



Reimagining U.S. Asia Policy for a Peaceful Afghanistan

Afghan Peace Process Issues Paper

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Summary: Regardless of how the United States manages the presence or withdrawal of its remaining 2,500 troops from Afghanistan, it still lacks any coherent, discernible framework to manage the regional issues that have fueled conflict in that country over the past four decades. Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China and India all have the capacity to facilitate or block an Afghan political agreement or oppose an unwanted foreign presence. With agreement reached in Doha between the Taliban and the Islamic republic's delegations on procedural rules for the Afghan peace negotiations, all that is required for negotiations to start is Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's approval. He may delay until it is clearer what policy the incoming Biden administration will follow, but it is most likely that the next U.S. president will support these negotiations. The Afghan peace process provides the United States an opportunity to pivot to a strategy that frees it from dependence on military bases in the landlocked backyard of Russia and China, and that can provide it with an entry point to an expanded and more effective Asia policy focused on some of the most vital threats confronting humanity.

Introduction

Now that the Trump administration has issued orders to halve the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan by January, perhaps it will be possible to reframe the debate about U.S. policy in Afghanistan away from a false choice between disengagement and troop commitment for counterterrorism, as if the only U.S. interest were preventing another 9/11, and military deployment the only tool at its disposal. The result of such narrow thinking to date has been an impoverishment of U.S. policy options in a region that is at the intersection of a number of key strategic threats and opportunities. U.S. goals in a region where the

interests of the United States, China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and India intersect cannot be limited to preventing the recurrence of one past event.

What Carl von Clausewitz called “considerations of supply” make this landlocked country with little infrastructure surrounded by U.S. rivals and antagonists a poor place to station troops. But a region where the interests of so many powers intersect cannot just be ignored. Regardless of how the United States manages the presence or withdrawal of its remaining 2,500 troops, it still lacks any coherent, discernible framework to manage the regional issues that have fueled the conflict for over four decades. Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China and India all have the capacity to facilitate or block an Afghan political agreement or oppose an unwanted foreign presence.

Impoverished Afghanistan depends on foreign assistance, and its landlocked economy depends on transit through neighboring states. Much of the population depends for its livelihood on migration, remittances, foreign funding or sectors linked to the licit or illicit international market, especially the drug trade. Afghanistan is surrounded by four nuclear powers (Russia, China, India and Pakistan). It is close to the world’s most likely site of a nuclear war (between India and Pakistan) or terrorist capture of nuclear materials or weapons (Pakistan). It borders Iran, whose revolutionary regime has obsessed Washington for four decades. Its economy, labor market and religious institutions are linked to the oil-exporting Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf. Afghanistan is at the crossroads of massive regional connectivity plans initiated by China and India, depicted as the greatest threat to the United States and the world’s largest democracy, respectively. All of these countries have both their own interests in Afghanistan and complicated bilateral relations with the United States. Yet, with the exception of Pakistan, Afghanistan is treated as a “below-the-line” afterthought in U.S. bilateral relations with all of them.

Those who say that success in Afghanistan will require a generational commitment may be right. The error lies in conflating commitment with troop deployment. But the region has been the main theater of U.S. active military cooperation with NATO allies, and its combined GDP is now double that of the United States.¹ Security analysts often treat GDP as an indicator of a state’s potential power. In 2001, when the United States intervened in Afghanistan, its economy was 4.6 times larger than the combined economies of the region. Now it is only half their size, a ninefold change. Washington’s policy debates speak of leadership as if the United States still produces half of the world’s GDP, as it did in 1945.

The Afghan peace process provides an opportunity to pivot to a different strategy. It offers an area of relative agreement among the United States, China and Russia at a time when relations are otherwise in a downward spiral. Confronting climate change, about which U.S. President-elect Joseph R. Biden, Jr. has rightly [written](#), “If we don’t get this right, nothing else will matter,” requires

¹ The author calculated this ratio using gross domestic product (GDP) at purchasing power parity (PPP) for 2019 as reported by the [World Bank](#). The following countries were included: Afghanistan, the United Arab Emirates, China (including Hong Kong and Macao), India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The combined GDP PPP of all these countries in 2019 was equal to 196 percent of the U.S. GDP. In other words, the U.S. GDP was only 51 percent of the combined economies of the region.

cooperation with these powers. The same is true of the other issues he has identified as priorities, namely “nonproliferation, and global health security.” A political settlement of the long war in Afghanistan that frees the United States from dependence on military bases in the landlocked backyard of Russia and China can provide it with an entry point to an expanded and more effective Asia policy focused on the most vital threats confronting humanity.

Background

The British and Russian empires that shaped Afghanistan as a buffer state built dependence and isolation into its structure. The former has remained, while the latter is long gone. When pro-Soviet army officers staged a coup d'état in 1978, they blew away Afghanistan's isolation as the country became a theater of successive proxy wars. Its foreign ties tilted first to the USSR, provoking a reaction from the United States and its European and Muslim allies and partners. When the USSR collapsed, both the state and the armed opposition fragmented. After 9/11, a regenerated Afghan state came to depend on military and financial assistance from the United States and its allies, codified in a “strategic partnership.” As U.S. officials spoke of a long-term military presence, the international consensus in support of Washington's campaign fractured. Pakistan had never fully joined it. Russia, Iran and China began to hedge against the U.S. presence despite the common threat posed by al-Qaida and the Islamic State.

The Trump administration's [South Asia strategy](#), announced in August 2017, dealt only with Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. It did not mention Iran, China or Russia, all of which the administration targeted in its December 2017 [National Security Strategy](#), focused on “great power competition” (Russia and China) and “dictatorships ... determined to destabilize regions” (Iran and North Korea). The Trump administration's [Indo-Pacific strategy](#) does not provide a framework for the required regional cooperation either. It is focused on great-power competition rather than cooperation. It also does not address continental Asia, which is the main focus of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Economic Union, the connectivity strategy of the European Union (EU) for Eurasia, the International North-South Transport Corridor (including the Iranian port of Chabahar) that connects India to Russia and Central Asia via Iran, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline, the Central Asia South Asia 1,000 kw electric transmission project (CASA-1000) or the Lapis Lazuli Corridor connecting northwest Afghanistan to Turkey via Central Asia and the Caucasus. China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran and India consider the stabilization of Afghanistan as an important enabling factor for these projects.

The Trump administration eventually realized that stabilizing Afghanistan requires cooperation with precisely those countries. After being appointed as special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, one of Zalmay Khalilzad's first acts was to contact Russian Presidential Special Representative for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov. Kabulov had been leading the so-called Moscow Process, aimed at finding a solution based on the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO military forces and a regionally endorsed political settlement. The United States had regarded the Moscow Process as unwelcome meddling.

Khalilzad started cooperation with Russia by authorizing U.S. participation in a November 2018 meeting in Moscow that included representatives of both Afghanistan’s High Peace Council and the Taliban. After Khalilzad and Kabulov met in Moscow in December 2018, the United States did not oppose Russia’s initiative to host a dialogue among Afghans, including the Taliban, in February 2019. On March 4, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Doha where he [announced](#) that Khalilzad and Kabulov were maintaining “close contact” to “unite efforts” on Afghanistan.

A few weeks later, China joined Russia and the United States in Washington for a “troika” that issued a joint statement in support of the Doha negotiations. They met again in Moscow in April 2019, and invited Pakistan and Iran to [join](#) their third meeting in Beijing in July. The United States had hoped Iran would join, providing a chance to deconflict policies on Afghanistan, but [Iran](#) saw no reason to help the United States solve its problem in Afghanistan. Pakistan agreed, however, and the four parties issued a [joint statement](#). They followed up with another meeting and [joint statement](#) in Moscow in October.

While the Trump administration made gestures to accommodate Indian interests in cooperation with Iran, it opposed even expressions of support for Afghan cooperation with China. The South Asia strategy had made cooperation with India in Afghanistan a priority, but Pakistan’s closed borders blocked India’s access to Afghanistan. In response, India and Iran, with Japanese support, had agreed to develop the port of Chabahar on Iran’s Arabian Sea coast as a gateway for India to Afghanistan and Central Asia. In June 2018, shortly after U.S. President Donald J. Trump reimposed sanctions on Iran, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo authorized exceptions to secondary sanctions for investments in Chabahar, which he [publicized](#) during a June 2019 visit to New Delhi. Companies have nonetheless been reluctant to bid on Chabahar tenders for fear of running afoul of U.S. financial and secondary sanctions.

The United States showed less deference to Afghanistan’s interest in relations with China. In March 2020, the United States threatened to veto the United Nations Security Council resolution that renewed the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) because it mentioned the BRI, as the resolutions had done every year since 2016. The proposed text for 2019 was the similar to that approved in 2018, which [urged](#), “Further efforts to strengthen ... regional development initiatives such as the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (the Belt and Road) Initiative,” and other projects, including Chabahar. Opposition to the BRI has been an organizing principle of the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy, and in 2019 the administration refused to defer to Afghan interests by mentioning it. [U.N. Security Council Resolution 2513](#) finally passed with a perfunctory endorsement of “regional cooperation for regional development, and ... international and regional economic cooperation for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.” China accepted the compromise at the request of the Afghan Permanent Mission to the United Nations.

Working with the Region to Advance Peace and Cooperation

During his presidency, Trump signaled that troop withdrawal was by far his primary concern in Afghanistan. He said little about the supposed conditions for withdrawal, including implementation of a political settlement and a cease-fire through the negotiations in Doha and the Taliban’s counterterrorist obligations. In order to launch broader regional cooperation on Afghanistan, the Biden administration should establish the right context with a presidential statement that clarifies that the troop withdrawal

is part of support for a comprehensive political settlement, including a cease-fire and counterterrorism cooperation with all parties, including Afghanistan's neighbors. The new U.S. team should then put forward a coherent policy toward the regions around Afghanistan. That will require a coordinated diplomatic effort on multiple issues.

Finding Common Ground with China

Contentious issues related to trade and the Pacific, including the South China Sea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and North Korea, will continue to be central to U.S.-China bilateral relations, but Afghanistan is a feasible starting point to test cooperation with China, including on the BRI. Chinese counterparts in a sustained dialogue I have conducted since 2012 with major Chinese think tanks and experts sometimes suggest that the United States and China have opposing interests in China's eastern "front yard," the Pacific, but convergent interests in China's western "backyard," Central Asia.

With apologies to Chairman Mao, why must the east wind always prevail over the west wind? During the Obama administration, U.S.-China cooperation on joint training of Afghan diplomats led to joint sponsorship of peace efforts. Plans to extend the cooperation to training health care and agricultural workers were never implemented, but the United States and China can revive this program to rebuild habits of cooperation. For years, China has sent out discreet feelers about cooperating with the United States to support the Afghan National Security and Defense Forces. At a meeting in Beijing in 2015, a retired lieutenant general of the People's Liberation Army proposed that China and the United States jointly train Afghan military officers. China also has a vast stock of used Mi-17 helicopters, with which Afghan pilots are most familiar, and which could be reconditioned to meet the Afghan military's needs for medical evacuation and convoy escort much more cheaply than the McDonnell Douglas models the United States is providing.

China has a particular interest in northeast Afghanistan. Badakhshan province borders the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where Beijing has imposed an unprecedented regime of surveillance and detention in an effort to suppress the Uyghur cultural and religious identity that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sees as a precursor to separatism. China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan have established a Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism under which they jointly patrol the borders.² The Washington Post [reported](#) that China has established a military base in Tajikistan, where it can monitor the border from a salient of land between Afghanistan and Xinjiang. Local Chinese officials have also begun cultivating direct ties on the Afghan side and are reportedly investing in local power generation projects. While the United States should continue to condemn the repression in Xinjiang, it can nonetheless share Chinese concerns about militants who have returned from fighting alongside the Islamic State in Syria or Iraq. For several years, China has been helping the Afghan National Army build a counterterrorism [mountain brigade](#) in Badakhshan. A door may be open for U.S. cooperation with China on support for the security forces in Afghanistan.

² Markey, Daniel S. 2020. *China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia*. Oxford University Press.

Even some Chinese colleagues agree that the United States has identified some of the BRI's shortcomings and flaws, but the U.S. critique neglects the reason so many countries, including Afghanistan, nonetheless find it appealing: a [2017 Asian Development Bank study](#) estimated that Asia needs \$26 trillion of investment in infrastructure. Whatever the shortcomings of the BRI, it offers Afghanistan its best chance to connect to international markets through both Central Asia via northern Afghanistan and through eastern and southern Afghanistan in cooperation with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

In 2016, China opened the [Sino-Afghan Special Railway Transportation](#), which connected Jiangsu province in China's Pacific coast with the northern Afghan land port of Hairatan by way of Central Asia. Hairatan connects to Uzbekistan's rail network. While Islam Karimov was still president of Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan's regulations prohibited the train from returning from Afghanistan with cargo for China. But the reforms instituted by Karimov's successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, have solved that problem. In 2018, China and Afghanistan [signed six agreements](#), including a memorandum of understanding on Afghanistan's cooperation with the BRI. In September 2019, the first train laden with 1,100 tons of Afghan talc left Hairatan for China. Taking advantage of Indian delays due to [slow funding](#) and [tensions with China](#), China is also moving into Chabahar as part of a long-term plan of strategic partnership with Iran that is under negotiation.

The Trump administration, with bipartisan backing, established the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) in large part to support U.S. investment to compete with the BRI. Khalilzad escorted DFC CEO Adam Bohler on a July 2020 tour of Central Asia and Afghanistan, with a side visit to the Taliban in Doha, but the United States will never be the lead actor in infrastructure on the Asian mainland. The DFC can provide some healthy competition for the BRI, but the United States should also engage with and try to influence China's initiative. One way to do that would be for the United States to join the [Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank \(AIIB\)](#), a multilateral development bank established in January 2016 with 103 member states and \$21 billion in investments. Afghanistan is a member of the AIIB and a potential recipient of project finance.

The image of the AIIB as a Chinese-inspired challenge to the international order is mistaken. A 2018 [study](#) published by Chatham House [concluded](#), "The AIIB clearly does not challenge the global governance status-quo." The Brookings Institution has [described](#) joining the AIIB as "an avenue of constructive cooperation to help stabilize the rocky U.S.-China relationship and enhance the U.S. economic presence in Asia." China is the largest shareholder, with 26.6 percent of the total, giving it a veto over decisions requiring a super majority, but that is well short of total control. India is the second-largest shareholder with 7.6 percent. Most NATO and Quad members have joined the AIIB, leaving the United States and Japan, which has followed the U.S. lead, as outliers. China, Russia and their closest partners currently [control](#) 36 percent of the votes, equal to the amount controlled by members of NATO and the Indo-Pacific Quad, even without the United States and Japan, and other U.S. allies and partners.³ The 11 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) control an additional

³ China, Russia, Hong Kong, Iran, Pakistan and Belarus together control 36 percent of the votes, as do India, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Israel, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. There are a number of technical considerations as well. The AIIB's [Articles of Agreement](#) distinguish between regional and nonregional members; the latter must

9 percent. The addition of the United States and Japan could change the balance, especially as Japan would presumably be a regional member at least as important as India. China could redress the balance by upping its contribution. Even if it does, the net result would be to increase the influence of the United States and its allies and partners over Chinese investment in the BRI.

Iran and Chabahar

The Biden administration will seek to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—as soon as possible and open dialogue with Iran. After the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhriadeh, the Iranian parliament passed a bill giving the new U.S. administration a deadline of three weeks from the inauguration for lifting sanctions, but President-elect Biden is already on record as advocating prompt re-entry to the JCPOA. He can argue that his decision is not affected by the ultimatum from Iranian hardliners. Things remain complicated on the Iranian side. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has said that Trump’s withdrawal from the JCPOA shows that negotiation with the United States is pointless, and an Iranian diplomat commented with a line of poetry by Hafez: *“Ishq aasaan namud avval, vali uftaad mushkilhaa”* (Love is easy at first, but problems occur). The resumption of dialogue with the United States has become a domestic policy issue linked to the Iranian presidential elections scheduled for June 18, 2021. To appeal to an aggrieved population, Iran’s hardliners are likely to demand compensation for losses caused by the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. They want to delay talks and sanctions relief until after the election. The United States could, nonetheless, try to persuade skeptical Iranian voters that it is worth their while to take another gamble on engagement. Even before a resumption of bilateral negotiations, it could encourage U.S. and other companies to invest in Chabahar. The Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) could immediately ease the process of applying for sanctions relief. This would assist both Afghanistan and India. The Trump administration has also ignored or denied the U.S. and Iranian common interest in combatting the Islamic State. U.S. policy focuses almost entirely on Iran’s “front yard,” in the Middle East, while ignoring Iran’s “backyard,” in Central and South Asia, where U.S. and Iranian interests converge.

China is negotiating with Iran over a strategic relationship that would connect Chabahar and the North-South Transportation Corridor to the BRI. This would provide China with an alternative to Pakistan and the CPEC as an outlet to the Arabian Sea. Before the exacerbation of Sino-Indian relations due to military incidents along their disputed borders, at the April 2018 informal summit in Wuhan, China, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had discussed the potential for long-term

control at least 75 percent of the shares. Qualified majorities are required for certain decisions. For decisions requiring a super majority, China currently has a veto as it holds more than 25 percent of the shares. Admission of new members requires a special majority, amounting to both a simple majority (over half of the votes) plus over half of the members. Super majorities are required for decisions that would increase the capital stock, substantially alter the balance of shares among regional and nonregional members, and make other changes that would be required by the admission of such substantial shareholders as the United States and Japan. Hence China would retain a veto over the conditions of admission. There is a substantial political difference, however, between the United States and Japan refusing to join and China blocking their applications. There is room for negotiation.

Sino-Indian cooperation on such projects. Given the links of the border conflict to India's August 2019 revocation of the autonomy of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and the resistance facing China in Tibet and Xinjiang, such tensions are likely to persist. India and China are major partners in trade and investment, however, and the two sides are trying to deescalate. Resumption of even limited cooperation, though unlikely in the short to medium term, could transform Afghanistan's regional environment.

Pakistan

By engaging with Iran and abandoning the attempt to maintain military bases in Afghanistan and Central Asia, the United States would acquire greater freedom of maneuver with respect to Pakistan. The need for logistical access to Afghanistan would no longer constrain the United States to focus its bilateral relationship on the Pakistani military. The United States could instead focus on the potential of economic cooperation with Pakistan. For several years the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor connecting Xinjiang to the Pakistani port of Gwadar appeared to be in competition with Chabahar. A more peaceful Afghanistan could benefit from that competition by negotiating favorable transit agreements with both sides. In 2020, however, India's participation in Chabahar seems to have stalled while China negotiates a multifaceted bilateral deal with Iran that would give it a share in both Chabahar and Gwadar. While it is far from certain that the economies of the region can support both of these projects, the advance of cooperation between China and Iran while India lags behind makes it even more crucial for Afghanistan to cooperate with China and Iran.

Afghan officials argue that their relative success in diversifying Afghanistan's ties in the region has improved their bargaining position with Pakistan. A coherent regional policy could also place the United States in a better position to seek the cooperation of the Pakistani military in a political settlement in Afghanistan. While Pakistan has helped bring the Taliban to negotiate in Doha and reportedly pressed them on some issues, it has not yet made the most important strategic decision: to eliminate the Taliban's Pakistan-based military and terrorist logistic capacities. An Afghan settlement will have to provide for a combination of demobilization and integration of the multiple armed forces involved in the fighting, as well as for continued combat against the Islamic State and other irreconcilables. Eliminating the Taliban's Pakistan-based military commission is necessary for integrating their fighters into a post-settlement Afghan state. The settlement will also have to address legitimate Pakistani security concerns, in part through a bilateral agreement with Afghanistan. The United States, the United Kingdom, Afghanistan and Pakistan have already held high-level military meetings to discuss this aspect of the settlement. Especially given the need for monitoring implementation in Pakistan, it would be worth considering inviting China into this group, as Chinese monitors would likely be more acceptable to Pakistan.

Russia

When he started his mission in 2018, Khalilzad, as detailed above, had to approach Russia immediately to avoid a clash with the Moscow Process, which had been developing since Russia hosted China, Pakistan and Iran in December 2016. Despite a shaky start (the first meeting between Khalilzad and

Kabulov in December 2018 was “as good as could be expected under the circumstances,” according to one participant), they developed an effective partnership. The June 2020 press reports that U.S. intelligence had evidence that Russia had offered bounties to the Taliban for killing U.S. service personnel do not seem to have disrupted cooperation, although that could change under a new administration. In any case, since the February 29, 2020 signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement in Doha, no U.S. service personnel have died from hostile fire in Afghanistan.

The greatest resource that Russia brings to the process is its diplomatic capability, which it could use to support or frustrate U.S. goals. The degree to which Khalilzad and Kabulov have cooperated has been remarkable, and the United States should build on it. Specifically, the regional format in support of this process that has buy-in from both Russia and China is the troika plus. In conjunction with a U.S. bilateral opening toward Iran, the Biden administration should also seek Russia and China’s help in bringing Iran in along with Pakistan, and eventually adding India to the format. While the United States was holding its presidential election on November 3, Kabulov convened Indian and Iranian senior officials in Moscow, where they agreed on “regional cooperation to consolidate peace” in Afghanistan. There is no single diplomatic format for regional and international support to the process, but Russia can also help through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO now includes India and Pakistan with Afghanistan and Iran as observers and has established an Afghanistan contact group. Russia has resisted bringing close U.S. allies into regional formats, however, meaning that the United States will have to continue to work on a separate track with Europe, Japan and other donors.

India

Despite the obstacles, India has reached near parity with Pakistan as a destination for Afghan exports. In 2018 (the last year for which data were available), Afghanistan [exported](#) \$360 million worth of goods to India and \$380 million worth to Pakistan. China was a distant third, at \$28 million. Relaxation of U.S. sanctions on Iran would make it easier for India to expand bilateral trade and augment its role in Afghanistan as envisaged in the South Asia strategy. India, which Iran has [dropped](#) from the Chabahar rail project, could more easily expand the Chabahar port, its transit point for access to and cooperation with both Afghanistan and Central Asia. The United States could send an even stronger signal by encouraging joint ventures between U.S. and Indian companies in the development of Chabahar, which would also offset potential Chinese influence. China has signaled support for Indian assistance to Afghanistan, and Pakistan says it is no longer opposed in principle, so long as India does not cross certain redlines, like building roads along the border.

Intensifying these exchanges could help bring India, the only country in the region with no publicly acknowledged contact with the Taliban, into the more sensitive discussions concerning the peace process. Both Afghanistan and Russia have shown interest in doing so. In October, Abdullah Abdullah, chairman of Afghanistan’s High Council for National Reconciliation, visited India, where he [discussed](#) expanding India’s role in the peace process. On November 3, as noted, Russia hosted the special representatives on Afghanistan of India and Iran in Moscow. The meeting’s [declaration](#) called for “regional cooperation for consolidation of peace” in Afghanistan.

United Nations and Central Asia

The United Nations has led peace processes all over the world, and it may take on a role in Afghanistan's, if it advances sufficiently. Only the U.N. would have the required convening authority to coordinate the multiple levels of negotiation and implementation needed for success. An augmented role could come either by expanding the authorities of the U.N. special representative of the secretary-general for Afghanistan or appointing a separate special envoy. U.N. leadership would be more acceptable to Iran, whose leaders bristle at being invited by a so-called great power to join the second tier at a meeting.

A related larger effort would be for the United States to support establishing a U.N. regional hub in Central Asia. Turkmenistan hosts the United Nations Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia and Uzbekistan hosts a regional office of the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime. The region's U.N. country offices, however, are mostly served out of U.N. hubs in distant Bangkok and Cairo. While U.N. specialized agencies are active in Afghanistan, several, like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Food Program (WFP), are absent from some of the countries of Central Asia. This gap has become more evident over the past year as the COVID-19 pandemic not only caused a global health crisis, but also affected food prices and supplies.

Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's president, has shown an interest in the Afghan peace process and also sought an enhanced role for Uzbekistan in the U.N. system. Since Mirziyoyev's reforms, Uzbekistan has become one of Afghanistan's most important regional partners. The countries have signed several dozen agreements. Uzbekistan has established a rail link, facilitated Chinese and other transit trade, and established both an International Logistics Center and a Free Economic Zone in Termez on the Afghan border. In his [speech to the U.N. General Assembly](#) on September 23, 2020, Mirziyoyev proposed establishing a "permanent U.N. commission on Afghanistan that would address the concerns of long-suffering Afghan people" and a U.N. "Regional Center for the Development of Transport and Communications" in Central Asia. On November 19, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov met Khalilzad in Washington, where they [announced](#) plans for a regional investment fund and a quadrilateral meeting on connectivity involving Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the United States. Uzbekistan might be willing to host a U.N. regional hub.

Both Japan and the EU are looking for ways to expand their soft power and multilateral presence in Central Asia. Both have supported regional cooperation in Central Asia. The EU has a [connectivity policy](#) for all of Eurasia as well as bilateral policies toward both [China](#) and [India](#). All of these can be linked up with policy toward Afghanistan. The EU and Japan might be willing to fund a regional U.N. hub as well as the Regional Center proposed by Uzbekistan. The United States has a historically important link to the WFP, which relies on U.S. farmers for much of the food it distributes and is always headed by a U.S. citizen. It has also had a historic and productive partnership with the WHO, until the Trump administration withdrew from it, ostensibly over its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. A Biden administration would rejoin the WHO immediately. It would, therefore, be appropriate for the United States, along with its international partners, to play a leading role in establishing such a hub for these specialized U.N. agencies in Tashkent.

Conclusion

Afghanistan is no longer an isolated backwater. It has become a focus of interest of many powers. Competition among great, and not so great, powers is and always will be a reality of the international system, but the United States need not let that competition define its options. The proposals in this paper are far from a definitive list, but they illustrate that the United States and its partners have many more tools at their disposal than the blunt instrument of military deployment. The Biden administration has a chance to overcome the U.S. tunnel vision of the past two decades by integrating its policy toward Afghanistan into the promotion of global cooperation to confront common challenges in the region and beyond.

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