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Afghanistan Beyond 2014: The Search for Security in the Heart of Asia

Michael Wills

On November 26, 2013, National Security Advisor Susan Rice left Kabul in frustration as President Hamid Karzai refused to compromise in negotiations over a bilateral security agreement that would govern U.S. military forces remaining in Afghanistan following the conclusion in late 2014 of the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission. President Karzai's intransigence—several senior Afghan political leaders and advisers had urged him to reach an accommodation on the agreement—was likely due to a misreading of the appetite within the United States for continuing to provide high levels of support for Afghanistan, despite the shortcomings of the Karzai government and its episodic intemperate outbursts toward Washington. Stephen Biddle likened the situation to a game of chicken, in which each side expected the other to swerve at the last minute to avoid a damaging collision.¹

The U.S.-Afghan negotiations over a security agreement in the fall and winter of 2013–14, still ongoing as this roundtable went to press, have taken place against a growing chorus of voices assessing the impact of the long Afghanistan campaign on U.S. national security interests in the heart of Asia. These analyses range from discussions about how a decade-long focus on counterinsurgency operations has affected U.S. military readiness to critical assessments of the costs and benefits of the ISAF mission and whether the United States should cut its losses and seek a definitive departure from the region.²

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¹ Rod Nordland and Alissa J. Rubin, "Karzai's Bet: U.S. Is Bluffing in Warning on Security Pact," *New York Times*, November 26, 2013.

² For a selection of arguments, see John Allen, Michèle Flournoy, and Michael O'Hanlon, "Toward a Successful Outcome in Afghanistan," Center for a New American Security, May 2013; Anthony H. Cordesman, "Afghanistan: Remembering the War We Are Still Fighting," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), CSIS Commentary, September 16, 2013; Stephen Biddle, "Ending the War in Afghanistan: How to Avoid Failure on the Installment Plan," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 5 (2013); Karl W. Eikenberry, "The Limits of Counterinsurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan: The Other Side of the COIN," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 5 (2013); and Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Uncertain Strategic Case for the Zero Option in Afghanistan," CSIS, CSIS Commentary, December 4, 2013.

A prevailing assumption in many of these assessments is that the United States is likely to shift its focus away from the region toward other security challenges in Asia, such as China's increasing assertiveness in the East and South China seas or the threat of instability in or provocations from North Korea. In this *Asia Policy* roundtable, Xenia Dormandy and Michael Keating review the history of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan and argue persuasively that other issues in the Asia-Pacific will most likely capture Washington's attention following the conclusion of the ISAF operation in 2014. Certainly there are many within the U.S. policy community who seem to agree with the notion that providing billions of dollars a year to Afghanistan, perhaps for another decade or more, is no longer feasible.

In the event that the United States does pull back, other powers will continue to vie for strategic influence in the region, and the outcome of that competition could have significant implications for broader U.S. objectives in Asia. The purpose of this roundtable, which comprises nine national and regional assessments, is to examine the range of strategic interests and priorities that Afghanistan's neighbors and other regional powers possess. Developed fully in the pages that follow, these interests can be grouped into three broad categories.

The first is the search for security, and in particular the desire to prevent a resurgence of the Taliban for fear that Afghanistan will once again provide refuge to terrorist groups such as al Qaeda. This motivation, of course, first drove the U.S. intervention in 2001, and it remains a key concern for U.S. national security managers. Security is also a primary motivation for leaders in Russia, as Mark Katz points out; in the front-line states of Central Asia (namely, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), which Kathleen Collins argues are preparing for a "coming Afghan spillover" of conflict, refugees, Islamist extremism, and drug trafficking; and in Iran, which, as Sumitha Narayanan Kutty notes, backed the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance during the civil war of the 1990s and was one of the earliest supporters of the U.S.-led intervention. China, too, has significant concerns about Islamism, which Beijing views as a key driver of the ethnic and religious tensions it is struggling to contain in Xinjiang.³

A second category revolves around economic interests and the protection of investments that have been or are being made in major energy, natural resources, and transportation projects in Afghanistan.

³ S. Enders Wimbush, "Great Games in Central Asia," in *Strategic Asia 2011-12: Asia Responds to Its Rising Powers—China and India*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Travis Tanner, and Jessica Keough (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2011), 262.

These interests motivate decision-makers in Beijing, Tokyo, New Delhi, and Tehran. Zhao Huasheng, for example, describes how China increasingly seeks to protect its investments in Afghanistan, while Kuniko Ashizawa ascribes similar motives to Japan, which ranks second to the United States in the provision of economic development assistance.

A third category of interests might best be described as comprising measures to protect a state's strategic reputation. C. Christine Fair offers a compelling argument that demonstrating effectiveness as a regional power in Afghanistan is almost a requirement in India's quest for emergence and recognition as a great power on the global stage. Similar considerations clearly are part of the calculus in Washington, Beijing, Tokyo, and Moscow, where success or failure in Afghanistan is seen as a test of national power and resolve. An extension of this concept is the desire to gain strategic advantage over competitors. India and Pakistan, for instance, both need to be involved in Afghanistan as part of their wider competition. Likewise, Saudi Arabia, in addition to its legacy of support for the Taliban, views the pursuit of influence in Afghanistan as an opportunity to constrain Iran, as Kristian Coates Ulrichsen notes.

Afghanistan's immediate neighbors and other powers are all driven by a varying combination of these objectives and considerations, which leads to mixed motives and conflicted choices. Pakistan, in particular, is a key front-line state that will inevitably play a major role in Afghanistan. Larry Goodson examines Pakistan's search for security in the context of the complex ties between its northwestern provinces and Afghanistan; its desire to develop energy, trade, and transportation links between its ports and China and Central Asia through Afghanistan; and its deeply held conviction of the need to build "strategic depth" vis-à-vis India.

As a result of all these factors, Afghanistan will remain an area of strategic competition and contention. Katz and Goodson both argue that one way to view this competition is as the natural successor to the earlier Great Game between the British and Russian Empires in the nineteenth century, now with Russia, Pakistan, India, China, and the United States all vying for influence. The complex mix of objectives, the divergent natures of the players, and their varied and sometimes conflicting motivations mean that strategic competition is a far more likely outcome than cooperation. Kabul's promotion of Afghanistan as the "heart of Asia," the United States' "new Silk Road" initiative, and other programs that seek to achieve regional stability through cooperative economic development are well intentioned and certainly worth pursuing. They should not, however, be followed to the

exclusion of hedging strategies to manage less optimistic outcomes, which are just as plausible.

For the United States, this requires a realistic, long-term assessment of U.S. national interests in and beyond Afghanistan, one that incorporates the effects of the United States' actions in the region on its allies, partners, and competitors and moves beyond questions of whether to cut losses or to double down and protect the investments and sacrifices that have been made. What considerations, then, should motivate the United States?

A first objective must be security. Preventing a resurgence of the Taliban as a security threat and ensuring that Afghanistan does not once again become a base for Islamist terrorism will remain prime U.S. concerns. Regardless of the outcome of negotiations for a bilateral security agreement and the size and composition of U.S. military forces that remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014, the United States will seek the ability to project sufficient power into the region to subdue any significant terrorist threat. In this endeavor, Washington will find natural partners in India, Russia (as noted in the current National Security Strategy), the front-line states of Central Asia, and, intriguingly, Iran. Competitors, to the extent that history is an effective guide, will be Pakistan (given its long support of the Taliban) and its close partners China and Saudi Arabia.

Rather than economic development, which Collins describes as a "hopeful vision presaged on multiple faulty assumptions," a second consideration instead should be understanding how developments in and around Afghanistan will influence broader changes in the balance of power in Asia, and especially U.S. concerns about the nature and goals of an authoritarian and increasingly assertive China. Ultimately, U.S. actions in Afghanistan will play into this strategic competition and influence perceptions of U.S. commitment and resolve. In this context, Washington will find that it shares concerns with India, Japan, Russia, and those Central Asian states troubled by China's growing influence in the region. Conversely, because of its close relationship with China, Pakistan seems more problematic in this regard.

Given this complex mix of considerations, as well as the critical questions of how best to honor the sacrifices of the past twelve years, protect investments, and demonstrate leadership, it is important that U.S. policy decisions be made in full awareness of broader strategic implications. Our hope is that the essays in this roundtable help inform those deliberations. ♦