President Obama’s announcement of the gradual withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan through the end of 2014 has stirred the international community with concerns over Afghanistan’s ability to build a stable, secure and prosperous nation. Major regional actors – Russia, Iran, India, Pakistan, China and the Central Asian republics – all have stakes in securing Afghanistan from a Taliban takeover, preventing violence and instability, strengthening the Afghan central government and military and developing Afghanistan’s economic sphere. The seminar speakers provided their views on how these actors are currently engaged in Afghanistan and in what capacity they can build a regional security framework post 2014.

**Dr. Stephen Blank**

Dr. Stephen Blank introduced the situation in Afghanistan as an urgent international security issue. The planned withdrawal of American troops has raised questions and concerns about the security situation in Afghanistan and the region after 2014. Despite the lack of public announcements, the Central Asian republics are restraining from commenting on the issue due to frightful possibilities of the outcome post 2014. Experts in Tajikistan openly said that the situation in the region will worsen with the U.S. military withdrawal and that Tajikistan will be under significant threat. The Uzbeks are concerned about radical Islamist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan threatening their own borders should the Taliban come into
power again. Therefore the Central Asians believe that the stabilization of Afghanistan under a non-Taliban power is a precondition for their own security. That is, if the Taliban prevails, the way will be open for the Taliban and their associates in the region to begin to launch greater and more persistent attacks on the Central Asian states. Aside from military attacks, such a situation would increase narcotics trafficking, which is a scourge not only in Russia but throughout Central Asia as well. Many analysts and Central Asian government officials claim that the region could become the next hub for international terrorist organizations, though there is no data to verify these claims that date back to 2009.

In terms of tangible losses, the region would suffer from deep contraction of enormous economic investments. The U.S. championed TAPI gas pipeline would be at greater risk if the Taliban seize power. The electricity supply lines that run from Tajikistan through Afghanistan and into South Asia would be broken. Therefore, the Central Asians fear abandonment by the West to be left along with Russia and China to face the Afghan threat. Russia, especially, does not want a second war in Afghanistan yet is unwilling to relinquish its sphere of influence in the region. The common denominator in these reactions is that almost ten years after 9/11 there is a widespread lack of confidence and pessimism concerning the Karzai regime and the Afghan army.

Dr. Blank believes that an international effort to aid the transition in Afghanistan is not promising either. The 2001 Bonn conference proved to be an unpromising forum and the possibility of extracting more aid from the EU, especially in this economic environment, is bleak. We might be experiencing a ‘donor fatigue’ situation which will dry up the resources needed for Afghan development. This may also hold true for investment in Central Asia from the US given the heated discussions in the Congress about controlling the budget. The Afghan army needs a large budget to operate its training programs and a lack of funding may hamper the creation of a robust Afghan National Army.

In conclusion, Dr. Blank presented a pessimistic outlook for Afghanistan after 2014 and called for immediate attention to the possibility of confronting a complete security breakdown after the US withdrawal.

Anthony Cordesman
Mr. Cordesman began by stating that we should keep in mind that the sole stated objective of the U.S. in Afghanistan is to deny Al Qaeda a base to attack America. It is also important to note our situation: U.S.AID recently stated that we will not be able to afford funding the Bonn agreement—funding next year has been decreased to about 50% or less of what it is this year, and per Secretary Gates set forth, the military account will be decreased by more than 50% by 2013. Mr. Cordesman stressed that we need to pay better attention to what we are saying—others are paying attention, and are concerned with what will happen when we drawdown our troops.

What is the Iranian perspective on this? Iran has historically been involved in Afghanistan, with western Afghanistan being part of Iran until the British pushed them out in 1856, and Iran
continues to play a critical role in Afghanistan. Iran has so far given Afghanistan around $670 million in aid. In addition, Iran’s annual trade with Afghanistan is worth $1.5 billion, with roughly 2,000 Iranian firms investing in the Afghan economy. With Afghan government revenue being roughly $2 billion, the Iranian help is significant. Also, Iranian aid workers are engaged in more dangerous regions of Afghanistan, which are often avoided by Western aid groups. Mostly the aid is low level, to maintain a presence, and it is focused on the Hazara minority, which is Shiite, speaks Persian, and makes up 10-20% of the population. In addition, Iran is investing in the Afghani infrastructure: currently, a railroad is being built from Iran to Herat. There are also plans to build a road from the Gulf of Oman to Herat, as well as a talk about building a pipeline from Iran into Afghanistan. Although the pipeline project is mostly just talk because of the logistical difficulties of the terrain and profitability of running the pipeline, as well as the lack of peace in Afghanistan.

Iran is opportunistic, yet cautious with its approach toward Afghanistan. Iran cooperated with the U.S. early in the Afghan war, but it mainly views the U.S. as a potential opponent. Iran states that the U.S. is a threat to regional stability, seeks permanent bases on the Afghan territory and is after the Afghan resources. Iran claims that the United States is present in Baluchistan and supports the local rebels, which is a security threat for Iran. Iran’s view of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan is that it is there to harm regional countries.

Iran can leverage the U.S. with several Afghan issues. Iran is a major route for the UN food aid program to Afghanistan, which it could disrupt; about 30% of the Afghan population is fed by this program during annually. Iran could disrupt fuel supplies to Afghanistan. Iran could also change its policy on illegal Afghan migrants—roughly a million people—causing problems for the U.S. in Afghanistan. Finally, Iran could utilize its connection with the Taliban to harm the American policies in Afghanistan. All this leverage, however, would cause relatively minor trouble for the U.S. and would not be enough to elicit a major response. Mr. Cordesman concluded that Iran is reluctant to act upon this leverage due to the belief that the U.S. supports Baluchi rebels, and could use this to incite unrest in Iran.

Mr. Cordesman concluded that when he was in Afghanistan three months ago, no one discussed Iran’s influence and approach. However, given recent U.S. budget cuts for Afghanistan, Iran will become a major concern for the region. Mr. Cordesman also mentioned that Iran maintains correct relations with Central Asian countries, which are anticipating the possibility of a significant civil conflict after 2014.

**Ambassador Karl Inderfurth**

Ambassador Inderfurth provided a more optimistic outlook for the possibility of increased international cooperation in stabilizing Afghanistan. The past mistakes in Afghanistan, or the ‘ghosts of 1989’, are a principle theme in most discussions regarding Afghanistan’s future. Ambassador Inderfurth started off the discussion with the role of India and Pakistan as being crucial for the future of Afghanistan. He referred to the resumed dialogue between the two countries as an optimistic start to a regional dialogue. Secretary Clinton’s July visit to New Delhi and Chennai underscored the need for such a dialogue. Talking specifically about Afghanistan,
Secretary Clinton highlighted the importance of engaging the regional actors in pursuing a political solution in Afghanistan and encouraged the development of trade and transit routes between Central and South Asia. As it becomes clear that there is a need for an external settlement to compliment the internal settlement in Afghanistan, regional players will have to engage in the diplomatic effort to ensure a stable and secure Afghanistan. Secretary Clinton also referred to the upcoming conference in Istanbul in November this year and the Bonn conference as platforms to address the need for regional cooperation in an inclusive manner. Ambassador Inderfurth noted that while the progress made on initiating talks is slow, there is some traction that presents an optimistic window of opportunity for the future.

The two key players, India and Pakistan, have to be quick in their joint engagement on Afghanistan. Both India and Pakistan have their own vested interests in the region and are deeply suspicious of each other. The conflicting interests and suspicions of India and Pakistan are Afghanistan’s ‘Gordian knot’ and unless that knot is cut, the possibility of a stable and prosperous Afghanistan is dim. Pakistan would like to see its own strategic depth in Afghanistan and wants to avert the possibility of an unfriendly government in Afghanistan that could seek closer ties to India. On the other hand, India is wary of the security threats that could emanate from the region and wants to gain access to Central Asia via Afghanistan. The countries have long been fighting a proxy-war in Afghanistan that has exacerbated their mistrust of each other.

Today, however, the two countries have converging interests: the terrorist threat is as worrisome for India as it is for the domestic security of Pakistan. Their converging interests have the potential to create a regional compact. The two countries are also interested in the development of trade and energy corridors from Central Asia to South Asia. Tackling this issue is a top priority in both countries and offers an opportunity to work together, despite the trust deficit. Leaders on both sides have made efforts to bridge this gap and cut the Gordian knot. Foreign Secretary of India, Secretary Rao, has reiterated that India has no interest in fighting a proxy-war in Afghanistan and has nothing to gain from it. Pakistan’s ex-Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, has called for a reappraisal of ties as well and has suggested that Pakistan stop treating India as “its biggest enemy”. It is absolutely critical for Pakistan to realize that its biggest security threat comes from within its borders and not from India. These positive statements show that India and Pakistan have the potential to move past their current mistrust of each other and engage in the regional strategy for Afghanistan.

Ambassador Inderfurth concluded with praise for both India and Pakistan for starting a new round of talks. These developments are certainly encouraging but outstanding issues between the two countries on Afghanistan need to be resolved for any future cooperation in the region.
Dr. Safranchuk began with a quip that in the recent years the outcome Soviet-Afghanistan war is no longer considered a loss for the Soviets because in current terms it can be described as a withdrawal that left a stable government behind. Thus, under the current circumstances such an outcome would be considered a victory. It is also important to note that during the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the Soviets and the Najibullah regime were fighting against the Afghan insurgency, which was de facto supported and funded by the West along with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and China. The biggest difference between the Soviet war in Afghanistan and the U.S. war in Afghanistan is that there bipolarity of the Cold War no longer exists and Russia is very willing to aid the United States and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

As U.S. and NATO military presence decreases in Afghanistan, the role of regional powers must grow. Dr. Safranchuk outlined four possible scenarios of how the role of regional actors would increase and what it would mean for Afghanistan.

In the first scenario, the U.S. will choose a strong regional partner for managing Afghan issues as it downsizes its military presence and eventually withdraws from the region. Russia believes this to be America’s first choice scenario, however not all regional actors, especially Russia and most likely China, would approve of such a configuration. However, certain regional actors, such as India and Pakistan, would accept such an appointment by the United States. Overall, this approach would be plausible for the region because it clearly indicates the United States’ continued commitment in solving the Afghan crisis.

In the second scenario, the American military withdrawal is paralleled with a withdrawal of commitments to the solution of the Afghan crisis. Consequently, this would lead to a direct or an indirect interference by regional actors in Afghanistan’s domestic politics and create proxy wars within the Afghan borders. This scenario would closely reflect the situation in the early nineties post-Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Most regional actors are opposed to such a situation developing in the region and would like to avoid it at all costs, with the exception of Pakistan. Pakistan feels most capable to interfere in Afghani politics and to openly operate in Afghanistan.

From the Russian perspective any intensification of the Afghan crisis would risk the stability and security of Russian allies in Central Asia and would force Russia to practice its security commitments for Central Asia.

The third scenario would result in the regional players dividing Afghanistan into unofficial spheres of influence. This scenario differs from the second because rather than meddling in the Afghani politics, the regional actors would take responsibility for geographic and economic zones of Afghanistan. Dr. Safranchuk believes that this scenario may happen in the future because in economic terms Afghanistan is very divided: the western region is dependent on economic ties with Iran and to some extent with Turkmenistan; the northern region is economically linked with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; the eastern and most of the southern regions are heavily economically connected to India and Pakistan. Because this scenario is based on existing economic conditions of Afghanistan, it could prove to be the most viable in the long term in terms of developing Afghanistan’s raw material reserves and implementing multi-billion projects such as the Modern Silk Road Strategy. Russia would not be openly enthusiastic about such a regional approach toward Afghanistan; however they would accept it over the previous two variances.
The fourth scenario for the regional development is that regional actors with participation from non-regional actors, who are stake-holders or donors with legitimate interests in Afghanistan, develop a coordinated position on Afghanistan. This open and inclusive regional compact would prevent regional competition, destabilization and would be based on coordinated policies of all regional actors. Simultaneously, this arrangement must have mechanisms that would restrain certain regional actors from practicing too much leverage on Afghanistan. Russia would prefer this variant the most due to the following conditions: 1) Afghanistan’s neutrality, as defined by the presence of only training American military camps; 2) maintenance of Afghani territorial integrity and reconciliation of all border disputes; 3) complete Afghani sovereignty over domestic affairs and economic development; 4) ethnic balance.

Russia participates in discussing the stabilization of Afghanistan as a regional actor without a direct stake in Afghanistan – no Russian military presence and little Russian economic investments. However, Russia does have serious security concerns, with the most urgent issue being narcotics. Thus, Russia will measure all regional policies toward Afghanistan against the criteria of how many drugs will flow into Russia from Afghanistan. Dr. Safranchuk believes that Russia’s obsession with the drug issue is a little exaggerated and it comes at the expense of its other interests related to Afghanistan.

Zhao Huasheng
China’s approach toward Afghanistan must be understood in the context of China’s historically limited engagement with Afghanistan. China has never fought a war with Afghanistan; the two countries do not share major ethnic groups; and the border between Afghanistan and China is closed. Despite the little direct contact between the two countries, China expresses significant concern about Afghanistan’s future and desires security, economic development, political reconciliation and regional cooperation for Afghanistan.

China is particularly anxious about the Taliban gaining power in Afghanistan after the U.S. and NATO military withdrawal. The Taliban support the East Turkmenistan terrorist groups in China’s volatile Xinjiang province. China realizes the longevity and legitimacy of the Taliban, thus it is cautious in criticizing the Taliban in its official documents. The Chinese government only condemns the activities of the Taliban and never singles out the group as the root of those terrorist activities. In an effort to protect Afghanistan from a Taliban takeover, China believes that a concrete policy must be established toward the weakening and ultimate eradication of the group. This policy must stem from the success of the Kabul Process, yet many challenges remain in making the transition to full Afghan leadership and responsibility.

Despite the challenges, China has made significant strides in engaging bilaterally with the Afghan government. In March of 2010, President Karzai embarked on an official visit to China during which both countries committed to strengthening good-neighborly ties. Chinese officials
stressed continuous assistance and aid to Afghanistan and pledged to enhance security and economic cooperation. Domestically, China has invested many resources into developing the Xinjiang province economically in order to bring stability to the region and to inhibit the local terrorist groups, especially their relations with the Taliban.

China also makes great efforts in a multilateral approach toward Afghanistan. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provides an ideal platform for China to cooperate with key regional actors in regard to Afghanistan. From the first days of its existence, the SCO always included Afghanistan in its agenda and all summits address the situation in Afghanistan. Many experts argue that the SCO must play the role of a mediator in the Afghan issues; however, there is also significant emphasis on the SCO’s economic contribution to the development of Afghanistan. All SCO members believe that economic development is the first step in providing stability to the country. Due to the geographical proximity of SCO members to Afghanistan, they are natural investors in the energy and agricultural sectors of Afghanistan and the members can provide Afghanistan with human capital in order to encourage dynamic development in all other sectors of the economy.

Overall, China backs the antiterrorist activities of international forces and Afghanistan’s government, and provides training for the Afghan officers and policemen. However, China refrains from direct military involvement and did not join the Northern Distribution Network. There have been rumors that the United States attempted to convince China to open a corridor from Kazakhstan to China, through the Xinjiang province. The official Chinese stance is that no such proposal has been made; China distances itself from American military and prefers that there is no American footprint in Xinjiang.