

South-west Asia after the Taliban

Mohammed Ayooob

In its war on terrorism, the United States has attempted to untie the knot of Islamic extremism that has been at the centre of Pakistani–Afghan relations for years. Optimists can point to two achievements: the installation of an interim Afghan government under the moderate Pashtun leader, Hamid Karzai; and the 12 January 2002 speech by Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, vowing to break Pakistan-based terrorist groups and to pull the country away from the brink of a ‘theocratic state’. Both developments have been greeted with palpable relief in Washington and other capitals. Yet the threat of instability throughout South-west Asia – that is, a region that includes both South Asia and the Persian Gulf and stretches into Central Asia – is far from over. Further conflict and fragmentation in Afghanistan could have continued ripple effects spreading through the region. In Pakistan itself – despite the acknowledged boldness of Musharraf’s crackdown – a history of creating, harbouring and aiding terrorist groups will not cease to haunt the country for the foreseeable future. Pakistan could yet become a new epicentre of instability, terrorism and state breakdown in the extended South-west Asian region. With al-Qaeda terrorists losing their safe haven in Afghanistan, some surviving members are likely already to have moved to Pakistan. The existence of similar terrorist groups in Pakistan, many of them supported by elements in the Pakistani military and by fundamentalist Islamic groups like the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam, could provide them adequate cover and sustenance – even in the face of Musharraf’s announced crackdown.

There is evidence that the autonomous tribal belt on the border of Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Afghanistan has already become the refuge of hundreds if not thousands of Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters. The Pakistan government’s writ does not run here and the tribal population is overwhelmingly sympathetic both to al-Qaeda and the Taliban.¹

Pakistan-based terror groups stepped up attacks in India during October–December 2001, culminating in the suicide attack on the Indian parliament on 13 December. This suggests that Pakistani groups have been receiving fresh recruits from across the Afghan border willing to do jihad against the Indian ‘infidel’ now that the war against America has been lost. It also indicates that

Mohammed Ayooob is University Distinguished Professor of International Relations at James Madison College, Michigan State University.

such groups are willing and able to defy Pakistani injunctions against such dramatic terror attacks after 11 September. They seem intent on acting as catalysts for escalating hostility between India and Pakistan by forcing India to attack terrorist bases and training camps across the 'Line of Control' in Kashmir, thus raising the danger of war between the nuclear-armed states.

The events since 11 September have sharpened the long-standing dilemmas that have troubled US policies towards Pakistan and India. Clearly Musharraf deserves American support if he can demonstrate continued determination to divert his country from an extremist trajectory. Yet, in the long run, it is India and (perhaps less obviously) Iran – pre-eminent states in South Asia and the Gulf and natural status-quo powers – that stand out as logical American partners. Musharraf's undeniable political risks do need to be rewarded. But India, a stable if somewhat raucous democracy, is a far safer bet as a US partner than Pakistan's struggling military dictatorship. Iran may look like an unlikely partner, especially after US President George W. Bush's hard-line classification of the country, in his 30 January 2002 State of the Union address, as part of an 'axis of evil'. Yet, the American decision to renounce hopes for rapprochement with Iran – if that is indeed what has been decided – is misguided. The US should not neglect the strategic logic of increasingly converging interests between Washington, New Delhi and Tehran.

Post-war Afghanistan

The Bonn conference, which met from 27 November to 5 December 2001, brought together four Afghan factions to form a transitional regime under Karzai. Yet no single government, even if it has the backing of the United Nations and the United States, will be in a position to control all or even most of the country effectively for a long time to come. The squabbling at Bonn among the different factions, the visible divisions within the Northern Alliance and the absence of several major contenders for power from the Bonn meeting, do not bode well for the future of Afghanistan as an integrated polity. Neither does the controversy among Pashtun factions and the subsequent fragile compromise over who should govern Kandahar after the departure of the Taliban from their heartland. Similar conflicts among Pashtun tribal leaders have been reported from other parts of eastern and southern Afghanistan. Above all, the perception that Karzai was imposed as the interim leader by the United States could undermine his legitimacy.

The warlord in control of much of western Afghanistan, Ismail Khan, has already expressed his displeasure at the constitution of the interim government in which, according to him, the western provinces are under-represented. The Uzbek General Rashid Dostum, who controls Mazar-e-Sharif and much of northern Afghanistan, has also expressed his disapproval of the way the spoils of office have been distributed in the interim government. He was particularly miffed that the Tajik component of the Northern Alliance has retained control of the defence, interior and foreign ministries and the power and patronage that go with these portfolios. Although both Ismail Khan and Dostum seem to have

been temporarily mollified, such bickering suggests that the Northern Alliance – the core of the anti-Taliban coalition – may break apart sooner than expected.

Despite the diplomatic skills attributed to Karzai, the interim government's writ is unlikely to run in a sustained fashion very far from the capital. The presence of an international force in the numbers currently contemplated – some 4,500 – is unlikely to change this outcome. Afghanistan's terrain and its internal division, especially among those leaders who have men, money and guns at their command, make political fragmentation the most likely scenario. The scenario might be avoided if the international community were willing to deploy upwards of 50,000 highly skilled troops equipped for mountain warfare for an indefinite period of time. Even then the outcome would remain uncertain. In any event, there is no indication that such a force is being contemplated under the aegis of the United Nations or a multinational coalition. International financial aid may temporarily provide incentives for the warlords to cooperate with Kabul, but is unlikely to resolve the underlying political conflict among them.

Stability looks elusive also because the strategic interests of Afghanistan's major neighbours – Iran, Pakistan and Russia in particular – are at odds. All have their favourite clients. One or two, if not all three, of them are likely to conclude that if they cannot get a regime favourable to them installed in Kabul, they would rather have the country divided into fiefdoms so that they can dominate areas of Afghanistan that they consider to be strategically and politically most important. Reports of Iranian meddling in western Afghanistan and Pakistani manoeuvrings in the east of the country support this conclusion.

The bloodshed of the past two decades has augmented and entrenched ethnic and tribal animosities that were never very far from the surface in Afghanistan. Continued warfare has also created elements with vested economic and political interests in its prolongation. Poppy cultivation, drug traffic, gun-running, protection money and control of scarce resources in a context of acute shortage have provided enormous benefits to 'conflict entrepreneurs' who have an abiding interest in perpetuating insecurity in the country. As in Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Congo, the major warlords in Afghanistan have been, and continue to be, the principal economic beneficiaries of fragmentation and civil war. It is unlikely that they will be willing to relinquish this role and its benefits any time soon.²

Moreover, illicit economic activities have also benefited external partners, especially Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and international drug mafias. Elements within these organisations are likely to encourage and support the activities of the conflict entrepreneurs covertly. Resources and conduits for illegal transit will be provided by such external agents to warlords engaged in the drug trade – thus generating cash that can be spent on weapons and manpower. Since any UN-sponsored authority in Kabul is expected to be under tremendous pressure from the US and the UN not to allow opium cultivation and to desist from the drug trade, the Afghan government is likely to lack adequate resources. It is also liable to become increasingly unpopular among both poppy cultivators and those engaged in narcotics trading, the two major

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economic activities in the war-ravaged country. External aid will be able to make up only partially for the central government's lack of resources, especially since international donors will strictly control its disbursement. They are unlikely to allow such funds to be used for buying off regional warlords who have returned to reclaim their former fiefs following the disintegration of the Taliban regime.³

External involvement

Afghanistan's major neighbours have conflicting visions for the country's future. The Russians and their allied regimes in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan would have preferred the Northern Alliance to be the senior partner in any government in Kabul. All three equate Pashtun domination with Islamic fanaticism. Faced as they are with their own Islamic insurgencies, they are extremely afraid that this contagion may spread if the Pashtuns, even if they be anti-Taliban for the most part, come to dominate the ruling coalition in Kabul. While the control of the crucial ministries of defence, foreign affairs and the interior by the Northern Alliance may give them comfort, the elevation of the American-sponsored Karzai adds to their concerns.⁴

The interests of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan also could diverge quickly as the Tajik and Uzbek ethnic groups within Afghanistan begin to quarrel over the spoils of victory. Given the history of Uzbek-Tajik relations in Afghanistan over the past two decades, especially the rivalry between General Dostum and the late Ahmed Shah Masood, such a falling out would not be surprising. Uzbeks, who form a small minority of about 6% within Afghanistan and are concentrated in the north, have traditionally feared domination by the neighbouring Tajiks, who form a quarter of the Afghan population and are more widely spread throughout the country, in addition to demographically dominating the north-east.⁵

Iran would also prefer to keep the Pashtuns of the east and south from playing a major role in the power structure. The American attempt to build up Karzai is likely to have Tehran concerned as well. The Saudi-inspired Wahhabi fundamentalism of the Pashtun-based Taliban and their treatment of Shia Hazaras, whom Iran supports, have made nearly all Pashtuns, many of whom harbour visceral anti-Shia and anti-Hazara feelings, suspect in Iranian eyes. For all their ostensible commitment to a radical version of political Islam, the Iranians, including their religious class, are a cultured lot, for whom the medieval brutalities of the Taliban were highly repugnant. For strategic and political reasons, Iran has also been apprehensive of growing Saudi religious and financial influence on the Pashtun population.⁶

Furthermore, despite ostensibly cordial relations with Pakistan, Tehran remains suspicious of Islamabad's motives in Afghanistan. Iran perceives Pakistan to be a client state of Saudi Arabia because of Islamabad's financial dependence on Saudi handouts and the religious affinity of important sections of the Pakistani population, including sizable elements of its political and military élite, with the Saudi-Wahhabi version of Sunni fundamentalism.

Repeated massacres of Shias in Pakistan carried out by Sunni extremist outfits, often clandestinely financed by Riyadh, has driven home the lesson to Tehran that the Saudi–Pakistani version of militant Islam and that of Iran are fundamentally opposed. Saudi influence in Pakistan is also perceived by Iran as targeted at curbing Iran’s rightful role in the Persian Gulf region.

While Pakistan’s interests run counter to those of Iran and Russia, nor are they congruent with those of the United States. The United States is committed to, and has succeeded in, putting a coalition of different ethnic groups and political factions, excluding the Taliban, in power in Afghanistan. Pakistan, on the other hand, would have preferred the major share of power to remain in the hands of Pashtun tribal leaders, many of who had spent the last decade in Pakistan. It would have preferred to see the Northern Alliance’s sphere of influence strictly limited to the extreme north of the country, away from Pakistan’s borders. It is particularly wary of the Northern Alliance’s close relationship with India, a fact that was underlined by the visit of the Alliance’s interior, defence and foreign ministers to New Delhi immediately after the Bonn conference.⁷ The Alliance’s close Indian connection was one of the main reasons why Islamabad was stridently opposed to the Northern Alliance’s capture of Kabul. Pakistan felt its external security directly threatened by the Alliance’s capture of Kabul undertaken – as Pakistan perceived it – with American connivance.

Pakistan and the Taliban

Pakistan’s support for the Taliban was not merely a major pillar of Pakistan’s foreign policy, but an important element of its domestic policy as well. The Taliban were deliberately fashioned as a military and political force by the ISI for the purpose of ensuring a client government in Afghanistan that would provide Pakistan with strategic depth during times of conflict with India. This need became particularly acute in the 1990s, as war over Kashmir appeared to be a distinct possibility with the Pakistan-supported insurgency escalating in the Kashmir Valley. The Taliban, and their friends in al-Qaeda, were also used by the Pakistani military to provide facilities and expertise for training Pakistani, Kashmiri, Arab and Afghan terrorists steeped in the jihadist ideology who were then infiltrated across the Line of Control into the Indian-administered parts of Jammu and Kashmir to create mayhem in the Kashmir Valley.⁸

In addition to these external security concerns, the Pakistani support to the Taliban was intimately connected to two domestic trends that became increasingly prominent during the late 1970s and the 1980s. The first was the dramatic increase in the influence and visibility of Islamist forces in the Pakistani body politic. This was the result partly of Pakistani military dictator Zia-ul-Haq’s policy of using Islam to legitimise his regime during the period he ruled Pakistan (1977–1988). An integral part of this strategy was the bestowing of state patronage on fundamentalist religious groups and institutions in order to build a support structure among them. It also manifested itself in the increasing Islamisation of the officer corps of the armed forces as loyalty to the

regime came to be tested on the basis of religiosity and the public observance of Islamic rituals.⁹

The increasing Islamisation of the Pakistani polity was also in part the result of an increase in the inflow of Saudi money and puritanical and militant Wahhabi religious ideas into Pakistan, through Pakistani immigrants working in Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich states in the Gulf, and through the deliberate effort of Saudi charities and, above all, the Saudi government. Beginning in the late 1970s, the Saudi regime came to see the spread of Sunni-Wahhabi fundamentalism as the best ideological antidote to Iran's revolutionary Islam, whose appeal transcended the Sunni-Shia divide. Pakistan's critical position on the eastern borders of Iran made it an important part of the Saudi strategy to checkmate the spread of Iranian influence and, therefore, of anti-monarchical revolutionary Islam. It was the same reason that led Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf Sheikdoms to financially underwrite Iraq's 1980-1988 war against Iran.

The insurgency against the Soviet-supported Marxist regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s, aided financially by the US and Saudi Arabia and militarily by the United States and Pakistan, augmented this trend. It did so principally by providing ready recruits to the militant Islamic cause in the form of young refugees, many of whom were enrolled in religious schools close to the borders of Afghanistan that were run by fundamentalist Pakistani groups and funded largely from Saudi sources. These schools not only provided shelter and food to their students, they also inculcated among them a jihadist ideology based upon the strict and intolerant Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam.¹⁰ The Taliban (literally, 'those who search for knowledge') were the products of these schools who were then trained, funded, armed (and, according to some reports, led) by the Pakistani military to take over Afghanistan.

The second trend that surfaced in the 1980s in Pakistan was also directly related to the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan and to Pakistan's role as the frontline state aiding the insurgency against Marxist rule. The Soviet invasion had a major impact on the attitude of the Pakistani Pashtun population, larger than the Pashtun population in Afghanistan (12 million as against 10m), and led to their increasing integration into the Pakistani polity. Pakistan's role as the primary supporter of the anti-Marxist insurgency and a safe haven for 2m Afghan, primarily Pashtun, refugees changed many Pashtuns' perceptions of Pakistan as Afghanistan's hostile neighbour. Similarly, the economic opportunities for drug trafficking and gun-running that the unsettled situation in Afghanistan provided to enterprising Pakistani Pashtuns created for many of them a larger economic stake in Pakistan. As a result, there appeared to be a remarkable reduction in the sense of alienation from Pakistan that the Pakistani Pashtuns had harboured since the creation of that country in 1947, when the British divided India before they quit the subcontinent.

The Pashtun alienation was primarily the product of the resentment felt against the artificial border called the Durand Line, imposed by the British in the nineteenth century, that divided the Pashtun population, and indeed

individual Pashtun tribes and sub-tribes, between Afghanistan and British India. All Afghan regimes before the Taliban had refused to accept the Durand Line as the border between Afghanistan and the successor state of Pakistan. The two neighbours came to the verge of war over this issue more than once in the 1950s and 1960s. Even the Taliban, although they were Pakistan's protégés, did not officially endorse the Durand Line as the border with Pakistan. Afghan, essentially Pashtun, irredentism had, therefore, imbued relations between the two countries with a substantial degree of hostility that continued to nurture Pashtun separatism within Pakistan until the end of the 1970s.

The Soviet invasion changed all that, as Pakistan became the prime supporter of the Pashtun/Afghan cause against Moscow and the Soviet-supported regimes in Kabul. Pakistan's critical role in the 1990s in installing and maintaining the Pashtun Taliban in power in Kabul reinforced Islamabad's image as the main supporter of the Pashtun cause in Afghanistan and the principal bulwark against Iranian and Russian designs to help minority ethnic groups dominate the Afghan polity at the expense of the traditionally dominant Pashtuns. This perception had a remarkably positive effect on Pashtun opinion within Pakistan, as it did, for somewhat different reasons, on the fundamentalist groups within that country.

Pakistan and the Taliban's collapse

In this context, Pakistan's post-11 September decision to pull the rug from under the Taliban came as a rude shock to both the Pashtun population and the fundamentalist religious constituency in Pakistan. It should, therefore, come as no surprise if the Pashtun resentment against the Pakistani regime's sell-out of the Taliban is eventually transformed into a resurgence of Pashtun separatism within Pakistan.

The prospect of such a scenario becoming reality has caused great consternation within the Pakistani establishment. It explains in substantial part the desperate attempt on the part of General Musharraf to prevent the Northern Alliance from entering Kabul and thus inflicting a grave insult on Pashtun tribal honour. It also explains his equally desperate attempt to find 'moderate' Taliban willing to join a new dispensation. Musharraf's failure on both counts has created an ominous situation for Pakistan. On the one hand, it portends the disenchantment and consequent alienation of substantial segments of Pakistani Pashtuns from the Pakistani state. On the other, it clearly signifies the failure of Pakistan's Taliban-based strategic calculations and raises the prospect of Pakistan having to face hostile neighbours on both its eastern and western borders. It also raises the clear possibility of rivals, such as Iran, Russia and India, coming to have a far greater say in Afghanistan's internal affairs and in its foreign policy than Pakistan, thus reversing the trend that had been in existence since 1990.

The problem is likely to be further compounded for Pakistan's rulers by the fact that the Taliban had close religious and ideological links with both Pashtun and non-Pashtun elements in Pakistan that espouse militant fundamentalism

within Pakistan and a jihadist foreign policy abroad, especially in relation to India and the United States. While these elements were temporarily stunned into silence by the speed with which the Taliban regime disintegrated, they are unlikely to forgive Musharraf for the indignities heaped upon their ideological brethren and their own religio-political cause. Once they overcome their present predicament, they might look for ways of destabilising the Musharraf regime to get their revenge, as well as to reorient Pakistan's foreign policy in a more radical direction.

Finally, there are credible indications that the officer corps of the Pakistan army is deeply divided. Rifts within the top brass became clearly visible when, in October 2001, Musharraf removed or shunted aside several leading generals, including the head of the ISI, who were considered sympathetic to the Taliban and were opposed to his alliance with the United States against the Taliban.¹¹ That there must have been substantial opposition in the armed forces to Musharraf's change of course appears logical in light of the political and financial investment made by the ISI in first bringing and then keeping the Taliban in power.¹²

Despite the major investment that the Pakistani military had made in the Taliban, most military leaders went along with Musharraf's decision, hoping that Pakistan would benefit more from ties with the US than by supporting the Taliban and opposing Washington. Massive economic assistance and debt write-offs, access to sophisticated weaponry and, above all, an assurance that the US would not support India in the latter's disputes with Pakistan seemed to make Musharraf's radical shift acceptable to them.

However, for the Pakistani military brass, the American assurance that the Northern Alliance would not be allowed to take Kabul was a key yardstick by which to judge Washington's reliability and its genuine concern for Pakistan's vital interests. With that promise in tatters and with anti-Pakistan forces in control of large parts of Afghanistan, Musharraf's policy is likely to cease making strategic sense to many of the top military commanders. Musharraf could increasingly appear either too gullible or as an agent of the United States working for American objectives, to the detriment of Pakistani interests.¹³

Musharraf's decision, announced on 12 January 2002, to crack down on militant Islamic groups, including some of those operating in Kashmir, could further fuel military discontent. This is especially likely to be the case as Musharraf's latest action against jihadi elements was clearly undertaken under pressure not merely from America but from India as well. The Indian military mobilisation following the 13 December attack on the parliament in New Delhi appears to be the key factor determining Musharraf's change of tactics against militant groups operating within and from Pakistan. Giving in to blatant Indian military pressure is unlikely to endear Musharraf to the 'armed forces' top brass, many of whom continue to be committed to pursuing the 'jihad' in Kashmir and are disillusioned over the failure of Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan. India's refusal to de-escalate its military mobilisation, despite what is perceived as

Musharraf's appeasement of the traditional enemy, is likely to detract further from his regime's legitimacy.

Consequently, the overthrow of the current Pakistani regime by disgruntled factions of the military opposed to Musharraf's foreign policy cannot be ruled out. What this will do to Pakistan's political stability remains an open question. But a likely scenario would be a successor regime that is increasingly fundamentalist and overtly anti-American with major revanchist tendencies.

It is becoming increasingly clear that Pakistan is in the middle of a deep crisis, much of which is of its own making. It is overextended in the east by its military and political support to the insurgency and terrorism in Kashmir, which could draw it into a war with India. At the same time, it is faced by the grave possibility of instability and possibly guerrilla warfare in Afghanistan to the west, again the result of its support for the Taliban, which has backfired.¹⁴ Furthermore, a likely increase in Pashtun restiveness within the country itself may threaten its territorial integrity or at least make it highly unstable.

If one adds the current severe economic crunch to all these political factors, Pakistan's future looks very gloomy indeed. While the promise of American and international aid may give the regime some breathing space, this is unlikely to last beyond a few months. International assistance is not capable of changing the lot of the common Pakistani in such a short period. Absent such a change, economic disillusionment is likely to augment political disgruntlement.

Pakistan's nuclear arsenal

If Musharraf is unable to purge Pakistani politics of fanaticism and return the country to a modicum of stability, one major concern for the United States and the international community would be the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. A nuclear-capable failing state with religious zealots, ethnic secessionists and disgruntled radical military officers vying for control of nuclear weapons is a terrifying prospect. The arrest of several former high officials of the Pakistani nuclear establishment with close ideological ties to the Taliban, and to the al-Qaeda leadership, has heightened concerns about the security of warheads, nuclear technology and nuclear-weapons grade material in Pakistan's possession.¹⁵ The Musharraf regime's own recent moves suggest that it is very concerned about the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.¹⁶ Reports also suggest that Washington recognises the danger that Pakistani nuclear warheads may fall into the wrong hands and that it has devised contingency plans for either securing or destroying Pakistan's nuclear weapons, should there appear to be a credible chance that this may happen.¹⁷

US policy towards Pakistan will also continue to focus on preventing any leakage of nuclear technology, and on keeping the Pakistani and Indian nuclear deterrents as 'recessed' as possible – that is, with warheads and delivery vehicles separated. This is easier to achieve in the case of India as it is committed to a 'no-first-use' nuclear doctrine.¹⁸ Pakistan, on the other hand, is unwilling to subscribe to a 'no-first-use' doctrine and adopt a corresponding posture because of its conventional inferiority *vis-à-vis* India and the consequent

need for holding out the threat of nuclear response to a conventional Indian attack. Moreover, Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, unlike India's, is under the control of the military: thus the decision to launch nuclear strikes is not so directly subject to the moderating influence of civilian élites. These two factors together make Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons highly dangerous as risks of miscalculation or unauthorised use are much greater. These risks are likely to increase manifoldly if the control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons passes into the hands of groups more fanatical and irresponsible than the current regime.

The United States also will need to put continued pressure on China to stop its clandestine collaboration with Pakistan on nuclear and missile development. The United States must make this issue a centrepiece both of its non-proliferation policy and of its policy toward China, which has violated several assurances it had given Washington about cutting off the supply of missile-related technology to Pakistan.¹⁹ The latest such assurance, given in November 2000, has already been honoured in the breach.²⁰

The United States, India and Iran

In this context of projected and possibly prolonged instability in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the best and most viable long-term US policy towards South-west Asia is one that coordinates US strategies with those states in the extended region that have a stake in regional stability, backed by the capacity to contribute to its security. India and Iran immediately come to mind.

The United States and India have been able to cultivate important economic and political links in the 1990s. Many have significant security implications, such as intelligence-sharing and combating terrorism, but are not limited to them. The pace of Indian–American security cooperation has increased visibly since the terror attacks of 11 September 2001.²¹ It is likely to pick up further following the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament on 13 December 2001, which seems to have been conducted by radical Pakistani groups with ideological and political affinities to al-Qaeda. However, their common interests go much beyond countering terrorism. Washington and New Delhi share common long-range strategic objectives both in South-west Asia and in the wider Asian region. The virtual endorsement by India of the Bush administration's decision to deploy ballistic-missile defence, in both its theatre and national versions, very clearly indicates the convergence of Indian and American strategic perceptions.²²

Two goals that India and the United States share stand out from the others. The first is containing instability in Pakistan and insulating the rest of the region from its negative effects. The second is the need to contain an increasingly powerful China whose long-term interests in the wider Asian region are likely to clash with those both of the United States and of India.

India considers China to be its primary security threat.²³ It is also increasingly clear that China is becoming, if it has not already become, America's principal strategic competitor.²⁴ On a number of issues, ranging from Taiwan to ballistic-missile defence, American and Chinese interests run directly counter to each

other. President Bush's decision to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty is likely to force these contradictions to the surface very clearly and quickly. Moreover, China's long-term aspiration to become the second pole of global power ensures that its relations with the US are bound to deteriorate sooner or later. Therefore, it makes a lot of sense that Washington further upgrades its links with India to the level of strategic partnership.²⁵

While it may not be the current conventional wisdom in Washington, a shared suspicion of China provides a logical basis for strategic cooperation with India. Such cooperation would not necessarily entail a defence pact obliging the two parties to aid each other in case of war. However, it could provide a framework for military and intelligence coordination and the supply of sophisticated American weapons and dual technology to India that could serve the interests of both countries, if the existing balance of power in Asia comes to be threatened by a more assertive China in the next couple of decades.

India's democratic credentials add to the attraction of an American-Indian relationship that has the potential to become a major pillar of the projected global democratic community. While India has demonstrated its democratic resilience against heavy odds over the past half century, Iran too is struggling to achieve true democracy. As Robin Wright puts it, the country, 'often in spite of its theocrats, has begun to achieve one of the revolution's original goals: empowering the people'.²⁶ Despite the attempt by the conservative clergy and the institutions it controls to delay political reform and engagement with the United States, both these trends have gained significant support from the politically conscious strata of the Iranian population.²⁷

Moreover, Iran's antipathy toward the extremism and militancy of the Taliban and their ideological brethren in Pakistan, and its interest in ensuring the uninterrupted flow of oil from the Gulf, underlines its stake in regional stability. Iran has been integrated into, and is highly dependent upon, the international economy, primarily through oil exports, which form the bulk of its foreign-exchange earnings. Iran's rulers, therefore, will pay a heavy price if they continue to act irresponsibly in their dealings with the outside world. This is one of the main reasons why several of yesterday's Islamic revolutionaries have become today's political and economic reformers.

Although heavy historical baggage makes it counter-intuitive, the strategic logic of rapprochement between the US and Iran is compelling. Yet the Bush administration signalled an end to rapprochement in the president's January 2002 State of the Union address. This hardened line will not – or at least, should not – be sustainable. Rather than burying *détente*, Washington should endeavour to bury the past. The liberalisation and further democratisation of the Iranian political system is in the interest of the United States, as is Iran's reintegration into the security structure of the Persian Gulf, where it is by far the pre-eminent state. Iraq continues to remain unrepentant and hostile to the United States. Saudi Arabia has become increasingly suspect because of its financial and ideological support to fundamentalist elements, including the Taliban, that continue to thrive on anti-American sentiments.²⁸

The Saudi regime is caught between its adherence to Wahhabi dogma, which has helped both to legitimise the regime and to produce Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, and its political and economic ties to the United States.²⁹ This has resulted in immobilism in Saudi policy, most clearly demonstrated in the wake of 11 September, and precludes Riyadh from playing a major role in helping to provide security and stability in the oil-rich Gulf. The internal contradictions within the Saudi polity have also raised questions about the regime's survival beyond this decade. All these factors have drastically reduced Saudi Arabia's strategic worth to the United States, except as a major supplier of oil to the industrialised world.³⁰ However, with Russian oil supplies rapidly increasing and oil and gas reserves in Central Asia now coming on to the market, alternative sources of energy clearly abound. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's importance in this arena is also bound to decline at least in the short- to medium-term – as long as these other resources are not exhausted.

As a result of a combination of the factors outlined above, Iran increasingly appears to be the only power in the Gulf with sufficient regional capabilities and the corresponding interest to contribute to regional stability. As such, it ought to be the centrepiece of an American strategy committed to establishing a stable security structure that would protect American strategic and economic interests in the region.

There are obviously aspects of Iranian policy that continue to cause consternation in Washington. These include its long-standing support for the Hizbollah in Lebanon and, most recently, the attempt, thwarted by Israel, to smuggle a large quantity of Iranian weapons into the Palestinian Authority. Yet the problems are not insuperable. Hizbollah is a local phenomenon and the product of a specific context: the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, now ended. It does not have the global aspirations of al-Qaeda and the consequent desire to hurt American interests worldwide. And while Washington may have reason to be angered by Iranian support for the Palestinian uprising, it must know that a return to diplomatic engagement with the Palestinians is unavoidable in the long term. Why, then, should Iran be forever quarantined? In any event, Iran's position toward Israel also is starting to look less uncompromising. Recently, President Khatami hinted that Iran might eventually recognise Israel if an Israeli-Palestinian settlement acceptable to the latter is achieved.³¹

Furthermore, Washington should give up the habit of treating Iran as a unitary, hostile actor. The rift between the reformists and the conservatives is clearly visible. The Khatami-led government and the reformist parliament has been at loggerheads with the hard-line Council of Guardians for the past several years. While this has obstructed the government's efforts both to liberalise domestically and to improve relations with the United States, it has also demonstrated that the large majority of Iranians, who support Khatami and have elected reformists and liberals to parliament in overwhelming numbers, no longer consider the US to be their enemy. It is in the American interest to cultivate and strengthen those forces in Iran who represent the majority as well as

symbolise the liberal, pragmatic trend in Iran's decision-making circles. Demonising Iran no longer serves any American purpose. In fact, it is counterproductive because it prolongs the conservatives' hold on important state institutions by allowing them to portray the reformists as being soft on the 'enemy'.

If American-Iranian relations took a positive turn and the reformists could consolidate their control over the country, Iran's support to organisations like Hizbollah would probably diminish. In the changed circumstances they will come to be seen as albatrosses around Tehran's neck rather than as instruments for the advancement of Iran's foreign-policy goals.

A major hurdle in the improvement of US relations with Iran is the American suspicion that Iran is engaged in a clandestine effort to build nuclear weapons. Much of this suspicion is related to the nuclear cooperation between Russia and Iran, especially Russian help in building a nuclear reactor in Bushehr in south-eastern Iran. Russia insists that its nuclear cooperation with Iran is conducted 'in accordance with the rules of [the IAEA] and under its control'.³² American suspicions will persist, but they can be overcome if the general atmosphere surrounding US-Iranian relations improves. IAEA verification can also contribute to reducing the saliency of this issue in US-Iranian relations. The bottom line is that once Washington comes to perceive Iran as a 'normal' rather than a 'rogue' state, Iran's nuclear ambitions, whatever their scope, could appear as non-threatening to the US as those of India or Israel. Such an outcome is easier to contemplate under a pragmatic Bush presidency that is not obsessed with non-proliferation goals than it would have been under an administration, like Bill Clinton's, more committed to non-proliferation objectives for their own sake.

Before Bush's 'axis of evil' speech, there had been no dearth of semi-clandestine contacts between the United States and Iran in the context of the war in Afghanistan.³³ Recently, American and Iranian officials have held consultations, relatively openly, on the sidelines of the Bonn conference on Afghanistan and at the United Nations. These have signalled that Iranian and American interests converge more than they diverge on issues central to the stability and security of the South-west Asian region. However, more needs to be done. For example, the US must lift trade sanctions on Iran and drop its objection to the construction of pipelines to export Central Asian and Caspian oil through Iran. The latter will benefit American companies as well as give Iran greater stake in the health of the Western and Central Asian economies. Iran's Central Asian neighbours, especially Kazakhstan, have been urging the United States to remove this barrier to increased economic integration between Central Asian states and Iran.³⁴ In addition, a sustained political and security dialogue with Iran should become a serious priority for Washington. Common concerns about Iraq, the spread of Wahhabi fundamentalism, Pakistan and Afghanistan can provide the incentive to begin such a dialogue.

In return, the US can expect Iran to tone down its opposition to Israel, cooperate with the US in Afghanistan, de-escalate its anti-American rhetoric, and, above all, satisfy the international community that it does not aspire to

become a nuclear-weapons power in the near future. Given patience and goodwill, none of these issues should pose insuperable problems, but neither can all these goals be achieved at once. The US must learn to compartmentalise its expectations of Iran as well as demarcate clearly areas of agreement from those of disagreement. Insulating the latter from the former will prevent disagreements on certain specific issues from disproportionately influencing America's overall policy toward Iran.

With Afghanistan and Pakistan likely to be in turmoil for much of this decade and possibly longer, the United States needs the support of India and Iran to stabilise the South-west Asian region, of which all three components – South Asia, the Gulf and Central Asia – will continue to be important to it for strategic or economic reasons or both. New Delhi and important elements in Tehran also realise that they cannot make the extended South-west Asian region secure and prosperous without Washington's help and participation. Prospects for a tripartite strategic understanding among the three countries should, therefore, be examined seriously both within the American government and in the wider American and Western strategic communities.

Two sides of this proposed triangle are already in place, though they need further augmentation. Indian–American and Indian–Iranian relations have improved in the 1990s, to the extent that the idea of India building strong strategic relationships with either or both will find serious takers in the most important circles in New Delhi. The convergence of Indian and American interests has been mentioned already. India and Iran have major common interests: the security of energy supplies; the installation of a friendly regime in Afghanistan (both India and Iran were staunch supporters of the Northern Alliance during its war with the Taliban); and trade with Central Asia, including India's access to Central Asian oil and gas reserves via pipelines traversing Iran.³⁵ Additionally, talks have been underway between Iran and India to build a pipeline either under the sea or via Pakistan to ship Iran's natural gas to India, one of the largest consumers of natural gas in the world.³⁶ The overland route through Pakistan is more economical and even appeared politically feasible after the Musharraf government gave an undertaking to Iran last year that Pakistan would not only permit such a pipeline to be built but ensure its security as well. This was not an altruistic gesture. Cash strapped Pakistan was expected to earn \$500–700m every year in transit fees. However, events since the 13 December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament, make this option seem remote. The under-the-sea pipeline option continues to be explored and feasibility studies are currently underway. It is almost certain that, one way or another, the India–Iran gas pipeline will be built in the near future to convey Iranian gas, currently transported through tankers in the form of liquified natural gas (LNG), to India more efficiently and economically.

Common concerns about preventing Afghanistan from again falling under the sway of Wahhabi fundamentalists and keeping Central Asia stable and secure have added greater depth to India–Iran relations. Instability in nuclear-capable Pakistan and the likelihood of its fragmentation or 'Talibanisation' can

also be added to this list of common concerns. Many of these Indian and Iranian concerns coincide with those of the United States.

Clearly, Tehran and Washington still have a long way to go to establish mutual trust. But, given the new strategic climate in the aftermath of the war against the Taliban, both Iran and the United States have a vital stake in mending fences. India, which is on very good terms with both, and which could benefit from the proposed tripartite security structure in South-west Asia, could be persuaded to act as the conduit for future attempts to bring about a genuine rapprochement between Iran and the United States. This is an opportunity that the United States, India and Iran should not squander. It may also turn out to be the most long-lasting positive outcome of the war against terrorism waged by the United States in Afghanistan.

Notes

- ¹ Arnaud de Borchgrave, 'Holes Found in Pakistan's 'Sealed' Border', *Washington Times*, 18 December 2001. After a week-long visit to the tribal belt, de Borchgrave, a veteran American journalist, concluded that 'Pakistan's tribal areas are free-passage zones for Taliban and al-Qaeda's foreign legionnaires escaping from Afghanistan'.
- ² For a general discussion of conflict entrepreneurs, see David Keen, *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars*, Adelphi Paper 320, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998).
- ³ Jane Perlez, 'The Corrupt and the Brutal Reclaim Afghan Thrones', *New York Times*, 19 November 2001.
- ⁴ That Hamid Karzai was Washington's choice to head the interim administration in Afghanistan, and that this is why he was chosen by the Bonn conference, was very clear to the participants at that meeting. See, Norimitsu Onishi, 'G.I.'s Had Crucial Role in Battle for Kandahar', *New York Times*, 15 December 2001.
- ⁵ According to the latest CIA estimates for 2001, Pashtuns form 38% of the Afghan population, followed by Tajiks at 25%. Other significant ethnic groups are the Hazaras at 19% and Uzbeks at 6%. Detailed statistical data reflecting CIA's estimates for 2001 are available at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/af.html>.
- ⁶ For the background to Saudi-Iranian relations in the context of their policies toward Afghanistan and the Taliban, see Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), chapter 15.
- ⁷ 'Afghanistan FM Abdullah Arrives, To Meet Jaswant', *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 13 December 2001.
- ⁸ Jonah Blank, 'Kashmir: Fundamentalism Takes Root', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 78, no. 6, November/December 1999, pp. 36–53.
- ⁹ For a sophisticated analysis of the use of Islam by Pakistani regimes and its consequences for the Pakistani polity, see Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the Making of State Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), especially chapter 6.
- ¹⁰ Jessica Stern, 'Pakistan's Jihad Culture', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 6, November/December 2000, pp. 115–126. Also, see Rick Bragg, 'Nurturing Young Islamic Hearts and Hatreds', *New York Times*, 14 October 2001.
- ¹¹ Ahmed Rashid, 'America Attacks: New Strategy in Pakistan', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 October 2001.
- ¹² For one authoritative account of the ISI's role in creating the Taliban and maintaining them in power, see Peter Tomsen, 'Untying the Afghan Knot', *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, vol. 25, no. 1, Winter 2001, pp. 17–23. Tomsen served as US Special Envoy to the Afghan mujahideen during the administration of former President George Bush.
- ¹³ For Musharraf's travails, see Arnaud de Borchgrave, 'Tense Dilemma in Islamabad', *Washington Times*, 15 November 2001.
- ¹⁴ It is interesting to note in this context that even 'one month after the Pakistan government had agreed to end its support to the Taliban, its intelligence agency was still providing safe passage for weapons and ammunition to arm them'. Douglas Frantz, 'Pakistan Ended Aid to Taliban Only Hesitantly', *New York Times*, 8 December 2001. There were also several reports of Pakistani officers and soldiers fighting on the Taliban's side in Kunduz in north-

- eastern Afghanistan well into November. They had to be airlifted clandestinely to Pakistan when it became clear that the Taliban were about to surrender Kunduz. For one such report, see Dexter Filkins and Carlotta Gall, 'The Siege: Pakistanis Again Said to Evacuate Allies of Taliban', *New York Times*, 24 November 2001.
- ¹⁵ John F. Burns, 'Pakistan Atom Experts Held Amid Fear of Leaked Secrets', *New York Times*, 1 November 2001, and David E. Sanger, 'Nuclear Experts in Pakistan may have Links to Al Qaeda', *New York Times*, 9 December 2001.
- ¹⁶ Molly Moore and Kamran Khan, 'Pakistan Moves Nuclear Weapons', *Washington Post*, 11 November 2001.
- ¹⁷ For one such report, see Seymour M. Hersh, 'Watching the Warheads: The Risks to Pakistan's Nuclear Arsenal', *New Yorker*, 5 November 2001, pp. 48–54.
- ¹⁸ An authoritative study recently published by RAND corroborated the fact that India's 'no-first-use' doctrine is confirmed by its current nuclear posture. RAND's Ashley Tellis, currently senior adviser to the American ambassador in New Delhi, defined the posture as one of a 'force in being' stopping well short of actual deployment. Ashley Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001).
- ¹⁹ For details, see Mohan Malik, 'China Plays the "Proliferation Card"', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 2000, pp. 34–36.
- ²⁰ According to one report, 'One promise made by China in November [2000] was to stop exporting technology covered under the Missile Technology Control Regime to countries developing nuclear weapons such as Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and North Korea. China isn't a signatory to the MTCR, but it pledged to adhere to MTCR parameters that apply to whole missiles or parts of missiles capable of carrying a 1,100-pound payload over 186 miles. But on May 1 [2001] a US satellite spotted a shipment of parts for Pakistan's Shaheen-1 and Shaheen-2 missiles – both of which can travel up to 1,240 miles and carry nuclear warheads – as they crossed the Sino-Pakistani border. To put it bluntly, China is fueling an arms race in South Asia. The danger here is that with Beijing's continued help, Pakistan is likely to succeed sooner rather than later in modernizing its nuclear arsenal with plutonium bombs and thus produce small and lighter warheads, which would result in longer effective ranges for its nuclear-armed missiles aimed at India and elsewhere'. 'Beijing's Broken Promises', *Wall Street Journal*, 20 August 2001. A very high source in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs confirmed that Richard Armitage, US Deputy Secretary of State, had relayed the information to the Indians during his visit to New Delhi in May 2001 that China had violated the commitment it had made in November 2000 not to supply nuclear and missile-related material to Pakistan. Personal conversation with the author, July 2001.
- ²¹ Joanna Slater with Murray Hiebert, 'India: America's Other Friend', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 December 2001. Also, see Celia W. Dugger, 'To Strengthen Military Ties, US Beats Path to India', *New York Times*, 6 December 2001.
- ²² For details, see Mohan Malik, 'Missile Defence Shield Set to Boost US-India Partnership', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, vol. 13, no. 6, June 2001, pp. 50–51. Also, see Celia W. Dugger, 'Rare

- Praise from India on US Defense', *New York Times*, 6 May 2001.
- ²³ For details, see John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).
- ²⁴ The US government document available in the public domain that most clearly depicts China as a strategic competitor to the United States is the *Report of the US House of Representatives Select Committee on US National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China*, commonly referred to as the Cox Committee Report, issued on 3 January 1999. Also see, Zalmay M. Khalilzad *et al.*, *The United States and a Rising China* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999), and David Shambaugh, 'China's Military Views the World: Ambivalent Security', *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 3, Winter 1999/2000, pp. 52–79.
- ²⁵ I have argued this at greater length in Mohammed Ayoob, 'India Matters', *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 1, Winter 2000, pp. 27–39.
- ²⁶ Robin Wright, 'Iran's New Revolution', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 1, January/February 2000, p. 133. Wright goes on to say that 'The most innovative movement in Iran today is the Islamic reformation ... Much of the most profound discourse within Islam today is taking place in Iran's newspapers, courtrooms, and classrooms' (p. 137).
- ²⁷ Amy Weldman, 'In Iran, an Angry Generation Longs for Jobs, More Freedom and Power', *New York Times*, 7 December 2001, and Nazila Fathi, 'On the Sly, Iran Weighs Closer Ties with the US', *New York Times*, 9 November 2001.
- ²⁸ For the Saudi contribution to the creation of the jihadist/terrorist groups, see Fareed Zakaria, 'The Allies Who made Our Foes', *Newsweek*, 1 October 2001, p. 34.
- ²⁹ F. Gregory Gause III, 'The Kingdom in the Middle: Saudi Arabia's Double Game,' in James F. Hoge, Jr, and Gideon Rose (eds), *How Did This Happen? Terrorism and the New War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), pp. 109–122. Also, see Thomas Omestad, 'The Kingdom and the Power', *US News and World Report*, vol. 131, no. 19, 5 November 2001, pp. 34–36.
- ³⁰ The value of Saudi Arabia to the US in the context of the war in Afghanistan and America's larger geopolitical interests is analysed cogently in Michael T. Klare, 'The Geopolitics of War', *Nation*, vol. 273, no. 14, 5 November 2001, pp. 11–15.
- ³¹ Elaine Sciolino, 'Iran Chief Rejects Bin Laden's Message', *New York Times*, 10 November 2001.
- ³² Wade Boese, 'Putin Reaffirms Arms Sales, Nuclear Assistance to Iran', *Arms Control Today*, vol. 31, no. 3, April 2001. Accessed on the internet at www.armscontrol.org/act/2001_04/iran.asp.
- ³³ For example, see Steven Mufson and Marc Kaufman, 'Longtime Foes US, Iran Explore Improved Relations', *Washington Post*, 29 October 2001.
- ³⁴ Patrick E. Tyler, 'Kazakh Leader Urges Iran Pipeline Route', *New York Times*, 10 December 2001.
- ³⁵ For the development of India–Iran relations during the 1990s, see Farah Naaz, 'Indo-Iranian Relations: Vital Factors in the 1990s', *Strategic Analysis* (New Delhi), vol. 25, no. 2, May 2001, pp. 227–241.
- ³⁶ C. Raja Mohan, 'Gas Pipeline: Iran May Help Overcome Pak concerns', *Hindu* (New Delhi), 14 June 2001.

