

The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan

Geopolitical Challenges and Opportunities

A Report of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project and
the Russia and Eurasia Program

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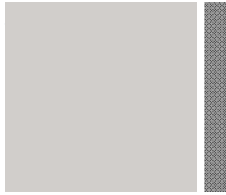
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About the Northern Distribution Network Project

As the U.S. presence in Afghanistan increases, so too will its demand for nonmilitary supplies. To accommodate this growth and address ongoing concerns with Pakistani supply lines, U.S. planners have opened the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a commercially based logistical corridor connecting Baltic and Black Sea ports with Afghanistan via Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.

The NDN has impacted the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. While key transit states enjoy new leverage over Washington, the NDN also serves as a potential vehicle for constructive U.S. engagement. Understanding how to manage these geopolitical risks and opportunities will be critical for the United States and is the first goal of this project.

Though the impetus behind the NDN is grounded in the military's immediate needs, its establishment nonetheless also offers a unique opportunity for the United States to help facilitate intercontinental trade. Such commerce can provide sustainable income for Afghanistan, deepen its integration with neighboring states, and ultimately contribute to the country's stabilization. Thus, the second goal of this project is to ensure that the expansion of supply routes is fully leveraged to further this long-term objective.

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THE NORTHERN DISTRIBUTION NETWORK AND AFGHANISTAN

GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Introduction

The development of new northern supply routes into Afghanistan, termed the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) by the U.S. government, and the expanded U.S. presence in Afghanistan has had considerable impact on regional geopolitics in Eurasia.¹ For those states now involved in the NDN (Latvia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), this cooperation has added a new dimension to their relations that increases their stakes in bilateral ties with the United States and vice versa. Washington is engaging these partners on an issue of utmost priority to U.S. security interests. Together and individually these states can play a constructive role in Afghan stabilization efforts. But persistent tensions, mistrust, paranoia, authoritarianism, and a near-exclusive focus on “regime preservation” make some of them unwieldy and volatile partners. Suspicion of U.S. intentions and commitment further complicate this calculation. Understanding the dimensions of and knowing how to manage the geopolitical challenges and opportunities associated with NDN transit states and other key players is critical for the United States.

While some argue that the NDN increases U.S. vulnerabilities by providing potentially unreliable partners new leverage, it is important to remember that the NDN was established to address a critical vulnerability: overreliance on fragile supply lines from the port of Karachi passing through enemy strongholds into Afghanistan. Each new supply line involves a new set of actors and a palette of challenges and risks, but overall the creation of alternatives and redundancies increases U.S. leverage. Prior to the introduction of the NDN and apart from critical airlift of sensitive supplies, the United States relied only on supply routes through Pakistan in support of combat operations in Afghanistan. This frequently left the U.S. forces at the mercy of a nation that is at once dependent on the United States for financial and military aid, but also deeply suspicious and often working at cross-purposes to Washington’s strategy. That single supply network courses through territory overrun by insurgent forces and criminals—an arrangement surely less than ideal.

¹ For more information on the transit routes that constitute the NDN, see Andrew C. Kuchins, Thomas M. Sanderson, and David A. Gordon, *The Northern Distribution Network and the Modern Silk Road: Planning for Afghanistan’s Future* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, December 2009).

The NDN was designed to provide redundancy to this critical Pakistan supply line and to help handle the surge of supplies associated with an increase of 21,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan in 2009 and, with the recent announcement by the Obama administration, an additional 30,000 troops in 2010. This obvious need and vulnerability has placed the United States' Afghanistan war resupply squarely in the hands of other nations. All states benefit greatly by hosting the supply line—the impact on bilateral relationships with the United States is in part constructive and positive. Russia's agreement to both aerial and overland resupply through its territory, and Uzbekistan's reengagement with America for similar transit, is proof of these encouraging developments.

Relationships between the United States and NDN partner nations; with Japan, China, and the European Union; and between NDN partner nations themselves are very complicated. To shed light on these dynamics, the following surveys the national interests, perspectives, and potential gains and losses for Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Japan, China, Iran, and the European Union as they pursue their own goals in Eurasia. Understanding the interests of each nation is critical for effective policy formulation and execution by the United States.

Russia's Conflicting Security, Political, and Economic Interests in Afghanistan and the NDN

“Russia/Central Asia: Afghanistan's northern neighbors have enduring interests in, and influence over, particular segments of Afghanistan. They pursue objectives that are not necessarily congruent with ISAF's mission. ISAF's Northern distribution Network and logistical hubs are dependent upon support from Russia and Central Asian states, giving them the potential to act either as spoilers or positive influences”²

Russia is a crucial country in the establishment of the NDN with a rich history of engagement in Afghanistan and Greater Central Asia. In the nineteenth century, this region was the central battle line as the British and Russian empires vied for influence in the legendary “Great Game.” The Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s foreshadowed the demise of the chief adversary of the United States and the onset of a period of diminished Russian power and influence in the world. Russia's restoration and identity as a great power, so crucial to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's vision, is the prism that defines Moscow's perspectives on its political, security, and economic interests in Afghanistan, which are deeply mixed. Understanding this broader context and managing Russian motivations is essential for the success of the NDN.

Russia has important security interests in the success of the international coalition in Afghanistan both to contain the movement and activities of Islamic insurgents and terrorists and to curtail the

² International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), “Commander's Initial Assessment,” *Washington Post*, August 30, 2009, pp. 2–12, http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf.

drug flow infecting its own population. Russian territory has been directly threatened and targeted by Islamic insurgents and terrorists for more than 15 years. While instability and fighting in the Northern Caucasus, especially the two wars in Chechnya, has deep domestic socioeconomic roots, foreign fighters and financing have contributed significantly to the challenges in the past. The impact of the flow of opiates from Afghanistan also touches a very raw nerve for the Russian people. Already experiencing dramatic demographic decline, Russia also suffers a drug-abuse epidemic fueled by its status as the biggest destination for Afghan heroin.

Despite the buffer of independent Central Asian states, Moscow may feel more vulnerable to these threats than during the Soviet period as border controls are far weaker now. On the other hand, the Russian leadership views Central Asia in a very proprietary way—as being in Moscow’s “sphere of influence,” which should be carefully protected from encroachment of other powers, especially the United States and NATO. Although impossible to quantify, the Soviet failure in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the support provided to the mujahideen by the United States also colors the Russian perspective on the difficulties U.S. and allied forces are currently encountering.

The international coalition’s brilliant success in knocking out the Taliban in the fall of 2001 marked the modern acme of U.S.-Russia cooperation since the Soviet collapse, and many analysts hoped this was the harbinger of a broader and deeper security relationship between Moscow and Washington. Then new Russian leader Vladimir Putin was lauded in the West for his bold decision to strongly support U.S.-led forces. But even that decision was not straightforward, as after 9/11 we know that the initial response of the Kremlin was to oppose the establishment of U.S. bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Kyrgyz president Askar Akaev and Uzbek president Islam Karimov were out in front negotiating with the Bush administration, however, and Putin made the right decision to essentially accept the fait accomplis and express support for these bases of operations at Manas and Karshi Khanabad.

We must also acknowledge the broader context of the U.S.-Russia relationship now in which Moscow and Washington have reengaged in cooperation in the war in Afghanistan with the establishment of the NDN. A steady decline in ties and trust between Moscow and Washington reached its nadir in August 2008 with the Georgia war. U.S.-Russia ties were virtually frozen for the last months of the Bush administration, but very early on, the new Obama administration made public its desire to improve ties with Russia, when Vice President Joe Biden said it was time to “press the reset button” with Moscow. Preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, reviving nuclear arms control, and stabilizing Afghanistan are now the three most important issues driving the Obama administration to improve ties with Moscow.

Moscow also sees value in improving ties with Washington, but it essentially has viewed the onus of policy change on Obama to “correct” what they view as mistakes by the Bush administration in pushing for NATO expansion to Georgia and Ukraine and planning to deploy third site missile defense system components in Poland and the Czech Republic. Some suggest that Russia’s enthusiastic engagement on transit agreements to Afghanistan has been motivated to some extent

on building leverage with Washington in the hope for the Obama administration to back off on NATO enlargement and Bush missile defense plans for East Central Europe.³ It is interesting to note that the much ballyhooed agreement between Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev at the July Moscow summit—allowing for the overflight of Russia of lethal goods—was initially proposed by the Russians.⁴

In the past year, many Russian officials and experts have expressed the view that of all the issues on the U.S.-Russia agenda, Afghanistan is where our interests are most closely aligned and has the most potential for cooperation.⁵ Russian president Medvedev, speaking during an official visit to Uzbekistan in January announced: “We are ready for full-fledged cooperation with all countries on the issue of assuring security in Afghanistan, including the United States. We hope the new U.S. administration will have greater success than the previous one in resolving the Afghanistan issue.” Zamir Kabulov, the Russian ambassador to Afghanistan, told *The Times* of London in an interview that “It’s not in Russia’s interests for NATO to be defeated and leave behind all these problems.... We’d prefer NATO to complete its job and then leave this unnatural geography.”⁶ The formulation by Kabulov, a veteran of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, probably comes closest to capturing Russia’s desired outcome. Best for Russia if NATO does not fail and even better for it to leave the region after some degree of stabilization of Afghanistan.

More skeptical and cynical interpretations of Russian interests argue that enduring destabilization of Afghanistan is Moscow’s desired outcome because this serves as a justification for Russian security and military engagement with Central Asian neighbors, as well as prevents the opening of transit corridors for energy and trade flows to the south. Failure would constitute a deep blow

³ The Obama administration’s September 17 announcement to drop Bush administration plans for missile defense in Europe for a new configuration was certainly warmly received in Moscow, although the administration was at pains to emphasize that this decision was not taken to appease Russia but rather was justified on the basis of new missile threat intelligence assessments and technological developments of missile defense components.

⁴ Authors’ private conversations with U.S. government officials. Certainly the agreement is welcome both as a contingency as well for its political value, but at time of writing the Pentagon does not have plans to make extensive use of this option.

⁵ The authors interviewed many Russian officials and experts during trips to Moscow in February, April, June, and July 2009, and there was a strong consensus on the point that cooperation could go much further with the exception of “bases in Central Asia and Russian boots on the ground.” One interlocutor presciently suggested in February that “bases” be renamed “transit centers,” the term now used for the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan.

⁶ Tony Halpin and Jeremy Page, “NATO making same mistakes as Soviet army, says Zamir Kabulov,” *The Times* (London), January 3, 2009, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article5435475.ece

for NATO and the United States in Russia's neighborhood, rendering Central Asian states more dependent on Russian economic and security ties.⁷

Russia's mixed interests and motivations on Afghanistan were starkly illustrated during the first half of 2009. On the one hand Moscow enthusiastically embraced and facilitated the establishment of the rail line that constitutes the NDN North from Latvia down to the Uzbek-Afghan border. The Russian government also worked hard with the Obama administration, as noted above, to hammer out the agreement for overflights of lethal materials. Virtually simultaneously, however, the Russians were trying to convince the Bakiev government in Kyrgyzstan to deny the U.S. military further access to the air base in Manas, which for more than seven years had been a key transit hub for U.S. military personnel and equipment into Afghanistan.

On February 3, 2009, Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev announced the base's closure, within hours after meeting with Russian president Medvedev in Moscow. Speculation abounds as to the real reason for this decision, but the \$2-billion-plus financial package offered by Russia to Kyrgyzstan precisely at the time the closing was announced and the most acute period of the global financial crisis that crippled Kyrgyzstan has fueled suspicions that Moscow was trying to buy off Bakiev to push the United States out. Russian authorities vehemently denied this suggestion and claim that Kyrgyz discontent with the U.S. presence was the true motivating factor, a point not without foundation.

Eventually the U.S. government successfully concluded a negotiation with the Kyrgyz shortly before the Obama/Medvedev summit in Moscow to nearly quadruple the annual payment of the United States to Bishkek to maintain access to Manas as a "transit center" rather than a military base. While speculation abounded as to whether Moscow had been outbid by the United States and duped by Bakiev and/or whether Moscow had decided to approve the access at the 11th hour as a "deliverable" for the U.S.-Russia summit meeting, there is broad consensus that Russia sought to oust the U.S. military from its use of the military base in another member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Incentives for Russia to Cooperation on the NDN: Economic Benefit and Political Leverage

Russia has a number of motivations for participation in the NDN beyond its larger concerns about the threats of Islamic terrorism and drug trafficking, noted above, which incline Moscow to work with the United States and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to stabilize Afghanistan.

⁷ This view was widely expressed to the authors in interviews in July 2009 in Tashkent. See Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas Sanderson, "Northern Exposure in Afghanistan," *International Herald Tribune*, August 5, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/05/opinion/05iht-edkuchins.html?_r=2&hpw.

The impact of the global economic crisis beginning in the fall of 2008 at the time CENTCOM was exploring the establishment of new transit corridors for nonlethal materials to U.S. forces in Afghanistan increased Russia's incentive to cooperate. After nearly a decade of dramatic economic growth, the Russian leadership was surprised by the deep impact of the global crisis on the Russian economy. The NDN offers Russian transit companies, especially Russian railways, a lot of business from the world's largest client during a time of economic stress and spare capacity. Already for years in Afghanistan, as well as in Iraq and Africa, Russian and Ukrainian air cargo companies who rent out cargo and personnel to NATO, were deeply dependent on this business.⁸ It is telling that in the wake of the Georgia war, when U.S.-Russia and NATO-Russia relations were in the deep freeze, this cooperation involving major Russian carriers like Volga-Dnieper was not curtailed.⁹ This is security cooperation, requiring political approval, which provides a very significant economic return, approximately \$1 billion per year, for Russian companies.

In addition to direct economic benefit for Russian transit companies, there are geopolitical incentives as well that get back to the driving factors for establishing the NDN—that is, to create new transit corridors that both provide alternatives as well as create a more competitive market for U.S. military suppliers. If the Northern rail route from Latvia through Russia works very efficiently, Moscow may hope that there will be less demand to utilize the southern NDN route beginning in Georgia through the Caspian. That the Georgian port of Poti serves as the gateway for the NDN South less than one year after the Russian invasion and defeat of Georgia (when Poti was briefly occupied by Russian forces) cannot sit well with Putin and his colleagues in the Kremlin. The Russians understand very clearly that establishment of the southern route is both designed to increase alternative routes but also to strengthen U.S. security ties with Azerbaijan and Georgia. No doubt the preferred Russian outcome would include only new routes controlled by Russia and negotiated through the CSTO rather than bilaterally with Central Asian and Caspian states.

Although many current and former U.S. government officials ritually accuse Russia of “zero-sum thinking” in international relations, it is more accurate to describe the approach as pragmatic and transactional. In the case of the NDN, it is pragmatic because not only does Moscow share interests in containing threats from Afghanistan, but it also recognized that since the United States was clearly going to establish alternative routes to reduce reliance on Pakistan, Russian interests were best served by making Moscow a, if not the, central partner. In so doing, this provides potentially valuable Russian leverage in the broader agenda of issues in the U.S.-Russia relationship. To the extent that the United States and its allies become more dependent on Russia

⁸ Marlene Laruelle, *Beyond the Afghan Trauma: Russia's Return to Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, August 2009), p.12.

⁹ U.S. government officials made this point in interviews with the authors on a visit to Moscow in July 2009. If the Russian government had decided to not allow Russian air carriers to continue, this would have been a logistical problem for a deeply stretched U.S. military.

as a transit route, Moscow is in a stronger position to put the “squeeze” on if and when it believes its interests are being encroached. Obviously Russia is not entirely alone, as the rest of the section will illustrate, in thinking about its cooperation on the NDN in this manner.

Central Asian Interests in the NDN and Afghanistan

Goods shipped via the NDN through Russia and the Caucasus continue their journey by transiting Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—while U.S. military personnel make extensive use of (non-NDN) facilities in Kyrgyzstan at Manas. Turkmenistan, shut off from much of the world over the past two decades, allows for overflights of its territory for humanitarian purposes associated with Afghanistan.

Expanded military involvement in Afghanistan stands poised to deepen U.S. engagement with Central Asia, a contentious swath of authoritarian regimes that has failed to fulfill its promise since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 yet still holds out the hope of an economically integrated and peacefully developing heart of Eurasia.

The NDN is a tactical response to concerns over pilferage, attacks, and dependency on supply lines in an increasingly unstable Pakistan. But the tactical move has strategic implications for U.S. relations with Central Asia, putting the first major push to expand U.S. engagement in the region since the immediate aftermath of 9/11 in the context of a policy priority for the Obama administration.

All of the United States’ NDN partners in Central Asia are certain to be aware of this context, which is reminiscent of the circumstances that accompanied the last significant expansion of U.S. ties with the region after 9/11. After largely ignoring Central Asia during the 1990s, the United States rapidly prioritized ties with Afghanistan’s northern neighbors as soon as the removal of the Taliban regime rocketed from a back-burner issue to a top priority. And while Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, where the United States soon established bases, were eager to abet the demise of the Taliban, two misunderstandings—primarily on the U.S. side—would soon strain new-found cooperation, with Uzbekistan in particular.

The first misunderstanding concerned priorities and expectations. In the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia, the elite’s top national priority—its overriding policy consideration—is to maintain its hold on power. Additional considerations can and do exist, but they are necessarily secondary in the absence of democratic mechanisms for the orderly transfer of power. An attendant expectation is that international cooperation should strengthen the regime’s hold on power. At the very least, it cannot under any circumstances weaken it.

Uzbekistan’s decision in July 2005 to evict the United States from its airbase at Karshi-Khanabad is sometimes misrepresented as a miffed reaction to U.S. criticism of Uzbekistan’s human rights record. It would be more accurate to say that in 2003–2005, as the United States enthusiastically greeted the fall of post-Soviet status quo regimes in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, Uzbek

president Karimov came to view U.S. aims in the region with mounting suspicion. The United States, in his eyes, was undermining the status quo and fomenting destabilization. When his regime brutally quelled an uprising in Andijon in May 2005, Russia and China chimed in with immediate support for his actions, while the United States hemmed, hawed, and—at what Karimov surely saw as a crucial moment—eventually urged an international investigation, an option Karimov emphatically rejected. For Karimov, who had expected his acquiescence to a U.S. military presence on Uzbek soil to buttress his standing and power, the dalliance with the United States was now more trouble than it was worth, and he showed the Americans the door.

Uzbekistan’s expulsion of U.S. forces from Karshi-Khanabad highlights the second misunderstanding. Even in relations with small and comparatively obscure countries, Washington does not automatically have the upper hand. Central Asian nations have leverage and will use it. In the period between the violence in Andijon in May 2005 and the eventual order to close Karshi-Khanabad in July, much of the debate in the United States revolved around the question “Should we stay or should we go?” But the point was moot—Tashkent, not Washington, made the decision.

U.S. Policymakers should heed both factors as they see to the spadework of maintaining the NDN. Central Asian nations have their own priorities, expectations, and leverage. They are, in the main, authoritarian regimes that prioritize their own perpetuation, expect international cooperation to aid this goal, and hope to gain leverage from assisting the United States. This is no reason to shun cooperation with Central Asia. But it is cause for caution.

Economic Development and Regional Integration for Central Asia

Viewed through the prism of its potential impact on economic development and regional integration, the NDN offers numerous potential benefits. Its reliance on commercial shippers could encourage diverse development in a region of remittance-based economies (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), resource-based economies (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan), and suboptimal combinations of the two (Uzbekistan). Its cross-border nature could spur coordination in a region of surly border snarls and land-locked isolation.

Unfortunately, what is promising in theory is unlikely to happen in practice. Crony capitalism and the enmeshment of ruling dynasties in moneymaking schemes mean that commercial shippers servicing the NDN are almost certain to be woven into the dense nexus of personal and state interests that characterize post-Soviet business. And while a stack of reports points to the benefits of regional integration, annual disputes over water usage, frequent border closures, pervasive corruption abetted by Byzantine regulation and absent oversight, and generally testy relations between states have torpedoed past hopes of transforming Central Asia into a more unified economic and political space.

Afghanistan is a largely untapped commercial transportation space, which if developed, can potentially open wider links between East and West. Tajikistan’s position at the crossroads of Central Asia connecting the state with the major seaports of the Indian Ocean, with China’s

Karakorum highway, with Iran, and through Iran with the states of Persian Gulf is of a great importance to the state's economy. Opening new avenues of transit through Afghanistan will give Tajikistan an opportunity to move out of its geopolitical cul-de-sac and transform the state into a territory for commercial transit into neighboring states resulting in considerable geopolitical and economic benefits to the country.

The NDN cannot remake the region or clear longstanding logjams. It can make a positive contribution, however, through the modest stimulation of economic activities unrelated to resource extraction or labor migration, the encouragement of cross-border trade within Central Asia, and the strengthening of legitimate commercial links to supplant the thriving drug trade that is today the primary commercial tie between Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Central Asia's Posture on Afghanistan

From the Central Asian perspective, little good has come from the south in recent history. As the Soviet Union collapsed and five new states emerged in Central Asia—three directly bordering Afghanistan—the mujahideen who had driven the Red Army from Afghanistan toppled the Soviet-installed regime of Muhammad Najibullah, plunged the country into bloody chaos with internecine feuds, and finally ceded control to the obscurantist Islamists of the Taliban. The leaders of Central Asia's independent states, all veterans of the Soviet Communist Party busy shoring up secular authoritarian regimes in the 1990s (or, in Tajikistan, coping with a civil war), understandably looked south with trepidation. Their mood only darkened as homegrown Islamists cropped up in the Ferghana Valley, extremists twice broke into Kyrgyzstan from the south in 1999 and 2000, and the Taliban played host to the increasingly radical and violent Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

The U.S.-led removal of the Taliban regime evoked sighs of relief in Central Asia, but subsequent U.S. efforts in Afghanistan did not elicit whoops of joy. First, Central Asia's ruling elites remain Soviet in education and outlook, and the Soviet Union's decade-long experience in Afghanistan tended to inspire a view of that country's problems as intractable and foreign embroilment there as folly. Second, Central Asia's rulers, while warning early of the threat the Taliban posed, largely succeeded in walling themselves off from that danger in the 1990s. Third, the United States' fitful foreign engagements in the 1990s, and its precipitous plunge into Iraq in 2003 and subsequent withdrawal amid uncertain achievements and incomplete political reconciliation, arouse doubts about U.S. judgment, stamina, and wherewithal.

The flow of drugs that has surged out of post-Taliban Afghanistan has only compounded Central Asian skepticism about its troublesome southern neighbor. But ambiguities abound. The same narcotics that have fueled rising addiction rates and a worrying increase in HIV infections have also enriched smugglers, who often operate with official connivance, if not collusion. In a sad irony, the gaudy narco-mansions that dot Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan testify to the existence of at least one flourishing cross-border commercial enterprise in a region with few such successes to boast of.

The Geopolitics of Central Asia

The main factors that could affect the NDN are geopolitical. Each of the Central Asian nations has its own calculus for determining the nature and extent of its involvement. Regional dynamics have their own role to play as well, as do outside powers like Russia and China.

Broadly speaking, Central Asian participants in the NDN can be expected to view their assistance in the natural context of quid pro quo, with actors at the lower levels motivated primarily by mercenary concerns, while higher-level figures seek a combination of financial and geopolitical dividends. Andrei Grozin, director of the Central Asian Department at the Moscow-based CIS Institute, told Eurasianet in July, addressing initial difficulties with NDN deliveries, that “mostly it’s all about the borders, the financial interests of the transit countries, and corruption in these countries.”

Kyrgyzstan’s successful renegotiation of the terms for the U.S. base at Manas, which has gained a new and more expensive lease on life as a “transit center,” is a fine example of this process in action at both the highest and lowest levels. It is unlikely to be the last such example.

The current fulcrum of the NDN is Uzbekistan, and it is worth pausing for a moment to consider what Uzbek president Karimov seeks to obtain from this new arrangement. Uzbekistan’s foreign alignments have tended toward unhappy endings in recent years—cooperation with the United States foundered after the “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan and the violence in Andijon; an alliance with Russia appeared to sour soon after it climaxed in a November 2007 mutual defense treaty.

If past practice is a guide, Karimov hopes to gain from his renewed cooperation with the United States some international legitimacy for his much-pilloried regime, a counterweight to Russia and its dreams of a privileged zone of influence on post-Soviet soil, and recognition of his nation’s regional heft, which Kazakhstan, with its oil-fueled prosperity and adroit multi-vector diplomacy, has significantly obscured in recent years. Through all his maneuvering, Karimov has made it abundantly clear that he is no one’s stooge and that he will make no concession that could, in his eyes, threaten the system he has spent nearly two decades building. None of this precludes cooperation on the NDN, but all of it places limits on an accompanying U.S.-Uzbek rapprochement. Clearly enunciated expectations, both in public statements and private talks, will help to prevent misunderstandings, but they will not be a panacea in a relationship that is likely to require constant care and frequent adjustment.

Difficult relations between states in Central Asia, with some points of contention involving outside powers, are another factor that U.S. policymakers will have to contend with. Uzbek-Tajik ties have been strained for years, with periodic spy scandals occasioning tit-for-tat arrests even as politically motivated disputes over emissions from Tajik industrial production further darken the horizon. Uzbekistan has closed its border with Kyrgyzstan at various times to prevent alleged militant incursions, with the most recent closure coming after a suicide bombing in Andijon in May 2009. Uzbekistan has also objected to Kyrgyz plans to allow Russia to open a second base in

Kyrgyzstan, this time in Osh. And virtually all of Central Asia has quarreled annually over water usage, with the upstream states of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan preferring to husband headwaters for power generation while downstream states require different amounts of water at different times for irrigation.

Despite a great many intemperate statements, border closures, gas and electricity shutoffs, and other hallmarks of hardball diplomacy, Central Asia has repeatedly defied expert predictions of chaos and conflict. NDN planners should be aware, though, that in previous flare-ups, disputants have not been shy to employ pressure tactics. A future outbreak of ill will may have nothing to do with the United States or the NDN, but it could affect the NDN all the same.

Traditionally, no discussion of regional dynamics in Central Asia is complete without a mention of Islamist militancy. The much-ballyhooed menace of Central Asian jihad is, however, the dog that didn't bark—for all the attention lavished on the problem, attacks have been few and far between. Nevertheless, a string of recent gun battles and arrests in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan suggests that Central Asian militants long holed up in Pakistan may be filtering back to the region along well-established drug smuggling routes. A distribution network through the secular regimes of Central Asia to feed U.S. operations in Afghanistan will surely be a tempting target.

For U.S. planners and policymakers, the danger is less that small groups of militants with dubious operational capacity will be able to disrupt supplies, but rather that local governments will react in problematic ways—with brutal crackdowns, demands for increased payment, or even a desire to remove themselves from the line of fire. While these difficulties are hypothetical today, contingency plans will help if they become real tomorrow.

Finally, Russia looms large on the horizon, both as a transit country for NDN supplies and as a regional player with its own agenda. A mid-July 2009 article on the Web site of Young Guard, the youth wing of the pro-Kremlin United Russia Party, ably captured what is likely the bottom line behind the Kremlin's decision to allow both lethal and nonlethal supplies through Russian territory on their way to Afghanistan. Ilya Kiselyov wrote that "if transit begins in noticeable quantities, this will for the first time make NATO dependent on Moscow." Moscow's politicized conduct with "dependents" in past situations—like gas shipments through Ukraine—should serve as a cautionary guide to future possibilities.

China, which has significantly expanded commercial cooperation with Central Asia in recent years and is finishing construction of a natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan, is a less problematic factor. China is unlikely to view a long-term U.S. military presence in the region as a positive development, but its main influence pertains to its rising prominence in Turkmenistan and a concurrent diminution of U.S. leverage there. With considerable volumes of Turkmen gas slated to move east through a Chinese pipeline opened on December 14, 2009, U.S. chances of inducing Turkmenistan to greater cooperation with promises of a trans-Caspian pipeline that remains a twinkle in planners' eyes are somewhat reduced.

As it continues with the heavy use of the NDN supply line, the United States should, with regard to Central Asia:

- Recognize that disputes within Central Asia could prove as great a threat to the NDN as disputes between transit countries and the United States and therefore take steps to minimize potentially damaging conflicts through diplomatic channels;
- Use the NDN to push for streamlined customs procedures along Afghanistan's border with Central Asia and, if possible, between Central Asian states;
- Strive for maximum transparency in financial arrangements surrounding the NDN;
- Draw up contingency plans for the reaction of Central Asian governments to possible militant attacks on the NDN and/or U.S. equities in the region;
- Integrate as many locally sourced products as possible into the NDN in order to facilitate the development of greater sustainable cross-border commerce;
- Clearly enunciate priorities and expectations with partner countries to avoid a repetition of past misunderstandings over competing aspects of U.S. policy, namely facilitation of operations in Afghanistan and reforms within Central Asia. Tension is unavoidable on this count, but clarity will make it easier to manage.

The Interests of Georgia and Azerbaijan in the NDN

The NDN South, beginning in Turkey or the European Union and moving on to the Georgian Black Sea port of Poti, carried 30 percent of total NDN shipments as of September 2009. Those supplies are then transported by rail to Baku, Azerbaijan, and across the Caspian Sea to the Kazakh ports of Atyrau and Aktau. Cargo then moves on to Uzbekistan and finally Afghanistan. At the time of publication, Turkmenistan, officially a neutral country, only allowed humanitarian overflights of its territory.

Interests and Perspectives in the Caucasus

Georgian officials quickly expressed their full support for coalition forces in Afghanistan and reiterated their desire to assist in the diversification of supply routes through the Caucasus. Georgian deputy defense minister Giorgi Muchaidze underlined his government's commitment to the success of NATO operations, stating in July 2009 that Georgian officials are "fully aware of our strategic responsibility, we stand ready to provide the full access to our infrastructure and the facilities needed for this purpose."¹⁰

¹⁰ Irakli Gurgenzidze, "Multinational peace operations contributes to the country's security," *Georgia Today*, July 31, 2009, http://www.georgiatoday.ge/article_details.php?id=7107.

Given Georgia's aspiration of NATO membership and generally Western-oriented foreign policy, Tbilisi's enthusiasm for the Caucasus route should not come as a surprise. It is widely accepted in Tbilisi that the successful implementation of the Caucasus supply route directly benefits Georgia as an informal security guarantee against further Russian hostilities. Russian forces would be far more hesitant to target military installations and infrastructure in a country through which NATO equipment was passing.¹¹ Georgian decisionmakers have also discussed the idea of a U.S. military base in the country, perhaps in conjunction with supply route efforts. Georgian foreign minister Grigol Vashadze said "If the United States thinks it wants to establish a base, we would seriously consider it."¹²

Azerbaijan's generally careful approach to interactions with NATO has also extended to its role as part of the Caucasus supply route. For Baku decisionmakers, the use of Azerbaijan's territory as a supply route to Afghanistan underscores the country's strategic position as a gateway to Central, Inner and South Asia, as well as Baku's support of the struggle against transnational terrorism. However, Baku has been cautious with its support because overt engagement with NATO could undermine Azerbaijan's carefully balanced foreign policy. President Ilham Aliyev has avoided committing to eventual NATO membership and has not embraced the possibility of U.S. military installations in the country. That said, nonlethal supplies continue to pass through Azerbaijan's territory and across the Caspian.

Azerbaijani decisionmakers see significant practical benefits from allowing NATO-U.S. cargo to pass through the country's territory, including transit fees, possible local procurement, and what one official referred to as the "positive externalities" associated with increased transport. An unnamed Azerbaijani official underlined in March 2009 the positive aspects of the agreement, stating "The Americans offered to set up the necessary infrastructure in Azerbaijan [for storage], as well as to contract transportation companies and local businesses which would purchase the necessary goods and products [for troops in Afghanistan]."¹³ The implication here is the welcoming nature of Baku toward continued cooperation with the NATO-U.S. coalition and the supply route's positive impact on Azerbaijan's economy. Azeri engagement in the NDN also serves to demonstrate the viability of Azerbaijan's vision to develop itself as a transit hub to help diversify its economy, a key long-term goal of President Aliyev.

¹¹ Alexander Jackson, "The Opportunities and the Risks of NATO's New Supply Routes," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, December 22, 2008, http://cria-online.org/CU_-_file_-_article_-_sid_-_16.html.

¹² Roger N. McDermott, "Azerbaijan Opening Supply Route to Afghanistan," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6, issue 51 (March 17, 2009), <http://www.eurasianhome.org/xml/t/digest.xml?lang=en=expert=1636&nic=digest&pid=3453>.

¹³ Shahin Abbasov, "US Negotiating Return to Uzbek Airbase," *International Relations and Security Network (ISN)*, March 24, 2009, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?ots591=4888CAA0-B3DB-1461-98B9-E20E7B9C13D4&lng=en&id=98142>.

Despite cautious rhetoric from Baku, Azerbaijani decisionmakers have welcomed the opportunity afforded by the Caucasus supply route to strengthen functional ties with the United States and Western institutions more broadly. This approach fits well into Azerbaijan's foreign policy priorities, affording Baku yet another link to extra-regional powers, without necessarily alienating regional heavyweights. Given Azerbaijan's fast-paced modernization and expansion of its transport infrastructure, the country will likely grow in importance as a Eurasian hub for Afghanistan-bound supplies and trade goods. To take full advantage of that potential, the United States and NATO will have to play their cards right in encouraging Azerbaijan's subtle Western orientation.

Mutual Benefits

The overall view among Georgian and Azerbaijani decisionmakers is that the Caucasus supply route is of mutual benefit to the United States, NATO, and the two national governments: first and foremost militarily for NATO and coalition forces, which desperately need diversification of supply routes to Afghanistan; and economically and politically for the Caucasus, exemplified by the collection of local transit fees and infrastructure development, and the wide support of the agreement by nations involved in the Afghan stabilization effort.

From the points of view of Baku and Tbilisi, stabilizing Afghanistan and combating Islamist extremism is a strategic interest for all regional powers, including Russia. Regional security provides benefits for all of Eurasia's players, from the European Union to Iran, and even China. The same goes for the countries of the Caucasus, a region acutely vulnerable to drug and weapons trafficking and the spread of Islamist extremism. Azerbaijani officials battle large-scale opium and weapons trafficking across the Iranian border on an ongoing basis. Much of this contraband is on its way to the European Union from Afghanistan.

The Geopolitics and Challenges of the NDN South

Despite Russia's equally important role as part of the NDN and general support of the Afghan stabilization effort, its actions in the Caucasus and the greater Black Sea-Caspian region have on the whole tended to run against the interests of NATO, as well as Tbilisi and Baku. During Russia's August 2008 intervention in Georgia, Moscow applied significant pressure on Ankara to strictly uphold the Montreux Convention on the Turkish Straits, so as to deny large-scale U.S. humanitarian relief for Georgians caught in the conflict.¹⁴ The same pressure could potentially be brought to bear regarding supplies bound for NATO troops.

Moscow's staunch opposition to a U.S. and NATO military presence in the Black Sea, while providing access to its territory for transport of military cargo into Afghanistan, would imply that Russia's interests lie with keeping Western military forces out of its own conflict zone in the

¹⁴ M.K. Bhadrakumar, "Russia and Turkey tango in the Black Sea," *Asia Times*, September 12, 2008, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/JI12Ag01.html.

Caucasus and diverting their attention to the Afghan theater. Russia's military presence in the Black Sea region remains a fundamental aspect of its relations with NATO and Turkey, and potential disagreements can have significant implications for NATO-U.S. supply shipments. Still, stability in Afghanistan seems to be a shared priority for Moscow's decisionmakers, and NATO cargo has been traveling through the Georgian port of Poti regardless of the Kremlin's opposition and the presence of Russian forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Nevertheless, the specter of a naval conflict between Russia and Georgia over Tblisi's efforts to interdict international ships into Abkhazia in 2009 illustrates the risk.

The Caucasus supply route for Afghanistan is meant to be an alternative to the uncertain primary route through Pakistan, but Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the wider region have their own significant security concerns. A viable Caucasus route is based on the premise that large-scale conflict, such as erupted between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, will not reoccur. As discussed above, the Caucasus corridor itself may play a role in minimizing that risk, especially in Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But, other major concerns linger, most notably Nagorno-Karabakh, and may limit the extent to which the United States and NATO want to commit to the Caucasus region.

Potential for supply disruption of the kind that plagues the Pakistan route may not be far-fetched. The August 2008 terrorist attack on Baku's Abu Bekr Mosque should be a warning that Islamist groups are somewhat active in Azerbaijan. The proximity of the corridor to a once-again restive North Caucasus, in which extremist Islamist elements play a role, should also be factored into the equation. Neither of these potential concerns is of major significance, but U.S. and NATO efforts would be well served by a careful evaluation and securing of the rail and highway systems used for the Caucasus corridor.

Were full hostilities to be rejoined in the seemingly intractable, simmering conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, its intensity could eclipse that witnessed in Georgia in August 2008. Although such a scenario is unlikely, lack of progress on conflict resolution for more than 15 years indicates that it should not be ruled out. A "hot" Nagorno-Karabakh would certainly disrupt the Caucasus supply route. Although Moscow plays a role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Russian forces would likely not be involved in disrupting the route. However, in the remote scenario that Russia and Georgia would come to major conflagration again, Russian forces could very well be directly involved in disrupting a U.S. and NATO supply route.

The viability of the route also depends heavily on how receptive the nations on the eastern shore of the Caspian are, particularly Turkmenistan. President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov agreed to open Turkmen airspace for nonlethal shipments of supplies to Afghanistan. "We have nothing

against the transit of humanitarian aid via our air corridor,” Berdimukhamedov said in February 2009.¹⁵

Recent disagreements between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan over their maritime boundary and gas fields in the Caspian have led to some tension between Baku and Ashgabat, and have prompted President Berdimukhamedov to transfer the claim to the International Court of Arbitration. Observers have speculated that the surprise move by the Turkmen government comes from pressure applied by Iran and Russia to slow down the Nabucco gas pipeline project, or simply as a way of demanding a better price for Turkmenistan’s vast gas reserves essential to Nabucco.¹⁶ Still, the disagreement looks unlikely to jeopardize Turkmen-Azerbaijani relations any further, and NATO supplies coming through the Caucasus have been moving through on schedule.

The Advantage of the NDN South

When U.S. decisionmakers look at Eurasia, particularly in terms of supply routes for operations in Afghanistan, they see few genuinely friendly governments. There are partners of convenience, those with shared interests and perhaps strategic partners in Eurasia, but not very many friends. The section of the supply route through the Caucasus is the exception in this regard. Both Tbilisi and Baku have demonstrated that they are willing to offer their territories and airspace to U.S. and NATO forces not just on a temporary basis while interests are aligned, but due to the aspirations of those capitals to forge long-term bonds with Washington and Western institutions more broadly.

This is not to say that Georgian and Azerbaijani decisionmakers are facilitating the Caucasus supply route out of the goodness of their hearts. They are doing so because it serves the strategic goals of their foreign policies: strengthening their sovereignty and independence in a geopolitically difficult neighborhood through links to major powers outside of that neighborhood. Both Tbilisi and Baku share U.S. and NATO concerns about transnational threats that are and could potentially emanate from Afghanistan, but their overriding interest in the Caucasus supply route grows out of their relationship with the West. This cannot be said of Islamabad or Moscow.

Again, unlike routes through Russia and Pakistan, Georgia and Azerbaijan are unlikely to exert leverage over U.S. and NATO objectives due to their positions on the route. Any leverage that they may attempt will likely have to do with conflict resolution for Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia. As long as resolution remains in the realm of diplomacy and negotiations, Tbilisi and Baku’s concerns are generally in line with U.S. policy objectives in the region. That

¹⁵ “Turkmenistan to open airspace for U.S. supplies to Afghanistan,” RIA Novosti, February 25, 2009, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20090225/120303895.html>.

¹⁶ Kenan Guluzade, “Azeris baffled by Turkmen legal threat,” *Asia Times*, August 19, 2009, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/KH19Ag01.html.

said, pressure from regional capitals aside, the Caucasus supply route does highlight the imperative of contributing to settlement of the so-called frozen conflicts of the Caucasus.

The immediate purpose of the NDN and the Caucasus corridor is to provide for supply route diversification for U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. But, for the long-term goal of stabilizing and developing Afghanistan, the blossoming trade and transport route through the Caucasus will play no small part. Despite and because of its major pitfalls, the corridor through Georgia and Azerbaijan is of strategic significance beyond its current role as a supply alternative.

Latvia's Flourishing Infrastructure and Interest in the NDN

Latvia has emerged as a key player in the development of the NDN North, which originates in the port of Riga, and views its role as a key transit hub in the future by linking Asia and South Asia with Europe as a significant part of its economic development strategy. "This is our competitive advantage compared with other countries in the region, to a large extent it was thanks to our initiative that Riga has become the central corridor for such shipments in northern Europe," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia announced in October 2009.¹⁷

In the fall of 2009, the government of Latvia produced the proposal, "Northern Line of Communication to Afghanistan," accentuating Latvia's vision to become a "gateway to Afghanistan," by taking the lead in delivering ISAF nations' cargo to Afghanistan. According to Edgars Trumkalns, first secretary at the embassy of Latvia in the United States, the proposal was positively received by NATO and ISAF countries, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), and the Movement Coordination Centre Europe (MCCE) and has attracted support from the United States. The proposal outlines the benefits of Latvia as a lead transport nation based on several existing factors. To name a few: Latvia's ports are ice free with good feeder connections to Western European ports; there is the possibility of forming a block train combining European shipments with those of the United States; and Latvia's infrastructure is "100% interoperable with that of Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan." To highlight the latter, Latvia already has permanent support on the ground with an embassy in Uzbekistan, and the border crossing point at Zilupe/Posin has been authorized by the NATO-Russia transit agreement.

International experience acquired by Latvian transport operators, coupled with Latvia's ongoing efforts to develop expertise in the processing and storage of containerized cargos, creates a foundation for sustained business with and investment from the international community. For example, the "Baltika-Tranzit" rail connects Latvia's ports with such Central Asian countries as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—boasting the successful shipment of over 21,000 20-foot equivalent unit (TEU) containers in 2007 and 54.9 million tons of cargo last

¹⁷ Alla Petrova, "3,500 containers for Afghanistan troops to be transported via Latvia," *Baltic Course*, October 16, 2009, <http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/transport/?doc=19445>.

year.¹⁸ According to a February 2009 report issued by the Latvian Institute, dynamic negotiations are currently underway with the Chinese government and private sector in “establishing a new cargo flow from China to the European Union through the ice-free Latvian ports of Riga, Ventspils and Liepaja.”¹⁹ Russia also benefits from engagement with Latvia in the transportation sector. As recently as July 2009, a Russian railway spokesman said that Russians are soliciting a grant from the U.S. government to improve the Termez-Galaba-Hairaton border crossing between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, which begins in Riga.²⁰ As for its European partners, the same report states that 70 percent of Latvia’s exports and imports are related to EU member states, and Latvia continues to use EU funds to further develop its transport infrastructure.

The success of the international efforts in Afghanistan concerns Latvia on the basis of economics, security, and development, which, in this context, are mutually dependent and interconnected. The basic function of the NDN suggests that local and international investments in Latvia’s infrastructure—namely its ports—simultaneously have a clear affect on the infrastructure needs of Afghanistan and Central Asia by steering trade away from Taliban hot spots that are common on the Pakistan supply route. Already, 50 block trains have been sent from Riga, and 4,900 containers have been shipped with equipment for U.S. troops in Afghanistan.”²¹

Latvia, Europe, and the United States

Latvia has enjoyed particularly fruitful ties with the United States and Europe, employing Western models of democracy and a free-market economic structure to become the European Union’s fastest growing economy from 2004 to 2006.²² Since 1999, Latvia has been a member of the World Trade Organization, after developing bilateral partnerships with the United States and making reforms on investment/tariff structure, trade policy, and protection of intellectual property rights. This helped drive a high level of foreign direct investment in the years leading up to Latvia’s accession to the European Union in 2004, which insulated its economy from the larger consequences of the recent global financial crisis.

Latvia’s international security policy was similarly conceived on a European/NATO model, involving them in exercises of crisis management and peacekeeping initiatives, like their Western counterparts. Moving in concert with international organs like the United Nations and NATO,

¹⁸ “Riga, Latvia to anchor ‘Northern Distribution Network’ for supply shipments to Afghanistan,” Fact Sheet No. 11, Latvian Institute, February 24, 2009, http://www.li.lv/images_new/files/2009_02_24__LI_FS_Nr_11_transit.pdf.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Deirdre Tynan, “Central Asia: Northern Supply Network for Afghanistan Hits Snags,” *Eurasia Insight*, July 23, 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav072309a.shtml>.

²¹ E-mail correspondence with Edgars Trumkalns, first secretary, Embassy of Latvia in the United States.

²² “Background Note: Latvia,” U.S. Department of State, November 2009, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5378.htm>.

Latvia deployed over 10 percent of its active-duty military in support of those causes by 2006.²³ Since 2007, Latvia has engaged its military in the Faryab province of Afghanistan, stationing troops there as a contribution to regional development and security.²⁴ According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, a policy and development adviser has been stationed in Afghanistan on a rotational basis since then, and as of October 2009, Latvia has 175 troops in the region.²⁵ In a speech delivered to the UN General Assembly on September 26, 2009, President Valdis Zatler confirmed Latvia's position on the stabilization and development of Afghanistan. His speech echoed NATO's mission to fight the Taliban and thwart terrorism in the region and emphasized Latvia's contribution to that end.²⁶ Also, Foreign Minister Maris Riekstins's March 2009 speech at an international conference in the Hague—attended by representatives of 72 countries of the world from 6 continents—confirmed Latvia's long-term commitment to participating in the international military operation in Afghanistan. Most notably, Minister Riekstins accentuated the significance of establishing and maintaining international cooperation—including that of Central Asia due to its close historic and cultural ties and longstanding geopolitical relationship with Afghanistan.²⁷

On the 90th anniversary of Latvia's statehood, President Obama praised Latvia's commitment to NATO and its important contribution to the peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan.²⁸ Bruce Rogers, chargé d'affaires of the U.S. embassy in Latvia, highlighted the importance of U.S.-Latvia cooperation vis-à-vis the NDN in a statement this year: "Cooperation on this effort to bring important supplies to Afghanistan is crucial to the NATO mission in Afghanistan, and is another example of the strength of the U.S.-Latvian security relationship."²⁹ Ultimately, Latvia recognizes that its security interests are strengthened by NATO's success in Afghanistan and that failure therein would have repercussions extending beyond the United States, impairing the credibility of NATO worldwide.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "Latvia's assistance to Afghanistan," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/DevelopmentCo-operation/Countries/Afghanistan/>.

²⁵ "International Security Assistance Force and Afghan National Army Strength & Laydown," NATO, October 22, 2009, <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/placemat.pdf>.

²⁶ "Latvia and the United States: Partners in Afghanistan," Press Release, Embassy of the United States, Riga, Latvia, http://riga.usembassy.gov/pr_10122007b.html.

²⁷ "Foreign Minister reiterates Latvia's support for the stabilization of Afghanistan," Embassy of Republic of Latvia in London, March 31, 2009, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/london/news/press-releases/visit-ainars-slesers-uk/?pg=11229&print=on>,

²⁸ "President Pledges Latvia will complete all its NATO homework that has been put off due to crisis dateline," Baltic News Service, November 18, 2009.

²⁹ "Riga, Latvia to anchor 'Northern Distribution Network' for supply shipments to Afghanistan," Latvian Institute.

The Interests of China, Japan, and the European Union in the NDN

China, Japan, and the European Union have a significant stake in the stabilization of Afghanistan for various reasons. The NDN is not only an alternative logistical route to help with combat operations and post-conflict stabilization in Afghanistan, but it also affords the opportunity to build a network of regional transportation links that could tremendously advance the economic development of Central and South Asia. And although these three actors wish to see security and stability in Afghanistan and the region, it is the economic development issues that are perhaps of the greatest interest to all three. The potential development of energy export routes from Central Asia has in particular been a cherished goal for energy importers in Europe and East Asia for more than a decade. For the United States, each actor brings something different to the table; consequently, Washington should calibrate its strategy accordingly.

China

The Chinese government has been engaged over the last several years in a serious attempt to build up the infrastructure of the nations of Central Asia. China's effort is partly geostrategic in nature and partly focused on domestic issues. Chinese leaders understand that the Central Asian region promises a bounty in natural resources to feed its ever-expanding economy. They also understand that Central Asia is a strategic gateway both into and out of China. The ancient Silk Road has seen the passage of goods and invaders in both directions for millennia. The primary domestic concern that links China with the region is the uneasy political and social situation that exists in the far western province of Xinjiang. The ethnic riots that took place in July 2009 in the capital city Urumqi highlight the social tension that underlies the region, which shares a border with Afghanistan and Central Asia. China has long been wary of links between Uighur separatists in Xinjiang and Islamic terror groups such as al Qaeda. Thus, China has both domestic and strategic reasons for caring about peace and stability in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The Chinese government takes seriously its involvement in developing the infrastructure of Central Asia. Of most interest to proponents of an expanded and robust NDN, the Chinese government is involved in a \$7.5-billion road construction project that broke ground in Kazakhstan in the spring of 2009. Kazakhstan—with Chinese assistance—hopes to build a 3,000-kilometer highway linking China and Europe. Nevertheless, energy remains the focus of Chinese interest in Central Asia. In 2004, Chinese state-owned firms began constructing gas and oil pipelines to link China's eastern seaboard with fields in Kazakhstan and beyond. Most recently, Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev secured a \$10-billion loan package from China during an April 2009 state visit to Beijing. Half of the loan is intended for Kazakhstan's energy sector, while the Kazakh government will allocate the other half to stimulate the diversification of the economy. China is clearly and justifiably concerned about its rising energy consumption and views Central Asia as a potential supplier for decades to come.

Chinese investment in Afghanistan took a great leap forward in 2008 when a state-run firm won a \$3.5-billion contract to develop the Aynak copper field. This contract marks the largest foreign direct investment project in the history of Afghanistan. To date, however, China's development assistance to Afghanistan has not been substantial (roughly \$145 million distributed and pledged between 2002 and 2011), but China's commercial presence in Afghanistan has tremendous potential. The U.S. government has asked the Chinese government for access to an overland corridor to assist in the transport of nonmilitary goods to Afghanistan. At the time of writing, the Chinese government continues to consider the proposal. Although China does in fact share a small border with Afghanistan, the area known as the Wakham Corridor is rugged and remote with a single-lane dirt road connecting the two nations. This could in no way serve as a significant transport corridor in its current state. And even with a more developed road network, the surrounding valley is closed for up to six months each year during winter.

China does have established rail links (through Urumqi) with Astana in Kazakhstan, Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, and Tashkent in Uzbekistan, but the rail gauges between China and Central Asia differ so the undercarriages need to be switched out at the border with Kazakhstan. Moreover, the transshipment of goods across so many nations means exorbitant transit and customs fees. Nevertheless, were nonmilitary goods destined for Afghanistan to be sourced in China then this overland route would gain considerably more positive momentum in China.

In addition to the impediments associated with logistical issues, China's willingness to cooperate with the United States and ISAF in Afghanistan has been very limited to date. The Chinese government, of course, has been battling Uighur separatists for years in its far west. Afghanistan's opium production also affects China, though not nearly to the extent that it affects Russia, Iran, Central Asia, and Europe. Given issues of regional lawlessness and terrorism, the Chinese government is willing to help where it can in Afghanistan. But to allow U.S. and NATO forces to operate with impunity in the region (including Central Asia) is clearly not in China's strategic interests. The Chinese government is also not going to send its own troops to help police Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the Chinese leadership must be convinced that the long-term benefits associated with regional development and economic cooperation within the region would heavily outweigh any perceived shortcomings associated with a stepped-up U.S. and ISAF presence in the region. At time of writing, the Chinese government had not officially responded to queries from the U.S. government to participate in the NDN, claiming to be "studying the proposal."

Japan

Japan's interest in the peace and stability of Afghanistan and Central Asia has much less of a domestic component than does China's. Apart from the controversial maritime refueling operations that Japan undertakes for ISAF in the Indian Ocean, it is safe to say that Afghanistan has little resonance for the citizens of Japan. But the Japanese government understands the importance of Afghanistan, not least due to a comprehension that cooperation with ISAF in Afghanistan and in the region can greatly affect alliance relations with the United States. Over the

last decade Japanese leaders have also come to understand the strategic importance of Central Asia.

Like China, the Japanese government has placed infrastructure at the top of investment and development assistance programs in Central Asia since the mid-1990s. Between 1997 and 2004, Japanese loans and development assistance programs in Central Asia totaled more than \$2 billion. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi became the first Japanese leader to visit the region in August 2006. Much of the media attention has been focused on Japan's desire to access natural resources, as well as on Japan's attempt to balance against increasing Chinese influence in the region. But an overlooked aspect of Japanese investment and loan projects in the region is Japan's help with infrastructure development.

The Japanese government has assisted the government of Tajikistan in building a road into Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has been a particular focus of Japanese development assistance projects, and Japan has helped with airport and railroad construction there. In November 2009, just before President Obama's visit to Tokyo, the new Hatoyama government announced a five-year assistance package for Afghanistan totaling \$5 billion. The funds are to be used in areas such as building up the police force and on agriculture and other infrastructure projects. In April, Japan had also pledged \$1 billion in aid to Pakistan.³⁰ Japan's contribution to Afghan reconstruction in the form of development assistance stands in stark contrast to China's meager commitment thus far. Japan has also dispatched civilian workers to help with provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) operating in Afghanistan.

Japan, however, could do more to help with the NDN. The Japanese government could offer to step up its road-building and railroad projects in the region, expanding its regional influence and contributing to not only the supply of ISAF forces, but also to the expansion of a transport and communications network in Central Asia that would spur economic development and encourage social stability. Furthermore, the Japanese government could offer to help pay for these supplies and the transportation costs, alleviating ISAF members and the United States of this burden. Synergies can potentially be found if Japan sourced cheap, nonlethal materials in China, stimulating lagging economic development in its western provinces. Such a network also promises potential dividends in the form of energy exports destined for Japan and East Asia. Exports could come overseas through Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean or through pipelines across China.

Tokyo also has pressing strategic reasons for a stepped-up effort in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The Japanese government has been looking for ways to support ISAF and to become more of a player in Central Asia. If the Japanese government can increase its participation in the campaign in Afghanistan, then it can bolster the strategic relationship with Washington at a time when

³⁰ Jay Alabaster, "Japan Plans Additional \$5 Billion for Afghanistan," ABC News, November 10, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=9039715>.

many in Tokyo are concerned about the drifting state of the relationship. In helping build up and maintain the NDN, Japan can honor commitments to its ally Washington in the war on terror, and it can revitalize its Central Asian initiative. Additionally, a reinvigorated Japanese effort in the region can at least go part way to alleviating Japan's fears about China's rise. There is little downside for Japan in a stepped-up role as an investor and donor in the development of regional transportation networks in Central Asia.

The European Union

The member nations of the European Union have admittedly fewer geostrategic interests in stabilization operations in Afghanistan and the development of the regional infrastructure, but the economic and domestic interests are clearly apparent. Obviously, individual members of the Union that are also NATO members have troops on the ground in Afghanistan and Central Asia (23 nations thus far). Their interests in Afghanistan as members of NATO take on a special meaning. But the European Union as a group has less of a strategic stake in the region than nations in geographic proximity (such as China or Russia).

During the five-year period 2002 to 2006, the European Union disbursed over \$4 billion of assistance to the government in Afghanistan. An additional amount of almost \$2 billion has been pledged for the 2007–2013 period. Much of the aid has been focused on rural development programs, public-sector reform, human rights, and establishing the rule of law. The majority of the assistance from EU members, however, has come individually (rather than through the Union's executive branch, the European Commission) and has been focused on security and counternarcotics operations. It is interesting to note that a small percentage of the European Union's aid has gone toward infrastructure development, suggesting that transportation networks rank relatively low on the Union's priority list in the region.

The NDN appears to rank low in importance to European Commission bureaucrats in Europe. NATO and ISAF members, however, recognize the necessity of opening and developing transportation networks through Central Asia and the Caucasus and into Afghanistan for security purposes. Furthermore, Europe as a whole stands to benefit from the expansion of ancient transportation networks that centuries ago linked Asia and Europe via the Silk Road. Today, Europe can benefit not only from expanded trade links with Central and South Asia, but also from the ability to bring Central Asian energy resources to market, whether via the Indian Ocean, pipelines coming overland, or the Caspian and Black Seas into Europe. In this vein, the European Union's interests in the expansion of transportation networks in Central Asia are not unlike those of China and Japan. Additionally, the stabilization of the political and social situation in Afghanistan means less narcotics trafficking through Europe, something that has been a great concern to EU members.

Implications of China, Japan, and EU Interests for U.S. Security Policy and the NDN

The United States also has varied interests when it comes to the role of the three actors and the development of the NDN. The closer the partner's relations to the United States, the more Washington expects. Obviously, much is expected of the European Union. As mentioned, 23 of its 27 member nations have fielded forces in Afghanistan for ISAF. Member nations such as Britain, Spain, and Denmark (the largest casualties to date as a percentage of total population) have expended the dearest treasure—human lives. Now as Washington asks them to offer even more troops, many of these nations are balking. Coalition members such as the Netherlands and Canada have announced withdrawals beginning over the next year. Although Washington may find replacement troops from other coalition partners, now would be the time to shift the focus of the European Union to infrastructure development within Afghanistan and Central Asia, particularly on transportation networks. Economically this makes sense for the Union, and geopolitically Washington and neighboring nations such as Russia and China would probably be less opposed to stepped-up European investment than to investment coming from elsewhere. If Europe cannot find the additional troops for Afghanistan, then it should contribute more through economic assistance programs.

Similarly, Japan is a nation that benefits economically from opened transportation networks in Central and South Asia. Japan has looked to play a stepped up political and diplomatic role across the globe in partnership with Washington. Central and South Asia would be a good place for Japan to begin shouldering more weight, because any expanded political or military role for Japan in Northeast and Southeast Asia still invites controversies. Additionally, unlike Afghanistan where combat operations are still underway, Central Asia poses fewer constitutional issues for the Japanese government.

China is the wild card. As a regional actor that shares a border with the region, China could potentially play a huge role, whether as a direct link into Afghanistan or through Central Asia, where it already maintains a strong economic presence. But Russia, the nations of Central Asia, and even the United States are all wary of Chinese intentions in the region. Because a land bridge through China would represent big logistical challenges, China's potential role is small. China could become obstructionist in Central Asia, due not only to concerns about terror links to Xinjiang, but also due to an unwillingness to see a continued huge U.S. presence in the region, which an expanded NDN promises. Instead, China's economic assistance and diplomatic initiatives should be steered toward stabilizing Pakistan, with whom it has a long and intimate relationship. If China can help in maintaining the sanctity of the trans-Pakistan corridor, then it would be playing a much more constructive role for ISAF than any collaboration in Central Asia could achieve.

The Interests of Iran in the Stabilization of Afghanistan

Understandably, Iran has several strategic interests in Afghanistan. First, Iran shares a nearly 600-mile border along Afghanistan's western provinces of Herat, Farah, and Nimruz. Of equal importance, Iran has close historic, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural ties to Afghanistan, particularly with the Tajiks, a Persian-speaking group in Herat Province, and the Hazara, a Shiite minority in central and northern Afghanistan. Consequently, Persian speaking or Shia mujahideen have received training, weapons, funding, and refuge in Iran. These factions, primarily Hazara, were united and backed by Iran under the Islamic Unity Party—serving as a counterweight to the Sunni Pashtun mujahideen groups operating largely on Iran's eastern border and supported by the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.³¹

Iran never supported the Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan, viewing them as an economic burden and security and ideological threat. The longstanding warfare between Sunni factions and Iran has deep historic roots and still persists today. For example, between 4,000 and 6,000 Afghan Hazaras were killed during a deliberate campaign of ethnic cleansing by the Taliban in August 1998. The United Nations confirmed that Afghanistan's Taliban militia led the massacre when they seized the opposition stronghold of Mazar-i-Sharif. The primary victims of this attack were young men over the age of 16—murdered in a ritualistic manner or suffering the extreme punishment of losing their hands at the wrist, simply for being ethnically Hazaras.³² These events prompted Iran to send 200,000 troops to its border with Afghanistan, demanding that the killers be handed over for trial.³³

Additionally, Iran supported the formation of an anti-Taliban coalition, known as the Northern Alliance, composed of Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek factions. These strategic interests generated shared policy goals and cooperation on issues related to Afghanistan and the Taliban prior to and during the U.S. invasion.³⁴ Iran actively participated in the UN Bonn Conference in December 2001 aimed at establishing a framework under which the newly emerging Afghan government would operate. Iran noted that the Bonn agreement neglected to address democracy and the war

³¹ "Iran and Afghanistan," Institute for the Study of War, Washington, D.C., n.d., <http://www.understandingwar.org/themenode/iran-and-afghanistan>.

³² See "Eyewitness Testimonies conducted by our Hazara Sources of the Killings in Mazar Sharif, Afghanistan, August 8, 1998," Hazara.net, <http://www.hazara.net/taliban/genocide/mazar2/mazar2.html>.

³³ See Michael Sheridan, "How the Taliban Slaughtered Thousands of People," *Sunday Times* (London), November 1, 1998, <http://www.rawa.org/times.htm>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

on terrorism, successfully soliciting Afghan commitment to both issues, underscoring Iran's dedication to long-term stability and influence in the region.³⁵

Ultimately, a stable Afghanistan appeals to several Iranian domestic interests, particularly in curbing illicit narcotics trafficking. Iran currently serves as a major transport hub for opiates produced by Afghanistan. According to the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as many as 1.7 million Iranian citizens are addicted to opiates³⁶ and as much as 30 percent of Afghan opium is trafficked across Iran's border.³⁷ Additionally, the Iranians—in the midst of a regional power struggle—fear that their regional archrival, Saudi Arabia, might be able to stabilize and secure Afghanistan and use it as a tool against them.³⁸ In fact, Iran has urged Afghan businesses to relocate their international offices—previously in the United Arab Emirates—to Iran.³⁹

Trade remains a focus between Iran and Afghanistan and amounts to over a billion dollars a year—not counting petroleum. Additionally, apart from commerce and transportation infrastructure, other projects have come to fruition, such as the construction of a dental college and a water research facility.⁴⁰ According to the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War, the motivation behind Iran's economic investment in Afghanistan is reducing the region's economic dependence on Pakistan by “allowing the land-locked Afghans to use the Iranian port of Chabahar to import and export goods as an alternative to the Pakistani port of Karachi.”

A bone of contention between Iran and Afghanistan revolves around refugees. Iran inherited over 3 million Afghan refugees after the Soviet invasion and subsequent civil war and uses this issue to flex its muscles in the region. For example, in January 2009, Iran forcefully deported over 8,000 Afghans, which was perceived by Kabul as a way for Tehran to slight Barack Obama after he did not respond to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's letter.⁴¹

Despite the aforementioned challenges to Afghanistan-Iran relations, recent events underscore potential ideological alignment and illuminate the potential strengthening of political and economic ties. Afghan president Hamid Karzai displayed support for Iranian president Mahmoud

³⁵ See James Dobbins, “Time to Deal with Iran,” *RAND Commentary*, May 6, 2004, <http://www.rand.org/commentary/2004/05/06/WP.html>.

³⁶ See Greg Bruno and Lionel Beehner, “Iran and the Future of Afghanistan,” *Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder*, March 30, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/13578/>.

³⁷ UNODC, *Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: The Transnational Threat of Afghan Opium* (Vienna: UNODC, October 2009), http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghan_Opium_Trade_2009_web.pdf.

³⁸ “Afghanistan: The Search for Safer Supply Routes,” Stratfor.com, November 19, 2008, http://www.stratfor.com/memberships/127458/analysis/20081119_afghanistan_search_safer_supply_routes.

³⁹ “Iran and Afghanistan,” Institute for the Study of War.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Ahmadinejad during Iran's contentious June 2009 elections. Moreover, Afghanistan officials have not been overly critical of Iran's refugee expulsion and support for insurgent activities.⁴²

Overland Routes and Supply Lines from Iran into Afghanistan

Transportation in Iran is facilitated by its extensive and sophisticated network of roads and railways that connect many of the country's main cities. Recent cooperation between Iran and India has resulted in the construction of several routes allowing for the transportation of goods between Iran and Afghanistan.

The most logical supply line into Afghanistan from Iran begins at the Chabahar port in the Gulf of Oman. From there, after being offloaded, supplies could be "sent by road to the southwestern Afghan town of Zaranj, which is connected to the main Afghan highway by a road recently completed by the Indian army's engineer corps."⁴³ This route, via the Chabahar-Zaranj Highway and the Zaranj-Delaram Highway (from which the main Herat-Kandahar road is accessible), is short and straightforward and the Chabahar port is increasingly attractive as India and Iran have been working together to develop the port complex since 2003.⁴⁴ Additionally, the construction of the Milak Bridge over the Helmand River, which was first used in March 2005, shortens the traditional route between the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas and Dogharoun on the Afghan border from 1,450 to 950 kilometers. The Milak Bridge, which connects Iran and Afghanistan, is also accessible from Bandar Abbas, Iran's most important port.⁴⁵

Alternative routes in Iran include the Khaf-Herat railway and the Dogharoun-Herat road. The idea of constructing a railway between Khaf Station in Iran (which is part of the Bafgh-Mashhad railway) and Herat, Afghanistan, first emerged in the 1970s, but several difficulties prevented its implementation. The current idea was first proposed in June 2002 in a Memorandum of Understanding between the Iranian Transport Ministry and the Ministry of Public Utility in Kabul. On the Iranian side, work officially began in July 2006. Upon the completion of this project, annual traffic is expected to reach 6 to 8 million tons, including oil products, iron, steel, and a range of industrial goods.⁴⁶ The Iranian Islamic Republic Railways (RAI) has proposed extensions with hopes that the Herat line will form the first link of a major rail trade route to

⁴² See Maseh Zarif and Ahmad Majidiyar, "Iranian Influence in Afghanistan: Recent Developments," IranTracker.org, August 21, 2009, http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/iranian-influence-afghanistan-recent-developments#_ednref29.

⁴³ See Richrad Sale, "U.S. Eyes Iran for Resupply of Afghan Forces," *Middle East Times*, March 9, 2009, http://www.metimes.com/Politics/2009/03/09/us_eyes_iran_for_resupply_of_afghan_forces/2901/.

⁴⁴ See Sudha Ramachandran, "India Takes a Slow Road," *Asia Times*, January 27, 2007, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/IA27Df04.html.

⁴⁵ "Expanding Afghan Road Transit Routes," *Iran Daily*, February 24, 2005.

⁴⁶ Murray Hughes, "Opening Up Afghan Trade Route to Iran," *Railway Gazette*, January 29, 2008, http://www.railwaygazette.com/news_view/article/2008/01/8040/opening_up_afghan_trade_route_to_iran.html.

Central Asia. The line would run approximately 700 kilometers across northwestern Afghanistan to Meymaneh, Sheberghan, and Sher Khan Bandar on the border with Tajikistan, presenting an opportunity to connect with the 1,524-millimeter-gauge line that crosses the Uzbekistan frontier near Termez—extending as far as Hayratan—where trains carrying produce, petroleum, and building material currently run almost on a daily basis.⁴⁷ Another route extending to Herat is the Dogharoun-Herat road. This road, which was recently renovated at a cost of \$60 million, was inaugurated in February 2005.⁴⁸

Is Iran a Feasible Option for NATO and U.S. Transit Cooperation?

Iran poses more of a challenge than an opportunity for transit cooperation with NATO. Tehran has blamed instability in Afghanistan on the presence of “foreign forces” who have limited knowledge and familiarity of the region.⁴⁹ Most of the allegations of negative Iranian involvement in Afghanistan surround its relationship with the United States. It seems that if relations between the two states thaw, Iran might be willing to provide assistance to NATO and the United States.⁵⁰

A core concern for the United States is that Iran’s actions are inconsistent with its strategic interest in the defeat of the Taliban. Iran has displayed two paradoxical strategic goals: on the one hand, to thwart Taliban growth in the region based on the abovementioned long-term hostility; and on the other, to keep the United States bogged down, paralyzed, and bloodied. The fact that a strengthened Taliban would serve to bog down the United States, and thus diminish its credibility in the region, might explain this possible link. The former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Peter Tomsen, believes that the Iranian government might be supporting the Taliban because a weak Afghanistan “lessens the likelihood it can become a U.S. ally against Iran.”⁵¹

NATO troops have found both Iranian- and Chinese-made weapons in Afghanistan. Intelligence points to the weapons being brought in from Iran.⁵² In 2007, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told reporters that “given the quantities that we’re seeing, it is difficult to believe that it’s associated with smuggling or the drug business or that it’s taking place without the knowledge of the Iranian government.”⁵³ Iran not only supplies weapons to the Taliban, but plays a pivotal role in training Taliban fighters. General Stanley McChrystal illustrates this in an assessment of the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ “Iran, Afghanistan Call for Expansion of Bilateral Ties,” *Ettela’at International*, January 27, 2005, <http://www.ettelaat.com:8080/etbarchives/2005/01/27/P8.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Glenn Kessler, “At Summit on Afghanistan, U.S. Extends a Hand to Iran,” *Washington Post*, April 1, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/31/AR2009033100809.html>.

⁵⁰ “Afghanistan: The Search for Safer Supply Routes,” Stratfor.com.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² See Richard D. Fisher Jr., “Chinese Arms Cost American Lives,” *Eastern Economic Review* 171, issue 6 (July/August 2008).

⁵³ Bruno and Bechner, “Iran and the Future of Afghanistan.”

International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) by asserting: “Iran plays an ambiguous role in Afghanistan, providing developmental assistance and political support to GIRoA (Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) while the Iranian Qods Force⁵⁴ is reportedly training fighters for certain Taliban groups and providing other forms of military assistance to insurgents. Iran’s current policies and actions do not pose a short-term threat to the (ISAF) mission, but Iran does have the capability to threaten the mission in the future.”⁵⁵ Iranian officials continue to deny these charges.

Despite deep-seated suspicion between the United States and Iran, the Obama administration has shown a commitment to establishing better relations between the two countries. In March 2009, President Obama released a video message to the Iranian people and government and offered a “new beginning” to relations between the two countries, stating that: “My administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community.”⁵⁶ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton requested that Iran be invited to a high-level conference on Afghanistan, and at that meeting, Richard Holbrooke, a presidential envoy, and an Iranian diplomat allegedly met face-to-face for a brief, unofficial encounter. U.S. officials say there was no mention of the use of Iranian roads in the discussions, however.⁵⁷ By and large, NATO and U.S. officials have become more amenable to the idea of Iranian assistance.

In February 2009, General John Craddock, NATO SACEUR, said that “NATO would not oppose individual member nations’ making deals with Iran to supply their forces in Afghanistan.”⁵⁸ Iranian officials have not responded positively. In fact, in early May 2009, Aledin Boroujerdi,

⁵⁴ According to the Federation of American Scientists’ Intelligence Resource Program, “The Qods (Jerusalem) Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is responsible for extraterritorial operations, including terrorist operations. A primary focus for the Qods Force is training Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups. Currently, the Qods Force conducts training activities in Iran and in Sudan. The Qods Force is also responsible for gathering information required for targeting and attack planning. The Pasdaran has contacts with underground movements in the Gulf region, and Pasdaran members are assigned to Iranian diplomatic missions, where, in the course of routine intelligence activities they monitor dissidents. Pasdaran influence has been particularly important in Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates.” See <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/iran/qods/index.html>.

⁵⁵ International Security Assistance Force, “Commander’s Initial Assessment.”

⁵⁶ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Videotaped Remarks by the President in Celebration of Nowruz,” March 20, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Videotaped-Remarks-by-The-President-in-Celebration-of-Nowruz/.

⁵⁷ See Thom Shanker and Elizabeth Bumiller, “U.S. Seeks New Afghan Supply Routes, Even in Iran,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/washington/12military.html?_r=1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

leader of the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign relations committee, said "Iran is not interested in becoming a logistic bridge for NATO to Afghanistan."⁵⁹

Although routes through Iran appear to be practical and possible alternatives to the routes in Pakistan, several challenges continue. The engine behind Iran's foreign policy has proven to be focused on thwarting U.S. interests abroad. Even in its ties to Central Asia, "Tehran's aim is to create a diffuse patchwork of regional ties and institutions that can serve as a counterweight to U.S. geopolitical pressure."⁶⁰ It will take time for U.S.-Iranian relations to thaw. It is imperative to recognize that both the "Iranian and American sides come to the negotiating table burdened with years of accumulated grievances and suspicions."⁶¹

Although U.S. officials were quick to condemn the October 18, 2009, bomb attack in Pish, Iran, that killed approximately 60 people—six of whom were commanders in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards—and injuring nearly 150 more,⁶² Tehran remains suspicious of perceived CIA involvement in supporting the Sunni Muslim insurgent group Jundallah (God's soldiers), which claimed responsibility for the assault.

U.S and UN sanctions against Iran might present a challenge to possible cooperation. Current UN sanctions ban trade with Iran on goods for both civilian and military use, authorizes inspections of shipments to and from Iran by sea and air suspected of carrying banned items, authorizes financial monitoring on two banks with suspected links to proliferation activities, and freezes the assets of companies and individuals with links to Iran's missile programs.⁶³ The UN sanctions do not present as serious a challenge as do the U.S. sanctions. U.S. sanctions prohibit "virtually all trade and investment activities with Iran by U.S. persons, wherever located."⁶⁴ Additionally, the sanctions prohibit "U.S. persons, including foreign branches of U.S. depository institutions and trading companies...from engaging in any transactions, including purchase, sale, transportation, swap, financing, or brokering transactions related to goods or services of Iranian origin or goods

⁵⁹ IRNA, "Iran Rules Out Becoming NATO Supply Route for Afghanistan," GlobalSecurity.org, March 6, 2009, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2009/03/mil-090306-irna02.htm>.

⁶⁰ Joshua Kucera, "Iran Expanding Ties with Central Asian States to Counterbalance U.S. Geopolitical Pressure," *Eurasia Insight*, April 13, 2006, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav041305b.shtml>

⁶¹ John W. Limbert, "Negotiating with the Islamic Republic of Iran: Raising the Chances for Success—Fifteen Points to Remember," *USIP Special Report 199* (January 2008), p. 1, <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/sr199.pdf>.

⁶² See Louis Charbonneau, "UN Security Council condemns bomb attack in Iran," AlertNet.org, October 20, 2009, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N20493088.htm>.

⁶³ Associated Press, "U.N. sanctions Iran anew over nuclear program," MSNBC.com, March 3, 2008, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23451338>.

⁶⁴ Office of Foreign Assets Control, "What You Need to Know About U.S. Economic Sanctions: An overview of O.F.A.C. Regulations involving Sanctions against Iran," U.S. Department of the Treasury, January 22, 2009, <http://www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/programs/iran/iran.pdf>.

or services owned or controlled by the Government of Iran.”⁶⁵ Transporting supplies through Iran under the terms of these sanctions is impossible.

If Iran becomes willing to assist NATO, it will come at a cost. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “Iran still sees Afghanistan as a ‘bargaining chip’ against American aggression.”⁶⁶ It seems likely that, at the minimum, Iran will expect toned down or cessation of rhetoric against their nuclear project, as well as the elimination of sanctions.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that negotiations between Iran and the United States on Afghanistan do not need to result in comprehensive agreements between the two states, as this will be quite difficult. Cooperation over Afghanistan might serve as a springboard for future negotiations on other issues as “cooperation over Afghanistan...is far from a foregone conclusion” and easier to imagine than cooperation over Iraq or agreements on the Iranian nuclear issue.⁶⁷

Conclusion

By extending U.S. military supply lines across several countries fraught with internal problems, external frictions, and a history of mercurial relations, the United States opens itself to manipulation by geopolitical forces. The establishment of the NDN, however, has brought the United States closer to these nations, generated deeper engagement on Afghanistan, and improved bilateral ties. Effective management of these relationships in a highly dynamic environment will determine if establishing the NDN will in sum turn out to be beneficial to the United States’ near-term goals in Eurasia and in particular to stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. If that turns out to be the case, then establishment of the NDN has laid important groundwork for a longer-term strategy of economic integration and development in Eurasia.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Bruno and Beehner, “Iran and the Future of Afghanistan.”

⁶⁷ Ibid.

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