



**CENTER ON
INTERNATIONAL
COOPERATION**

Meeting Highlights:
Assessing Change in Southern Central Asia
Regional Conflict Post September 11th

Regional Conflict Formations Project
Afghanistan Reconstruction Project
Center on International Cooperation
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ANDREA ARMSTRONG

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Introduction

The Center on International Cooperation, in partnership with the [Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation](#), gathered experts from Europe, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, the United States, and Uzbekistan to assess how the regional conflict formation in Southern Central Asia¹ has changed since September 2001 and to identify questions for further discussion for a larger meeting on the regional impact of the reconstruction of Afghanistan to be held in June 2002.

The Impact of the United States

While U.S. military action in Afghanistan has dramatically transformed the most violent and longstanding conflict in the region, it has also introduced new concerns for regional state and non-state actors. First, the United States may be stimulating additional competition in the Southern Central Asia region through its use of multiple allies in the region (including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan) and through its own rivalry with Iran.

Second, the U.S.'s historically short attention span is influencing how actors in the region perceive their interests. States in the region are competing with one another for short-term access to U.S. financial and military resources rather than working for long-term cooperation, because they expect the U.S. to abandon the region again, as it has in the past.

Third, the U.S. strategy also relies on helping states increase their capacity to control territory and people. One participant argued that this will directly affect non-governmental activity, since states could misuse this newfound capacity to repress independent activity other than terrorism, ultimately leading to more instability instead of stability. Increased political grievances could potentially result in new dissatisfied groups or alliances, each commanding increased shares of popular support.

Analyzing Change in Pakistan

Participants were divided as they evaluated Pakistan's apparent change of strategic policy and the implications for the region. One group argued that the shift in policy is real, citing that 7 out of 9 core commanders of the military had been either demoted, retired, or moved to less sensitive positions. Pakistan's decision to join the "anti-terror" coalition did not arise out of philosophical liberalism or a change in objectives but was a strategic choice to regain the U.S. as a strategic ally and save \$20 billion over the next 25 years through debt rescheduling and relief.

Other participants maintained that the recent changes in Pakistan have been mostly cosmetic and tailored for international consumption. The 2000 militants arrested were the easiest to find, not necessarily the most dangerous. Many, if not most, had been released. While international media focused on the arrests, the situation in Kashmir dominated domestic media coverage. Of particular concern was Musharraf's policies announced in February, which restricted political groups more than religious groups, in effect "creating space for extremists."

¹ Regional conflict formations (RCFs) are sets of transnational conflicts that form mutually reinforcing linkages with each other throughout a region, making for more protracted and obdurate conflicts. In Southern Central Asia, the RCF includes state and non-state actors in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Kyrgyzstan, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

One expert shared reports that Islamic extremist groups control a sizeable share of economic activity (licit and illicit) in northwestern Pakistan, including many of the industries that could contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. But their profits from rebuilding Afghanistan could also support the reorganization of extremist and armed networks in the region with immediate implications for Afghanistan, the Ferghana Valley, Kashmir, Pakistan, and the U.S.

Questions for further research and discussion:

- How are profits distributed among those who facilitate transborder trade that sustains conflict; which groups dominate the trade; what is their involvement in other activities; and are the beneficiaries closely linked to the government, or particular government agencies, especially security services?
- How financially and politically autonomous are armed groups in the region; what are their methods of recruitment; how have their objectives changed since September 2001; are armed groups in the region regrouping based on ideological, ethnic, and/or religious lines?
- How will Pakistan balance U.S. demands for increased central government control with domestic necessities of local decision-making and authority in the tribal territories?
- What are the reasons behind the recent rise in sectarian violence in Pakistan and escalation of the conflict with India; is it related to the return of “jihadi” militants from Afghanistan, or possibly an effort to discredit Musharraf internationally? Or are there other reasons?
- Will the destruction of the bases of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan lead to greater stability in Central Asia, or will it push militants into more violent action; will greater stability ease interstate tension in Central Asia around border controls, making regional cooperation easier?
- How will increased state regulation affect the ability of non-violent non-governmental groups to advance their agenda?

Regional Involvement in the Reconstruction of Afghanistan

States in the region want to benefit financially from the reconstruction of Afghanistan, which is expected to generate up to \$15 billion in external contributions. Some states, such as Kyrgyzstan and Turkey, have appointed special envoys to facilitate their participation in the reconstruction. In discussions with the Afghan Interim Authority, donors and large non-governmental organizations, some states, such as Tajikistan, Iran, and Pakistan, have promoted industries near their Afghan border for contracts rebuilding Afghanistan.

For some states, particularly Pakistan, Iran, and Russia, the reconstruction of Afghanistan is an opportunity to influence the future development of Afghanistan. Russia, which has little to contribute financially to Afghan reconstruction because of its external debt obligations, is finding other means of influence, mainly through sharing information from their intelligence services and printing Afghan currency. Pakistan and Iran both want an Afghan government that is non-threatening and receptive to their

needs, such as cooperation in trade and ensuring a political role for their favored leadership of Pashtun and Hazara ethnic groups.

The [Economic Cooperation Organization](#) could provide a framework for regional involvement in reconstruction now that its “main stumbling block,” the conflict in Afghanistan, is no longer an issue – and ECO is the only regional organization that includes Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, as well as Azerbaijan. Another participant suggested that since Southern Central Asia is indeed quite fluid, including countries from the Middle East to South Asia, maybe a “flexible coalition” of states, rather than a single multilateral organization, would be more effective in facilitating regional cooperation in reconstruction.

Questions for governments in the region, donors and inter-governmental organizations:

- How can states open borders for increased cooperation in reconstruction amid governmental concerns over drug trafficking, smuggling, organized crime, refugees, labor flows, and terrorism?
- Will regional participation in reconstruction create economic zones of influence or facilitate regional economic cooperation?
- How much time does Afghanistan have to rebuild before donors lose interest?

A Regional Approach?

Participants generally agreed that a regional approach is important for Southern Central Asia not only as a framework, but also as a “practical necessity.” Some participants argued for fostering a regional approach at the non-governmental level through civil society initiatives. Developing regionally-focused think tanks and advocacy groups could also inform donor assistance approaches to the region.

In order to increase incentives for cooperation among countries in the region and offset competition, some participants suggested that donors should:

- Support a regional dialogue to assist in setting regional assistance priorities and coordinating future aid packages.
- Guarantee funding for the reconstruction of Afghanistan for a specific amount of time in the long-term.