

Afghanistan after 2014: Bane or Boom in Relations with Central Asia?¹

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Introduction

From the rostrum of the 67th General Assembly General Debate in September 2012, representatives of Central Asian (CA) republics expressed their concerns with the potential threats that could stem from a quick and complete withdrawal of Coalition forces from Afghanistan after 2014 and the transfer of responsibility for security to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). CA participants also stressed that social and economic development of Afghanistan is the key for ensuring lasting peace in the country.

One common perception expressed by CA experts is that, given their mounting domestic concerns about the prolongation of an unpopular war, the US and its European Coalition partners can no longer shoulder the task of maintaining security in Afghanistan and sustaining the heavy financial cost of reconstruction of the country. Thus, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) forces are seeking an exit strategy by 2014. By this time international aid to Afghanistan will be sharply reduced and probably attached to heavy conditionalities. This point of view sees an abandonment of Afghanistan in 2014 by the West, which would plunge Afghanistan into turmoil, turning it once again into a safe haven for extremists and terrorists, which would inevitably threaten the neighborhood, and likewise international peace.

There is however another theory: Presenting 2014 as doomsday deadline is much rather for domestic consumption of war-weary US electors. This alternative point of view, expressed by some diplomats of countries in the region and Afghan politicians, recalls that the international community will not abandon Afghanistan, having recently committed to a long-term engagement for partnership at the Bonn Conference in December 2011, and having pledged more than USD 16 billion in Tokyo in July 2012 for development until 2014, when progress toward mutual accountability will be checked, and a decision to sustain support through 2017 will be made. At the NATO Summit in Chicago in May 2012, the international community also reaffirmed its commitment to support Afghanistan's security forces after 2014 with USD 4.1 billion annually from 2015 to 2017. Even though most EU countries would leave Afghanistan around 2014, with France being the first in line, a good size of US and NATO forces (UK, Germans and new partners) will stay beyond the deadline, even if heavily transforming the mission from combat to training and counter-terrorism, with proof being five new "super bases" that are being built or fortified around Afghanistan (Baghram, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif and Shindand).

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What can be assumed is that regional politics will once again come to the foreground. Despite considerable discussions in the Western press about the “hedging of bets” that may be going on at the moment among Afghanistan’s neighboring countries, none of the neighbors is likely to intervene physically in Afghanistan. At the same time, it is clear that they would want an Afghan regime sympathetic to their own national interests. The new post 2014 era would probably push into a more active role the regional players that are currently playing more secondary roles, i.e. China, Russia, and India. After all, the considerable mineral resources of Afghanistan and its potential as East-West and North-South corridors for trade and pipelines would ensure that external partners would not leave Afghanistan to disintegrate into chaos.

It must be stated that Afghanistan is an unpredictable country and there are a number of uncertainties related to how state and non-state actors within Afghanistan will behave. This and the extent and nature of foreign presence after 2014 make predicting the future akin to gazing into a Crystal ball. With that caveat in mind, this paper bases its analysis not only on a thorough factual assessment of the current situation, but extends to an analysis of trends and emerging issues, with the understanding that Afghanistan and its neighborhood are caught in highly dynamic changes which make scenario building a highly complex and difficult exercise. Having said this, it is precisely the existence of uncertainties and the impact any development will inevitably have on the larger neighborhood, including on Central Asia, that makes planning for best and worst case scenarios an absolute necessity. To this end it is essential to look beyond the next two years.

This paper examines a number of questions: What could be the possible scenarios ahead and how could they impact security in Central Asia? What can be done by CA states to mitigate risks and enhance opportunities? In the final analysis, the larger question that the paper seeks to entertain is whether from the point of view of CA states a joint that is a regional approach to existing or emerging challenges can be more conducive to achieving the ultimate goal, which is supporting stability in Afghanistan and in the wider region.

1) Central Asian View of Afghanistan: Fire or Market?

Afghanistan and Central Asia share long historical, cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious commonalities, with some ethnic communities having been separated as late as the late nineteenth century through border demarcation between the Russian and the British empires. However, their respective socio-economic development in the twentieth century has been very different, which in turn created different security concerns. This contributed to mistrust and insecurity that have mired relations for the past century.

The question in this context is whether the Afghanistan of today is seen as an opportunity or a threat from the Central Asian perspective.

The potential for instability after 2014 means that the ‘Afghan factor’ is seen as a source of seven inter-related threats for CA countries:

- 1) That the Taliban would potentially infiltrate CA and spread fundamentalism in the region. Yet, for the moment the extent of Taliban ambitions to dominate CA and to pursue, alongside with CA extremist groups, an Islamic order that challenges the rule of secular

regimes in the wider region is not clear. Coalitions between extremist groups are also not straight forward, even though they seem united today on the terrain of Afghanistan: Differences in ideology and tactics exist between Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), as well ethnic tensions and ideological disagreements between CA Turkic militants, the Pashtun-dominated Taliban and the Arab al Qaeda. In any case, terrorism in CA countries does not only stem from Afghanistan and is not the prerogative of the Taliban. A variety of home-grown groups have sprung up in CA itself, such as the Jund al-Khilafah (the Soldiers of the Caliphate), which was allegedly responsible for terror acts in Kazakhstan during 2011.

- 2) That CA extremist groups such as the IMU and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) among others, after having been trained in the NWFP of Pakistan and now being engaged in the Jihad in Afghanistan, would go back 'home' when the Jihad in Afghanistan against foreign troops is over in 2014. This fear may be more realistic than a potential move north of the Taliban proper. The potential spillover of CA Jihadis could indeed be different from the current scale. Its impact would be greater not only because of its scale but because they would have undergone specialized training in Pakistan, which essentially might result in the launching of a guerrilla that may hit CA armed forces unprepared. Yet, alternative viewpoints by experts argue that the returning fighters would not pose an existential threat to stability as they lack a base of popular support and are too weak to stand up to the strong security apparatus of the CA states.
- 3) That continued cultivation of opium in Afghanistan and the existence of the northern transit route through CA territory towards Russia, Europe, and Asia would lead to the region being flooded with narcotics, which in turn could destabilize the political system, delay the consolidation of national economy, cause an increased public health threat in terms of addiction rates and contribute to criminality and corruption in Central Asia.
- 4) That the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), once activated as a source of supply route for NATO and US forces in Afghanistan, could attract potential acts of sabotage and terrorism. Another concern is that the NDN could intensify competition between CA countries for access to the military equipment that withdrawing forces could leave behind.
- 5) That Afghanistan could break up along ethnic perforation lines, which would then put pressure on CA countries to interfere in the labyrinth of domestic politics there and intervene in support or protection of their ethnic kin across the border.
- 6) That perpetuated instability could contribute to the militarization of the region, forcing CA countries to seek more military and security aid from players such as US, Russia and China. As a result, increased military aid concentrating on equipment and training for forces would be at the expense of aid to the social sector and human dimension.

Yet, despite these potential threats, the view of Afghanistan as an opportunity in the short term prevails among many policy makers in CA countries. Afghanistan, notably a stabilized one, represents five strategic potentials:

- 1) The potential to attract clientele for the CA market through the potential to extend the market to Afghanistan and beyond to Pakistan and India for natural energy resources such as gas (through the TAPI pipeline for example) and electricity (eventually through the CASA-1000 project pending support from IFIs and other donors, and bilaterally through the supply of electricity to Kabul from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and to Afghanistan's northern areas from Turkmenistan).
- 2) The potential to gain access to oceans and southern trade routes and benefit from money being spent by donors in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan, according to a research produced by the Tashkent based Center for Economic Research, could win up to USD 100 million profits through participating in transportation projects in Afghanistan as a subcontractor, as well as receive more benefits from increased transit in the longer run. Yet, the paper also warned that Uzbek companies would need the Government's support in mitigating security risks related to doing business in Afghanistan.
- 3) Peaceful management of water resources in Afghanistan as a riparian state of several trans-boundary river basins connecting the country with Pakistan and India (Amu Darya, Indus and Helmand), could serve as an example for CA states of a scheme of usage of water resources that bears in mind interests and needs of all sides involved. This becomes all the more topical in a region marked by scarcity of water.
- 4) An opportunity for CA countries to contribute to the development of Afghanistan through fostering investment, trade, culture and communication infrastructure, providing assistance in terms of infrastructure such as railroad and pipelines.
- 5) An opportunity to matter in regional and international politics by providing support to the international Coalition through the NDN or through the Transit Center at Manas international airport (Kyrgyzstan) and by contributing to regional diplomacy through engagement in the Istanbul process and its Confidence Building Measures (CBMs).

The reality most likely is characterized by a mixture between these two widely different visions of pessimism and optimism over the future of Afghanistan. The perception whether Afghanistan constitutes a threat or rather an opportunity varies among CA countries, depending on a number of factors: First their geographic position, with frontline states such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan showing the most concern for the imperative to stabilize their immediate neighbor. Added to this is varying degree of trust in the security of their respective borders: Tajikistan, which shares 1206 kilometers of borders with the provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz and Balkh, much of it through poorly guarded rough mountainous terrain, is considerably more vulnerable than Uzbekistan. The 137 kilometer stretch of the border between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan's Balkh province is one of the most heavily guarded borders in the world. Despite strong border control, Uzbekistan is concerned because of the potential entry into its territory of IMU fighters through other borders of Central Asia in the Ferghana valley. It also is concerned about the spread of extremist ideology which transcends physical borders. This concern however did not feature prominently when Uzbekistan took the lead in pushing through an ADB tender the finalization of the construction of the Hairaton-Mazar-i-Sharif railroad, one of the main planned railroads in the region. This in turn assured Uzbekistan's advantage for being considered as

primary hub for the NDN route. Uzbekistan is also supplying fuel, construction materials, metal-
roll, fertilizers and wheat to Afghanistan.

For Kyrgyzstan, a country poor in resources, the fear of infiltration by criminal groups is more haunting even though it does not share direct borders with Afghanistan. The entry point to Kyrgyzstan for illicit cargo and drug trafficking is the southern city of Osh. Kyrgyzstan requires substantial donor support to participate in regional projects to export its electricity, such as the much delayed CASA-1000 project. In the meantime, Kyrgyzstan has been an important player in Coalition efforts by leasing out its military base at Manas airport, and stands to lose the nearly USD 200 million per year it receives from the US once Coalition forces leave Afghanistan. It seeks to compensate for the potential loss by courting more concessions from Russia over the lease of its bases at Kent.

The 744 kilometers of borders with Turkmenistan do not seem to pose that much of concern for this country, confident as it is in the strength of its borders, its strict visa regimes hampering crossings, and its neutral relations with the legacy of peaceful coexistence with the Taliban in the past. Yet, the shifting course of waterway of the Murghab and Amu Darya requires revisiting the question of demarcation of borders with Afghanistan. In the meantime, Turkmenistan puts special emphasis on the potential for Afghanistan as a transit route for its energy exports.

Kazakhstan, too, puts more emphasis on the potential of Afghanistan than its threat, seeing it as a way to give access to Afghan goods through the Western Europe–Western China transport corridor, in which it has invested approximately USD 3 billion. Kazakhstan has developed a comprehensive Assistance Programme for the Reconstruction of Afghanistan which includes projects on water supply, infrastructure development, delivery of cement and construction commodities in addition to wheat export to Afghanistan. It provided humanitarian aid (food aid and grain), implemented a number of large-scale social projects (including support to the parliament), awarded scholarships and allocated USD 50 million dollars for education and training of Afghan nationals.

While Afghanistan is seen as a potential fire, in the short term it is a market for the export of natural resources for all these countries, namely electricity and gas, which the three neighbors (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) explore the possibility of implementing large-scale projects (CASA-1000 and TAPI) through bilateral relations and with the IFI's support or through large business investments.

All in all, the verdict on whether Afghanistan is more of a threat than an opportunity from the CA perspective seems to be mitigated. Perceptions and assessments of threats depend on 1) geography, 2) strength in ability to control borders, 3) resources and endowments as well as 4) the geo-strategic position the CA states maintain mainly vis-à-vis the Russian Federation and the USA.

Despite the alarming rhetoric about the possible 2014 doomsday, for the moment, the vision of Afghanistan among CA countries tends to be that of an opportunity in the short term. This optimistic view cannot be easily dismissed as naïve as behind this vision there is a distinct philosophy: The economic potential of Afghanistan can be developed with peace, but peace also depends on short term opportunities for economic opportunities for people. It is a different

perception than the usual “security or development first” that transpires in perpetual dialogues in post-conflict situations between the military, diplomats and development workers.

CA policy makers are willing to wait and be patient to see how Afghanistan evolves in the next four years, how the Taliban will be dealt with, how the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) shape up, whether elections in line with international democratic standards take place, how divided the north of the country in fact is, how the US continues its engagement, what happens in Pakistan and Iran etc. These are factors that could become game changers for the region. In the meantime, CA states seek to protect their individual interests and are very hesitant to engage in regional efforts.

2) Possible Scenarios Ahead and their Implications

With the mentioned caveat regarding the difficulty of developing scenarios based on fast changing situations, the following four hypothetical situations could be foreseen in Afghanistan. The scenarios would help to analyze potential impact of developments on Central Asia:

Scenario One: The system (nezam) survives political transition – even turmoil – strengthened by a peaceful power-sharing agreement and the state of Afghanistan emerges after the 2014 elections and the withdrawal of combat troops as a unified, centralized entity.

This is the vision which appears to suit the CA countries most and the one toward which they are working at the moment, gearing their assistance towards support to a strong central authority. It does not matter whether the outcome is a federal or a centralized system, remains a presidential system or is turned into a parliamentary one. What matters is the survival of the system in which an Afghan-led political process resulting in a participatory government that includes representatives of all ethnic groups. The strongmen presiding over different regions are given autonomy over their territory but share the rules of the center and abide loyalty to the central presidential (or parliamentary) system and put their strength behind a capable (and fair) national leader. In this case, they would no longer act as independent entities with centrifugal tendencies but will contribute to the legitimacy and authority of the central government. This scenario relies on a successful, smooth and peaceful political transfer of power with the 2014 elections, with its own inter-Afghan accommodation and compromises. The national economy is consolidated and no longer needs to run on illicit trade in narcotics. Peace is restored in the region when neighbors have the guarantee that the soil of Afghanistan will not be used against their interests in proxy wars and they themselves refrain from interfering in the national process. A united Afghanistan not only provides the space for different ethnic communities to coexist, it also provides an opportunity for the countries in the wider region to ensure a balance of power within Afghanistan.

All this also would ease the pressure on CA states to form alliances with co-ethnic strongmen in Afghanistan to protect their interests in case of larger scale turmoil and violence. CA countries stay neutral, refrain from interfering politically in Afghanistan but take advantage of national peace by expanding their economic and energy infrastructure projects beyond Kabul and the north to southern Pashtun-dominated areas. This scenario depends much on positive changes that

could be achieved to consolidate the nation and the state in the run up to the 2014 presidential election in Afghanistan. This scenario is however not very likely for the moment.

Scenario Two: Status Quo, Neither War nor Peace.

A more plausible scenario is the continuation of the situation as is: A Kabul-centered administration (institutions, bureaucracy etc.) continues to function, albeit with decreased capacity after aid and support by the international community decrease and become more conditional on performance and on curbing of corruption. As aid diminishes while the national economy does not pick up, narcotics production increases, leading to further blurring of the line between politics and organized crime. While overall confidence in political processes is lost, proper functioning of institutions based on merit is also hampered as a result of increased jockeying of lobby groups from different regions, ethnic, tribal or linguistic identity groups, reminiscent of clan-based or sub-regional-based (Mahalgaroi) behavior that characterizes CA political systems. Security in the meantime continues to degrade. The Taliban are not being included in the political process – since they do not have a political platform or their demands continue to be threatening to the very *raison d'être* of the Afghan Government – but they are also not defeated militarily. The US and NATO forces increasingly leave counter-insurgency to the quantitatively large but qualitatively weak and unprepared ANSF. The Taliban have no political power to run for office, nor do they have military power to hold territory. Yet, they do not leave the scene, resulting in some sort of stalemate with a high potential to low-scale but continuous violence.

For CA countries, this stalemate situation only buys them time as it can only be a transition phase, more probably transiting towards degeneration rather than the more optimal scenario above. As insecurity increases and trust in a strong centralized political system erodes, the fragmentation that could result could threaten Afghanistan's northern neighbors. In response, CA countries would further their own isolation while only engaging in short-term economic projects, mainly in the north of Afghanistan. As the 'market' of Afghanistan decreases, competition may also increase among CA countries and further hamper cooperation and coordination.

Pessimistic scenario Three: Blackwill plan ('Plan B') gone awry: Civil war intensifies and the country breaks up along a north/south divide.

This pessimist scenario is the picture often painted in Western media and in narratives of some diplomats from Coalition countries. It is reminiscent of how former US Ambassador to India Robert D. Blackwill argued in *Foreign Affairs* (February 2011). According to this scenario a de facto partition of Afghanistan is inevitable. He suggested that the US and Coalition troops cordon off the Pashtun-dominated southern Afghanistan and move their forces to northern areas. Blackwill may have been right in pointing out that accepting a partition would not lead to civil war "as such a conflict is already being fought". The acceptance of the partition in his view however was for the sake of stabilization and in order to avoid defeat of Coalition forces, and not necessarily to respond to an according will of the Afghan people. While Blackwill called this de facto plan the best alternative to strategic defeat (for the US and the Coalition), his plan did not take into consideration women, non-Pashtuns residing in southern areas, and Pashtuns who do not cooperate with the Taliban. Those were dismissed basically as not topical to the problem the US is facing in its fight in Afghanistan. The plan assumes that the Afghan people do not want to

retain a unified state but instead seek to carve semi-independent ethnic fiefdoms for their individual ethnic groups, dependent mainly on neighboring states. Yet, Afghan interlocutors have consistently rejected this essentialist view of what Afghan people really want. The plan also does not take into consideration the problems for some of Afghanistan's neighbors: Pakistan could feel threatened by the carving out of a Pashtunistan on its border and the hold it has on its own internal Pashtun minority.

While it is clear that partition along ethnic lines would add an element of destabilization to the region, there is one element within this plan that could, hypothetically, serve Central Asia well. A partition along north/south perforation lines could have a potential to unite CA countries, as it might unite non-Pashtun commanders and opposition parties against the Taliban as their common enemy. Partition may also allow for the north to become a protected zone, where conceivably economic projects could continue, both in order to prevent further instability and to prepare for a robust buffer zone against the Taliban-dominated south. Yet, even if this scenario sees a temporary union between ethno-political opposition groups (essentially the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras that populate the Jibhay-e Melli (National Front) or act independently behind various leaders of the north, the fire of instability would most likely not be confined to partition lines drawn up by external actors. For one, it is hard to predict to what extent the Taliban may agree to stay in their cordoned off areas and not seek to cast their grip over all of Afghanistan, although Blackwill was confident that the strength of the ANA and the continued presence of ISAF would thwart any ambition of the Taliban to take over the rest of the country. Second, under such a partition scenario, the heavily armed and trained non-Pashtun CA Jihadis who may have been allied with the Taliban but find themselves hitherto isolated, would probably direct their attentions towards crossing borders instead of staying in Afghanistan to fight coalition troops in the north. Under this scenario, the next frontier of instability would inevitably move north, engulfing eventually Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and the Ferghana valley, potentially in this very order.

The most pessimistic scenario Four: "Plan C" enacted by default: Intensified civil war and a fragmentation along ethnic divisions.

The most pessimistic scenario involves the extension of the civil war situation described above along ethno-linguistic-religious lines of fragmentation. It is a flashback to the experience of the 1990s, when Mujahidin commanders fought each other violently after the Soviet troops, their common enemy, withdrew. The disintegration of Afghanistan will lead to the emergency of warlords and militant groups with their respective fiefdoms, the loss of central command and control from Kabul, the loss of monopoly over the use of force – which de facto means the end of the state. This scenario builds the gloom into what a British Conservative Member of the Parliament, Tobias Ellwood, proposed in September 2012 for dividing Afghanistan into eight zones based around the economic hubs Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunduz, Jalalabad, Khost and Bamyan, a plan code-named "Plan C".

His proposal saw a 'regionalized' state under a powerful new prime minister, tackling the problem of weak government, tribal disputes and corruption. In reality, however, such a partition, by design or by default, takes the north/south Pashtun against non-Pashtun divide even further and predicates a larger disintegration along inter-ethnic lines as competition rises among the regional economic hubs.

The eventual “balkanization” of Afghanistan would have a destabilizing and polarizing effect not only within the country but also in the wider region as it could give a further boost to separatist demands in regions such as Baluchistan in Pakistan and Iran, or Badakhshan in Tajikistan. It will also put additional pressure on CA countries which would have to deal with demands of unification and support from their co-ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Isolation and animosity between ethnic groups within Afghanistan would mirror relations between countries in Central Asia, each then forced to put efforts behind bilateral involvement that could be to the detriment of the other. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan could be the first to be drawn into a fight. At the same time, however, demand for support could also give CA countries more leverage on co-ethnic commanders to force them not to collaborate with CA extremist Islamists such as the IMU.

Ironically, this scenario depends on the force of the Taliban as a threat. If the Taliban threat is strong, it acts against fragmentation. If it is weak, fractional war could ensue as political and military actors turn to their own rivalries and competition over scarce and unequally distributed resources.

This particular scenario however cannot completely engulf CA countries, even if it leads to a fragmentation of Afghanistan: First, it assumes that Afghans have no ambitions for national unity and nationalism, which is just an assumption, based on the memory of the Civil Wars of the 1990s but may not have any basis today. Afghans cannot rally behind ethnic commanders to wage war on each other, and the loyalty or disloyalty of the ANSF is not a fact proven beyond doubt. Second, it also assumes that ethnic groups would pursue separatism or CA governments would risk their own ethnic harmony by encouraging separatism and ethnic segregation in Afghanistan. Yet, even during the Civil War in Afghanistan such bold demands (of separatism and unification) were not made. This scenario also supposes that CA countries have the necessary finances to support their co-ethnic groups, when evidence is clearly to the contrary.

Overall, this is probably the most undesirable scenario for the CA countries which squarely prefer to deal with Afghanistan that enjoys territorial integrity. It may however be possible that non-state actors within the region, those with vested interest in chaos-enhanced criminality, may have more interest in fragmentation, in which case conflicts between state and non-state actors in CA countries over engagement with Afghanistan would become more apparent.

3) Unknowns, Variables and Preconditions in Afghanistan

What are the elements that could decide which scenario may most likely prevail in Afghanistan? Below are outlined some of the most important ones, in no particular order, and without taking into consideration the time factor:

- *Whether the Afghans can define and work towards their common national interest and common values.* Torn between competing visions of global and regional security and political interests, as well as sub-regional ethnic, linguistic and tribal divides, the Afghan nation as a whole has not been able to form its own national vision and aspirations. To get there, a democratic space is needed for national reconciliation and a genuinely Afghan-led political process. The role of values of sub-national identities (tribalism, ethnic and religious identities) etc. need to be analyzed, discussed, and clarified vis-à-vis national

identity and nationalism. National interests also need national institutions: Currently, pan-Afghan institutions, such as the armed forces are threatened by suspicions of ethnic loyalty, although no verification system exists. Mobilization along ethnic factions does not signify ethnicity as primordial, but the weakness of other modern forms of political mobilization. It is not ethnicity that materially influences Afghan politics, but ambition for power, or put the other way, the fear of losing out. In fact, during the past decade, ethnic groups in Afghanistan have not had separatist ambitions for a variety of reasons. Positions (and positioning) matter more than ethnic standings, but ethnicity becomes the basis of the constituency that props up leaders. The alignments and re-alignments of different politicians are testimony of the need to prepare for the 2014 elections but also to prepare for a future which is strongly characterized by uncertainty. In the meantime, the construction of a pluralistic state and definition of national identity is hampered by the 'threat' of the return of the regime of the Taliban which then forces all to concentrate on accommodation, patronage politics and 'deal making' instead of visioning the future and strengthening national interest.

- *How a healthy, non-violent socio-political conflict is accommodated within state and society.* What Afghanistan needs, more than a political settlement that brings the insurgents and key political and social forces, including civil society on board, is a political process which responds to at least three fundamental requirements: 1) time seen in a long-term perspective, 2) ownership and, 3) disputes and conflicts. Not all conflicts have to lead to full-fledge civil war. Political conflicts exist in all democratic societies of the West and it would be wrong to assume that the Afghans would not be able to handle thorny political questions without reverting to arms, if left alone. The consolidation of society in fact requires conflict, albeit acted out in a non-violent manner, between dichotomies of the old (conservatism/traditionalism) versus the new (progressive/contemporary) values. State and society, through the public and media, should openly examine and decide how much space should be given to ideology in politics (including along the spectrum of the political left and right), the role of religion, *akhlak* (morality) and *iman* (faith) in the construction of new state and social institutions, the type of state that Afghan society requires, the role of justice in institutions etc. While all focus is on negotiations with the Taliban, insufficient time is allocated to this much-needed process of state formation and social cohesion.
- *How modern political institutions fare in upcoming elections.* If the elections are smooth and credible, and power is transferred consensually to a new leadership, it will not only show the maturity and robustness of institutions and provide impetus for trust and confidence for external donors, but also send a positive signal to the countries of the wider region, setting the example of a successful third round of democratic elections in Afghanistan. Yet, the signs are not too good: By late 2012, the electoral process has not become activated yet (voter identification non-nascent, election laws still incomplete etc.). Demands of the Taliban to redraw the Constitution could lead to an institutional and constitutional crisis. Institutions are weakened by the legacy of personalization of politics that have seriously hampered the development of a political class. The nature of the state system itself is under question (whether to keep a presidential system or to create a parliamentary one, whether to extend centralization or to create federalism, how to integrate political parties, etc.). The extent of state-non state cooperation is unclear, as are

the intentions of President Karzai for a smooth transfer of power. What is clear is that the modern state requires political parties and a system not based on ethnicity and a cult of individuals, but on ideology and political ideas. Yet, the role of political parties in the parliament and elections has not been clarified, even though in September 2012 most of the major political parties put aside their differences and made a rare joint statement, a 'Democracy Charter' which demanded a timely and fair 2014 presidential election and stronger role for political parties in making decisions about such important issues as negotiations with the Taliban.

- *How and whether the Taliban will transform from a militant group to a political one.* At the moment, the political solution is often depicted as an alternative to the military one, meaning that instead of fighting with the Taliban, Coalition forces and the Afghan government need to talk with them. The opening up of a Taliban representation in Doha was perceived as positive in this light. Yet a number of false assumptions have gone into this equation of peace-as-dialogue with the Taliban, starting with the presumption that the Taliban movement can constitute itself as a genuine political entity with coherent political demands:
 - 1) So far, although there is general agreement that concessions have to be made by all sides, the precise nature of these are not clear as the demands have either not been fully expressed or what has been expressed by the Taliban (i.e. rewriting of the Constitution, acceptance of the Shariat as the basis of the law etc.) threatens the very *raison d'etre* of the Afghan government and institutions.
 - 2) The problematic assumption that the Taliban (the Haqqani Network, the Quetta Shura) are united and that their demands are in line with, for instance those of the different factions of Hezb-e-Islami (HeI). Some factions of the HeI have become more powerful today precisely because they constitute moderate breakaway factions from the militant wing, and its members have entered the political process, the cabinet, the parliament.
 - 3) A political solution stipulating talks with the Taliban can disregard the very different demands and grievances of the formal opposition, i.e. opposition parties such as the Jabha-e Milli-e Afghanistan and dozens of other political parties that have a stake in the outcome, even if they have not taken up arms.
 - 4) The absence of a legitimate and empowered third party for mediation is also problematic. The United States, which is also involved in negotiations together with the Afghan government, is itself one of the fighting sides, while the United Nations' role in organizing talks directly and mediating officially, while this could be seen as its core mandate, is somewhat hampered by individual interests of key members in its Security Council.
 - 5) This solution ultimately assumes that the general public accepts negotiations with the Taliban for the sake of peace and will abide by its outcome. However, without a consistent and broad-based mechanism to gauge public views, it is difficult to assess the genuine appetite for war, or for accepting compromise when it comes to

principles of human rights, justice, or women's rights could come along as a price for a negotiated peace with the Taliban.

6) Finally, from the point of view of Central Asian security, the question is how much the Taliban and the Islamist extremist groups of Central Asia share the same or similar ideologies and goals. Different expert opinions exist concerning whether the ambition of the Taliban is to gain power over Afghanistan or to pursue the more radical and expansive dream of establishing an Islamic Emirate or Caliphate within the wider region. In sum, therefore, talking with the Taliban is not a guarantee for peace in Afghanistan, for its people and for CA countries.

- *The genuine strength of the Afghan security forces to fight terrorism, extremism and criminality* especially after 2014 and without support from NATO and US forces. As it is, security has become worse in the country, with areas of the north such as Kunduz, Badakhshan and Faryab noting insurgency activity when there were none before. Large parts of the country (some estimates mention 70 percent) fall outside of the government's control despite the overwhelming official size of the security forces. Without a clear counter-terrorism strategy that goes beyond defense of territory, and without guarantees about the national unity of the armed forces, the future ability to curb extremism is dim. Taliban and other insurgency groups (IMU, Al Qaeda etc.) which are seen as continuing to get support from Pakistan are considerably stronger militarily than the more independent groups backing northern commanders which are not officially supported from CA countries. Finally, and most importantly, convergence between criminal groups engaged in trafficking (of narcotics, arms, and human beings) with extremist and ideological groups around the same vested interest for instability guarantees sustained strength for the groups that the ANSF is poised to fight using conventional methods of warfare.
- *The survival of the national legal economy despite the withdrawal of aid.* It is realistic to anticipate an economic crisis precipitated by a sharp drop in Western aid and spending as well as the return of labor migrant from Iran and Pakistan. Although Afghanistan has a lot of natural resources, lack of national capacity to invest in extraction combined with insecurity hamper the potential for engagement of foreign companies. The legal economy today mostly relies on services around security and aid: As the aid sector draws down, it is likely that the other source of economy, illicit narcotics production would increase to make up for the expected loss in revenues. For CA economies, this would become an additional burden as they try themselves to consolidate their economies to a legal and sustainable mechanisms that does not have to rely on volatile and illicit, even if lucrative, sources.
- *Good will of external partners, from the region and beyond.* At this juncture of time, the extent of sustained interest and presence of external partners in Afghanistan has not been clarified. Afghanistan has signed Strategic Partnership Agreements not only with the US, but also with the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Australia, India, China, and recently with Pakistan and expect so sign another one in 2013 with Turkey. The specifics of what these agreements contain however have not been made public, or are not even clarified through

negotiations with the government yet. Moreover, two major uncertainties remain in the region which could become game changers for Afghanistan as well as for Central Asia: 1) The extent to which internal developments in Pakistan exacerbate the strained relationship between its civilian government, the Army and security forces and its domestic militant groups. 2) How relations between Iran and the US pan out in the future and whether a possible open confrontation would force regional states into an uncomfortable position to choose sides. In the meantime, Russia has expressed increasing concerns about the character of international military presence in Afghanistan after 2014 and the motivation behind the building of new bases there. Another possibility is that after the US elections of 2014, interest in Afghanistan decreases and makes room for dynamics in the larger region such as the rise of the SCO, Iran, the new Arab states, etc.

Most of these uncertainties are not likely to be resolved by 2014. In other words, conditions for the most optimistic scenario are extremely fragile. Yet, it is also clear that CA countries cannot influence events in Afghanistan today, as they are not a significant military power, power-broker or donor. Their strategy so far has been that of isolation, a wait-and-see tactics before engaging in the Afghan terrain, threading with caution, insisting on intensification of socio-economic approaches to conflict resolution and respecting the sovereignty of Afghanistan through non-interference. In other words, the strategy has been that of implementing the 2002 Kabul Declaration on Good Neighborly Relations, where CA countries pledged “constructive and supportive bilateral relationships based on the principles of territorial integrity, mutual respect, friendly relations, cooperation and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs”.

4) Regionalism or bilateralism?

a) To engage or to isolate?

Unlike countries like Pakistan and Iran, CA countries, with their policy and attitude of non-interference in domestic Afghan politics, lack of means to financially support opposition or insurgency groups, hesitation about engagement, and policy of isolation are not the most relevant players in regional hedging games. Isolating oneself in times of uncertainty may be positive in the grand scheme of things.

However, lack of proper engagement can also be a missed opportunity in a number of areas.

First, isolation cannot provide a fool-proof seal of protection against threats. In the event of any of the pessimistic scenarios unfolding, scale, speed and nature of threats that would inevitably spill over into Central Asia would be such that no country could guarantee it will not be affected.

Second, isolation reinforces the ancient idea that Afghanistan is to remain a buffer zone between empires (Russian and British in the nineteenth century) and zones of influence today (Eurasian zone with Russian and Chinese influence dominating in the north, and South Asia in the south with Anglo-Saxon influence prevailing). While this destiny may suit an unstable Afghanistan, in the event of stability, it robs the country of the potential to act as a bridge between the landlocked countries of the north and the seas and markets of the south and the opportunity to recreate linkages between civilizations.

In the final analysis, Central Asian countries may not be a factor of immediate relevance for the moment, while the nature of the game is one of hedging bets in uncertain times with imperfect knowledge of what could happen. However, even during times of uncertainty, CA countries could be players in a new paradigm of international relations. And they can do so not by developing their current reputation as purely concerned with self interest and viewing Afghanistan through the prism of a 'market', but by showing unity and leadership in a new era of peaceful regional diplomacy.

b) Bilateral or multilateral?

Assuming that engagement is chosen over the strategy of isolation, a second choice is between a bilateral and a multi-lateral approach. At the moment, Kazakhstan, which is separated from Afghanistan by two countries, seeks most to engage multilaterally with Afghanistan, followed by neutral Turkmenistan which leads efforts to boost regional infrastructure through the Istanbul process. On the other side of the spectrum, Uzbekistan with its official preference for bilateral relations opted out of the Istanbul process. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are engaged in bilateral relations in order to provide their particular assistance (mainly electricity), but are open to regional and multilateral approaches, something from which they will benefit greatly if and when the CASA-1000 initiative becomes viable. Kyrgyzstan for example has signed for all seven of the CBMs under the Istanbul process, although its own financial difficulties prevent it from full participation in any of the working groups. Tajikistan hosted the Fifth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA V) meeting in March 2011 where political support was once again stressed to many of the regional projects that have been floating under different umbrellas (TAPI, CASA-1000 etc.).

Yet, ironically, those countries that show themselves open to multilateralism in the final analysis conduct their activities with Afghanistan bilaterally, as both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan do when rendering assistance to Afghanistan. At the same time, Uzbekistan's government, while defending its preference for bilateralism, also used the rostrum of the 67th session of the General Assembly in September 2012 to reiterate its proposal for the UN to engage the neighbors of Afghanistan plus the US, Russia and NATO in a collective, multilateral though restricted scheme. The 6+3 Contact Group under the auspices of the UN, as proposed by Uzbekistan, constitutes a revival of the 6+2 formula it had proposed as early as in 1997 and which Lakhdar Brahimi, then the UN special representative for Afghanistan, adopted under the name of the '6+2 group of neighbors and friends of Afghanistan'. The latter had led to a Regional Action Plan for curbing the drug trade from Afghanistan. However, if back in the late nineties there was no internationally recognized Afghan government to work with, the exclusion of sovereign Afghanistan in the 6+3 proposal of 2012 would put the UN in a difficult position as it seems to deny the sovereignty of the country. The argument against the inclusion of Afghanistan, from Uzbekistan's point of view, is that the initiative is designed for stability of this country by its concerned partners and neighbors, and including the Afghan government would mean favoring one of the factions or warring parties over the others. Yet, this omission in reality points to doubts about the survival of the Afghan government after the US withdrawal. In fact, Uzbekistan's proposal tasks the Contact Group with achieving compromise and accord between confrontational forces and on this basis forming a coalition government which represents the core ethnic, national and religious groups of Afghanistan. The proposal therefore negates the principle

of non-interference in domestic politics and assumes, in a *realpolitik* manner, that neighbors have a responsibility in forming the new Afghan government possibly even more than the Afghan people themselves. Furthermore, the inclusion of NATO in the Contact group puts it at odds with the position of some of the neighbors of Afghanistan, notably Iran. The proposal is anyhow falling on deaf ears, despite being raised on numerous occasions in the UN GA by President Islam Karimov, partly because of its neglect of the role of the Afghan government, partly because it proposes the UN to institutionalize such a consultative mechanism, and partly because Uzbekistan has not been able to muster support from the other CA countries for their unilateral proposal. The 6+3 proposal could find additional traction if three elements were considered by Uzbekistan: 1) the inclusion of sovereign Afghanistan as one of the partners, 2) consensus and support among other Central Asian countries and 3) investment, especially financial, by Uzbekistan's government, such as for example the organization of a large conference in Tashkent or pledging of money to regional projects. In the meantime, the international community is ignoring Uzbekistan's proposal, which may have played into the latter's unenthusiastic reaction to the New Silk Road initiative and the Istanbul process.

In the final analysis, even with the perception that bilateral relation may be faster and more effective (as one Central Asian diplomat told this author, "while others talk and talk, we act"), multilateralism – and regionalism – has a number of added values. It can: 1) Diffuse conflicts and tensions; 2) Increase obligations and responsibilities, 3) Prove more advantageous in terms of economy of scale (for example by pooling resources for the construction of railroads, gas pipelines, the sale of surplus electricity and the management of water resources); 4) Create more transparency – with countries not being able to afford to stay out or act as a spoiler – which can only be beneficial in the long-term; and 5) Help to embed projects into the bigger political context, thus facilitating their smooth and successful realization. Bilateral relations, instead, would be more vulnerable to fluctuations and affected by political currents. Afghanistan, in this sense, can be the diffuser of tensions among CA countries and between them and others in the wider neighborhood.

c) Hurdles on the road to a more meaningful engagement

The ideal win-win solution is multilateralism based on self interest. However, assuming that the choice of multilateralism is taken by CA countries, there are a number of hurdles for its success. These are related to:

1. Hesitation to engage given uncertainty of the exogenous environment related to *Afghanistan* itself. CA countries question whether the international community has a clear vision of support to Afghanistan after 2014, the overall presence of Western forces, their intentions and how other concerned powers of the region will react, namely China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan.
2. The influence of geopolitical rivalries, of being caught between having to choose the Eurasian zone of influence and security guarantees from Russia (for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) or the concessions in terms of material and military aid that could come from the USA (currently stronger for Uzbekistan). It is therefore of interest that the CA countries watch the position of Russia and China in Afghanistan, seeking ways to strike a balance between supporting NATO for benefits for themselves and avoiding the

alienation of their non-Western allies. Even economically, the choice of reaching southern markets is competing with options to take advantage of the Customs Union consisting of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus which could facilitate the import of oil, wood, grain and other essential commodities for countries such as Tajikistan even if they do not have common borders with the three member states (which would change once Kyrgyzstan becomes a fully-fledged member of the Union).

3. Internal rivalry among CA countries such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and conflict over water between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, all mirror great power competition in Central Asia between the US, Russia and China, and make short-term alliances preferable to long-term strategic planning. Consequently, relations with Afghanistan are similarly fragmented and impacted by internal disputes between CA states and by changing alliances externally. Caution, in such an environment, seems to be preferable to sustained coordinated action.
4. There is also the element that the CA countries have been denied genuine participation by the Western partners of Afghanistan in regional schemes so far. Partly because of their history with respect to Afghanistan during Soviet times, they were initially excluded from participation in ISAF and from US and European efforts to build the ANSF.
5. In order to take part in the regional process, capacity and resources of CA states' ministries dealing with the Istanbul process need to be built (sufficient and well-qualified personnel to represent the countries at meetings, ability to address a multitude of issues in this field (administrative, logistical, and political) at the same time).

d) The Istanbul Process: By the region, for the region

The Istanbul process launched at the Heart of Asia Summit in November 2011 in Turkey provided a degree of new opportunities for meaningful engagement of CA in Afghanistan. The Istanbul process was launched as a new approach with an agenda for regional cooperation. Afghanistan was placed in its center and promoted as a land-bridge connecting South Asia, Central Asia, Eurasia/Europe and the Middle East. The Istanbul process adheres to the principle of regional ownership and of voluntary participation and primarily seeks to build confidence in the region.

Despite initial skepticism about the potential of this process, its ambitions to tie diverse countries together, and the fears that it was duplicating existing mechanisms, the Istanbul process has moved incrementally forward. The concretization of the agenda through seven CBMs, the effective facilitation of UNAMA in supporting the government of Afghanistan and coordinating among UN agencies are factors contributing to the positive achievements of the process so far in rallying around it increasingly interested countries.

The Istanbul process now envisages a number of follow up mechanisms (Annual meeting of Foreign Ministers, meetings of Senior Officials to prepare the agenda of Ministerial meetings, regular meetings of Kabul-based Ambassadors), in which CA countries have taken an active role: The second Senior Official Meeting was hosted by Turkmenistan in Ashgabat in April 2012,

while the second Ministerial Conference is expected to be held in Astana, Kazakhstan, in the first half of 2013.

The implementation of CBMs is a voluntary and inclusive process, with countries able to choose to join or withdraw at anytime during preparation or implementation of certain CBMs. Among the four CA countries that signed the Istanbul Declaration, Kazakhstan has chosen to co-lead the Disaster Management CBM (with Pakistan) and Turkmenistan leads the Regional Infrastructure CBM (together with Azerbaijan). Kyrgyzstan has signed up for all 7 initial CBMs, although its participation in technical meetings was hampered by the recent change of government. All four CA countries are participating in the regional infrastructure and the education CBMs. Uzbekistan, which was an observer in Istanbul in November 2011, features among the participating countries that adopted the Ministerial Declaration in Kabul in June 2012 and its representatives participate in the Heart of Asia Ambassadors' meetings in Kabul as observers.

Obviously, a lot remains to be done, namely fine-tuning the implementation framework of the CBMs, prioritizing activities, raising funds for them, division of responsibilities, benchmarking mechanisms to track progress, etc. But in the meantime, CA countries stand to gain a number of benefits from a deeper engagement:

1. Investing in diplomacy in such a wide forum provides them with valuable international experience.
2. The success of such a regional process will build confidence for further cooperation among countries, both within Central Asia and with South Asia and the Middle East. For CA countries, this larger forum is a valuable opportunity to diversify contacts, be involved in open discussions, manage conflicts, gain confidence and build trust.
3. The Istanbul process does not negate the value of existing bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral formats of cooperation in the region. As stated by the Istanbul and Kabul declarations, the process builds on existing regional initiatives, and includes the participation of regional organizations that are active in Central Asia, such as the SCO, CSTO, CICA, CIS and EurAsEC. As such, implementing regional projects identified in RECCA V in Dushanbe and measures identified in the declaration of the recent Ministerial Meeting of CICA in Astana will be important steps towards greater confidence building in the wider region and seeking potential complementariness and coordination.
4. Finally, consultations show that CA countries, much like the other Heart of Asia countries and participating agencies, seek tangible action with visible results. As the CBM implementation plans become further developed, they will include operational issues and concrete actions as well as declarative statements on principles of cooperation. While the process shall lead to the identification and implementation of concrete and tangible activities, it shall also contribute to strengthening the political will for cooperation through declarations of intent on principles of cooperation and coordination.

5) Recommendations to the Central Asian Countries

The room for maneuver for CA states to directly influence events in Afghanistan to prevent pessimistic scenarios from materializing is limited. At the same time, arguments have been put forth for a more active engagement in new opportunities for multilateralism and regional

initiatives around Afghanistan that would develop the capacity and confidence of CA states in the process. In the meantime, mitigation of risks that could potentially emanate from Afghanistan or from sources within Central Asia is possible and necessary and requires both strategic approaches and more concrete initiatives. For a successful mitigation in this regard, the following elements could be considered:

1. Support to stabilization efforts through investing in socio-economic projects. CA countries have understood that economic support boosts regional cooperation and the national economies, provides long term trade opportunities and economic complementarities, while creating jobs in the short term and contributing to the prevention of conflict at the local level. For example, laying the TAPI transnational gas pipeline would allow meeting the growing need of Asian energy markets through the export of natural gas from Turkmenistan, but would also bring along job creation, construction of new infrastructure along the pipeline, qualification of specialists etc. Railroad projects planned in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan for Afghanistan's route would provide long term strategic support that can create opportunities both along the routes and for providing access to the ports in Iran and Pakistan. Yet, two elements need to be kept in mind: First is the need for the CA countries to better harmonize their proposals in order to pool efforts and resources instead of competing with each other (particularly cooperation in the field of electricity provision and railroad construction requires harmonization). Second, CA states may not have to wait for IFI or private sector investors of the projects: Funds may be put forth by CA governments in the meantime. It is difficult to convince CA businessmen to invest in Afghanistan because of the conception that security is necessary before development. Time however plays against this slower approach of first ensuring security, and then development. Hence, as the challenge for CA countries is to find investors who have confidence enough to support economic development even under conditions of security challenges (such as the IFIs), they should pool efforts themselves in a regional consortium in order to invest collectively, and benefit from cooperation instead of competition and invest their own money into the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. To this aim, CA countries should be encouraged to provide their own investments to regional projects, albeit on a small scale.
2. Supporting the relatively stable regions of the north through small scale job creation, supply of electricity, cross border trade etc. can also provide a buffer in case instability engulfs southern regions and a de-facto partition materializes. As such, economic investment could become a security dividend. This would require investments into small scale income generation projects, such as small factories, cooperatives, cross-border trade facilitation, development of border area markets etc., all of which could improve livelihoods and provide disincentives for radicalization.
3. Intensified counter-terrorism cooperation with Afghanistan. Some countries, such as Tajikistan, already established close bilateral relations between law enforcement agencies, border and intelligence services. Cooperation, both bilaterally and through regional institutions such as the CSTO, SCO and the CIS could be intensified with Afghanistan and with NATO, Pakistan and Iran as the problem of terrorism and extremism within these neighboring countries are all inter-related. Counter-terrorism cooperation and

coordination among law enforcement agencies, both bilaterally and through existing regional organizations, could focus on the exchange of contacts in each country, the sharing of pertinent information and intelligence data to the extent possible, joint exercises, taking advantage of and organizing regional training opportunities using the facilities of SCO RATS, the OSCE Border Staff College, the Center of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism (COE-DAT) in Ankara, etc. Cooperation is also required for harmonizing laws and extraditions practices and providing mutual legal assistance.

4. CA countries as well as Afghanistan also need to develop their own counter-terrorism strategies and approaches at the national levels in ways that do not solely rely on defensive measures, such as law enforcement, closure of borders etc., but also adopt an approach that is preventive, proactive, holistic, and aimed at cooperation. Borders can be sealed to delay infiltration from Afghanistan, but CA countries also need to address conditions within their own societies that are conducive to the rise of violent extremism and radicalization. These have to do, as the Joint Plan of Action for Central Asia for implementing the Global UN Counter-Terrorism Strategy notes, with conditions of poverty, social exclusion and marginalization.
5. CA countries and Afghanistan could invest jointly in developing research and new methodologies related to understanding areas such as the sources of radicalization, linkages between terrorism and socio-economic conditions like poverty, social exclusion and marginalization, and the financing sources for terrorism. Given the similarity of conditions, languages and cultures in CA, these joint assessments could be useful for all concerned countries of the region. Example of good policies and programmes that tackle the problems of marginalization, exclusion and social fragmentation could also be shared among CA countries and Afghanistan with the help of relevant international and regional organizations.
6. On the basis of assessments such as those described above, specific initiatives tackling the youth and countering potential radicalization in these societies should be developed and implemented with the support of international organizations. These initiatives would have to concentrate on the education sector, both formal and informal. At the same time, religious education should receive a special focus as the young in all societies concerned are increasingly turning to radical interpretations of Islam and are vulnerable to interpretations they could receive from extremist leaders. To this end, the capacity of Imams needs to be strengthened to allow them to address this challenge while fully catering to the religious needs of CA societies and Afghanistan. Measures can include specialized training courses to enhance their knowledge and education, bringing Ulemas/theologians from abroad to train Imams, and bringing together Imams of the region to discuss specific issues pertinent to the challenge of radicalization. International organizations should support efforts to create synergies for Islamic scholars in CA with Afghanistan and the Muslim world. Publication of proper religious books in relevant languages (Uzbek, Tajik, and Dari) should also be encouraged to counter superstition and radicalization.
7. Political commitment for the eradication of the narcotics trade in the region is necessary. Curbing drug trafficking is not only a matter of better control over borders through the

provision of equipment and new identification technologies. It also involves political will to curb corruption, strengthen the rule of law, curb domestic demand, provide alternative livelihoods to poppy farmers or opium traders etc. These measures require not only the continuation of provision of technologies for better management of border posts, but also incentives and trainings for border guards to prevent corruption. Cross country exchanges between CA countries and Afghanistan can be facilitated through UNODC and the OSCE. The fight against narcotics trafficking in the region also requires concerted efforts on behalf of CA governments to consolidate their own national economies so that they do not have to rely on illicit sources of income.

8. Improved border management also should come hand in hand with the facilitation of so called soft borders (open, transparent and secure at the same time) that could encourage cross-border trade. The BOMBAF and BOMCA projects could be used as entry points. The concept of free economic zones for the markets in cities on the borders between Tajikistan and Afghanistan in the Khatlon Province and the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Province that the government of Tajikistan is planning to establish can be beneficial not only for Tajikistan but should be seen and encouraged as an entry point for all of CA and China.
9. The principle of border management (as opposed to strict border control) should encourage exchange and free movement of people and goods. Strict border control is not always an appropriate means to successfully prevent trespassing by criminals and terrorist groups, or does so only at the expense of trade and development, which in turn might contribute to marginalization and socio-economic shortcomings. At the same time, facilitation of exchange and trade requires a revision of the strict visa regimes that CA countries set up and that inhibits the establishment of Afghan businesses in CA countries and works against enhancing confidence. More airline connections need also to be set up between CA capitals and Afghan cities. At the moment, there is a direct flight only between Kabul and Dushanbe.
10. Preparation for a possible refugee crisis. For the moment, Afghan refugee movement is primarily directed towards Iran and Pakistan. However, it is conceivable that should there be a Taliban push towards the north in Afghanistan, refugees might well cross over to Tajikistan as they have done during the Civil Wars in both countries during the nineties. This time, if there is an intensive and steady flow, the countries of CA, and specifically Tajikistan, do not have the capacity to deal with a large influx.
11. Sharing of expertise with Afghanistan. CA countries can contribute to the development of specialists and cadres in Afghanistan for the public and private sectors. These include skilled labor force in the energy sector, education and medical personnel. Tajikistan initiated the preparation of an index of experts that can be used for Afghanistan, a project that was abandoned but could be revisited, and coordinated with the help of the UN. Tajikistan and Kazakhstan provided scholarships for Afghan students to study in their universities, an initiative that could also be encouraged for Uzbekistan.
12. Sharing of experience. The peace process and the ensuing 1997 Peace Agreement in Tajikistan could be promoted as a model for its various elements of success: the

involvement of the UN in shuttle diplomacy among the regional contact group countries, power sharing agreement with the opposition by devoting a 30 percent quota of government positions for members of the opposition, the pace of the peace-building process with proper coordination among actors dealing with security, diplomacy, humanitarian and development etc. provide good examples to be shared with Afghanistan, even though the circumstances in Afghanistan nowadays are different, and replicating Tajikistan's experience as a blueprint would be difficult.

13. A successful engagement in regional processes requires commitment and capacity. CA countries should be encouraged to appoint focal points to the various CBMs and take active part in elaboration, implementation and eventual evaluation of the regional initiatives proposed under the Istanbul process.
14. The engagement of Afghan representatives in the discussion on a mutually acceptable mechanism concerning the usage of water resources (based on the international standards and bearing in mind interests and needs of all sides).