

Regional Powers Seek Afghanistan's Stability

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The war against Iraq was billed as part of the continuing “war against terrorism,” launched in the wake of Sept. 11, 2001, with the war against Afghanistan. Yet, as many U.S. and international critics of the Iraq War have been quick to point out, while the United States was rushing headlong into its Iraq invasion, it still had not completed the task begun with the conquest of Kabul. Worse: The Afghan theater had turned into a festering sore. The security situation in that strategically situated country has gotten worse, not better, since the war in the Fall of 2001; the al-Qaeda/Taliban networks, which the war was supposed to eradicate, have re-emerged, reorganized, and reasserted control over many parts of the country, while opium production has soared.

Now, what U.S. troops are still there, will probably be withdrawn and redeployed, due to the need for more military in Iraq, and for a long time. What, then, is to be done with Afghanistan? There is good reason to believe that the awesome task of stabilizing the country is being assumed through a new approach by neighboring countries, with western European help. Working in the interests of regional security, Russia, India, Iran, China, and the Central Asian Republics are joining hands in a new Afghan project.

Diplomatic Initiatives

To stabilize Afghanistan requires military and security deployments to re-establish law and order, as the first step. Further steps include dismantling the vast drug networks that are organized under regional warlords. Most important, then, is the establishment of a normal economy, based not on drugs, but largely on agriculture. To provide the means for trade with neighboring countries, and abroad, Afghanistan then needs basic transport infrastructure, especially roads and rail.

During his historic visit to Germany in late May, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee discussed the Afghan problem with German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and Defense Minister Peter Struck in Berlin, and agreed on cooperation to stabilize Afghanistan. Germany seems ready to engage in the envisaged expansion of the mandate of the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF), beyond the capital city of Kabul. Vajpayee stated in Berlin that India explicitly welcomed such an expanded ISAF mandate, and a leading German role in it, as

FIGURE 1



contributing to the stability and reconstruction of Afghanistan as a whole.

Reportedly, the German government plans to increase its troop contingent for Afghanistan and deploy forces as protection for reconstruction projects outside of Kabul that are crucial for the country. The mandate for this mission is very different from the military campaign of U.S. forces.

According to well-informed Berlin sources, Germany, in coordination with other European countries, wants to work closely with Afghanistan's neighbors, among them India, Iran, Russia, the Central Asian Republics, and China. The idea is to begin with the expanded ISAF mandate in the western Afghan region of Herat—which is considered the most stable one outside of Kabul—and to expand, step by step, into the rest of Afghanistan.

Building Basic Infrastructure

Afghan “reconstruction” is a misnomer, considering that the country, plagued by decades of war, has never really seen the construction of basic infrastructure. Particularly important is transportation infrastructure, for without this, there is no perspective for the country to establish normal trade and economic relations with its neighbors.

Now, with the new approach taken by regional partners, strides are being made in this direction. Iran has completed work on the main highway leading into Herat in western Afghanistan and will soon open the route for regular transport. China signed an agreement for the Parwan irrigation project and hospital reconstruction, funded with a special \$150 million Chinese loan to the Afghan government. The latter agreement was signed on May 29, after meetings between Afghan Vice President Nimartullah Shaharani and Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, in Beijing.

On June 3, the news was released by the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), that Iran, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan had agreed to build important transport corridors. Representatives of the three countries signed a draft agreement in Tehran on June 2, establishing a road link from Iran to Central Asia via Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Iranian Minister of Roads and Transport Ahmad Khorram, Uzbek Deputy Prime Minister Elyor Ganiev, and Afghan Minister of Public Works Abdul Ali declared their commitment to build the “Rahgozar” corridor. Iran is to allocate \$3-4 million for the construction of the Milak bridge and road, as well as \$43 million to build the 125-kilometer-long Dogharoun road.

This project will link Iran to Uzbekistan via the Afghan cities of Herat, Badgis, Jouzghan, and Balkh, the Afghan minister explained. In addition, the Iranian announced that his country has decided to establish a rail link from Torbat Heidarieh, in the eastern province of Khorassan, to Afghanistan’s Sangan and Herat. Khorram added, “This project will also link neighboring Afghanistan to the high seas as well as to central and northern Europe.”

In this context, Uzbek President Karimov will visit Iran for three days, beginning June 17. He will meet with President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami as well as with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who will be there at the same time. “Road transportation will top the agenda of talks between these officials,” IRNA noted. Karimov reportedly will sign an agreement with his counterparts, for building a road from his country, which is landlocked, to the Persian Gulf.

Earlier, on May 9, IRNA reported that Iran had finalized plans to build a new tunnel in Tajikistan, which will facilitate transit through Afghanistan, Pakistan and into Iran. The 10 km “Anzab” tunnel project, to be financed by an Iranian loan for \$25 million, was finalized by Iranian Foreign Ministry economics representative Mohammad-Hossei Adeli and Tajik Economics and Trade Minister Hakim Salehof.

And, on June 3, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) announced approval of a \$150 million concessional loan, to help Afghanistan restore damaged road and power generation, and natural gas infrastructure, which would link up Afghanistan’s eastern regions with the Pakistani port in Karachi.

Iran is central to the entire regionally coordinated project. Clearly, the intention of the Tehran government, is to use its strategic geographical location, to build up a network of interlinked transport routes across the region; landlocked countries such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan can be given access to Iran’s ports, if the necessary road and rail infrastructure is built.

Iran is also important politically for the stabilization of Afghanistan. The governor of the Shi’ite Muslim Herat province, Ismail Khan, spent years in exile in neighboring Iran (which is also Shi’ite), and has developed solid political, economic, and trade ties with Iran. On June 4, *The Dawn* reported that Ismail Khan, who had theretofore kept provincial revenues from duties for his own regional budget, started transfer-

ring the funds to Karzai’s government. The gesture was important, not only for the financial contribution it makes to the central government, but politically, indicating Khan’s new allegiance to Karzai’s authority.

One key transport route for the region, is the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), joining Russia, India, and Iran. As reported by the *Moscow Times* on May 6, Russia has proposed a consortium be set up of the shipping companies of Russia, Iran, and Germany, to provide investments for improving the trans-Russian route. Russian Transportation Minister Sergei Frank said that North-South transit could be worth tens of billions of dollars to Russia in a few years, but this is hindered by the lack of railroad, highway, and river infrastructure between the Caspian Sea and St. Petersburg. Iran is being asked to participate with its state-owned cargo fleet, along with the St. Petersburg Port, Olya Port near Astrakhan on the Caspian, and the Free Port of Hamburg in Germany. Both Iranian President Khatami and Russian President Vladimir Putin have given the proposal a high rating.

Another important grouping, which overlaps the North-South corridor countries, and Afghanistan’s neighbors, is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO—Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan), which held its third heads-of-state summit in Moscow on May 29. At the meeting, the SCO was transformed from an informal group into a full-fledged institution with secretariats, a standing budget, and yearly summits. One of the most important objectives of the SCO from its founding, has been the fight against terrorism and drug traffic; all member countries recognize the fact that this dual menace has had its headquarters in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan. Therefore, their work constitutes an important contribution to Afghan stabilization. Now the SCO has expanded its range of activity, recognizing the importance of economic development, to ensure security. Thus, at the concluding press conference to the SCO summit in Moscow, the Presidents of Russia, China, and Kazakhstan stressed that, in addition to the fight against terrorism and drug trade, they would intensify economic cooperation.

In fact, the website eatu.org reported on May 29 that the North-South corridor was at the center of the SCO summit. Russian Transport Minister Frank said, “The (SCO) summit is focussed on the issues of transport of Asian commodities to Europe. The Minister’s report was dedicated to the development of the North-South transport corridor, designed to provide continuous transit of container cargo from Asia to Europe. One of the largest European transport consortiums, Eurogate, has already joined the project, which is supposed to involve over \$300 million in foreign investment.”

If this series of overlapping agreements on infrastructure development, economic cooperation, trade, and anti-drug law enforcement, is consolidated, there can be hope that war-ravaged Afghanistan may have a future.