

Second Session of the
Körber Dialogue Middle East

“The Conflict in Afghanistan: Implications for Regional Stability and Options for International Action”

January 11–12, 2008, Istanbul

The Körber Dialogue Middle East provides a platform for multilateral discussions on foreign policy and security issues relevant to the Middle East. It seeks to bring together on a regular basis representatives of the most important stakeholders in order to foster an open and policy-oriented exchange of ideas. In the second session of the Körber Dialogue Middle East, high-ranking representatives of leading think-tanks and former officials from Afghanistan, the European Union and the United States gathered in order to discuss the conflict in Afghanistan and its implications for regional stability.

The summary reflects individual arguments put forward during the discussion.

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

I. Afghanistan’s Neighbors and Their Role in the Afghanistan Conflict

Pakistan

- Pakistan granted refuge to the Taleban after the Taleban regime was toppled in 2001. It thus provided the Taleban with a crucial opportunity: the Taleban regained strength in Pakistan and afterwards returned to Afghanistan.
- The Taleban, having regained strength, threaten the Pakistani state from within.
- The Afghanistan and Kashmir files are dealt with by the Pakistani army and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), not the government of Pakistan. Regional conflicts, such as Afghanistan and Kashmir, provide justification for the continuous interference of the army and the ISI in Pakistani and regional politics.

- The ISI contains radical elements closely affiliated with the Taleban.
- On the part of the United States, there is great concern with regard to the situation in Pakistan. At the same time, only the United States is capable of compelling Pakistan to change. Yet, at this point in time, the US is unlikely to exert sustained influence on Pakistan.
- In order to effect changes on the part of Pakistan, the international community must keep Pakistan engaged. International aid to Pakistan should be made contingent on reforms of the ISI.
- Pakistan is keen on becoming the international community's primary interlocutor on matters concerning Afghanistan ("Afghanistan should be dealt with through Pakistan").
- Afghanistan seeks to improve its bilateral relations with Pakistan. Upon the initiative of President Karzai, the so-called Peace 'Jirga' was established in August 2007, bringing together 700 high-ranking Afghan and Pakistani representatives from all fields of public life. Pakistan was initially reluctant to join this initiative.
- In order to develop constructive bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a "level playing field" must be created: Afghans must free themselves of former affiliations and past influence by neighbors.
- The Pashtuns are particularly vocal about the unresolved problem of the Afghan-Pakistani border. They are exposed to military pressure from both sides. The Pakistani army even cleanses Pashtun areas and thus triggers migratory movements to Afghanistan.
- Is the problem of the Afghan-Pakistani border a national or an ethnic - i.e. a Pashtun - issue? On both sides, the issue is being instrumentalized for domestic purposes.
- As a gesture of good will aimed at the improvement of bilateral relations with Pakistan, Afghanistan should accept the current demarcation of its border with Pakistan as permanent.
- Pakistan perceives India's influence in Afghanistan as a threat. According to the Pakistani government, India uses its consulates in Afghanistan (located in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif) to stir unrest across the border in Pakistan's Balochistan and other frontier provinces. However, the Indian consulates are not sufficiently staffed and equipped to engage in large-scale anti-Pakistan activities.

Iran

- Iran's main concern refers to Afghanistan's turning into a permanent US/NATO base.
- In strategic terms, Iran must be interested in a stable Afghanistan.
- Iran provides reconstruction aid to Afghanistan, has granted sanctuary to Afghan refugees, yet at the same time, instrumentalizes the refugees to pressure Afghanistan.
- Initially, Iran was very supportive of the Karzai government. Yet, recently, it also conferred support to the oppositional National Front. Iran is obviously pursuing a strategy of "putting its eggs in several baskets".
- Recent reports on Iranian support for the Taleban should be shared with the Afghan government in order for Afghan officials to discreetly take up the matter with their Iranian counterparts. However, such reports should not be used as part of an aggressive anti-Iranian PR campaign.
- Afghanistan should actively engage with Iran if it serves the purpose of stabilizing Afghanistan

Regional Cooperation

- Regional actors have accepted that Afghanistan plays a pivotal role in regional stability and that they will benefit from a stable Afghanistan.
- Afghanistan's unique locality as a land-bridge country is an asset rather than a liability. Large infrastructure projects can increase the inter-regional connectivity between Central Asia, the Middle East and the Far East.
- Afghanistan must adopt a pro-active approach to regional cooperation. First steps in this direction have already been taken, e. g. the Kabul Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations of 2002 signed by Afghanistan and its six immediate neighbors; the First and Second Regional Economic Cooperation Conference (RECC) on Afghanistan (Kabul, 2005; New Delhi, 2006).
- In the economic and commercial field, Afghanistan entertains very promising trade relations with the Central Asian states. Shared infrastructure programs constitute the main field of cooperation. Central Asian authoritarian regimes are ready to contribute to the Afghan reconstruction process, yet fear "spill-over effects" with regard to the spread of democratic values.
- Afghanistan must increase its capacity for regional cooperation. The major obstacles lie in the absence of a culture of reading and writing which makes the drafting of joint statements etc. very difficult as well as in a lack of awareness of the centrality of regional cooperation among Afghanistan's political elites. Therefore, Afghan officials should be trained to be able to promote concrete issues of regional cooperation.
- The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could constitute a suitable forum to engage with China and Russia.
- Chinese firms engage in copper-mining in Afghanistan. In order to boost Afghanistan's economy, it is crucial to involve China.
- Recently, Russia has become more active in Afghanistan. As Russia has the potential to be very destructive in Afghanistan, it is important to "have Russia aboard", i.e. to turn Russia into a constructive actor.

II. International Actors and Their Role in the Afghanistan Conflict

- 2008 will be a decisive year for the international community's engagement in Afghanistan: The achievements of the Afghanistan Compact will be evaluated in a mid-term review, and NATO's engagement will be reassessed at the NATO Bucharest Summit.
- Despite this agreed-upon framework, international actors engaged in Afghanistan face three major dilemmas: 1) resources dilemma (mustering sufficient domestic support to allocate the resources for an efficient and sustainable engagement in Afghanistan grows increasingly difficult), 2) ownership dilemma (implementation is often hampered by lacking capacities on the Afghan side), 3) objectives dilemma (objectives aspired to by the international community are not always compatible with the goals the Afghan side pursues).
- As public opinion in some of the countries participating in the NATO-led ISAF mission grows increasingly critical, domestic agendas will be decisive for the NATO engagement in Afghanistan. It is of crucial importance to communicate to the public in countries contributing troops to ISAF

- that the international community must continue its engagement in Afghanistan and that, as a consequence of withdrawal, “another Bin Laden” might emerge.
- The Afghan perception of ISAF frequently differs to a considerable degree from the goals determined for ISAF by NATO. Such divergences between perception and original intention are reflected in the following statements which prevail among ordinary Afghans: “ISAF is a soft force in dealing with the Taleban”, “The British troops are trying to bring back the Taleban”, “NATO and the US are engaged in Afghanistan to perpetuate instability”.
 - NATO’s “pick and choose” approach results in a de facto fragmentation of Afghanistan. ISAF should act in a more coherent manner and pursue an integrated approach, comprising both military and civilian components.
 - ISAF suffers from a lack of flexibility to deploy troops.
 - Only 10 per cent of ISAF troops operate outside their compounds.
 - Being the main troop contributor with an additional 3,000 US troops to be deployed in 2008, Washington is concerned about the incoherence and lack of support among ISAF troop providers. According to the US administration, NATO is failing to impose a coherent strategy.
 - The US is strongly committed to Afghanistan. The current administration regards the toppling of the Taleban regime and the ensuing reconstruction process as its legacy although Iraq has gradually become the primary concern.
 - In order to increase the coherence of international engagement in Afghanistan, OEF and ISAF should be fused.
 - Afghans are distinctly aware of the long-standing friendship between Germany and Afghanistan. Enjoying a positive image among the Afghan population, Germany should expand its engagement to Southern and Eastern Afghanistan.
 - No, Germany performs very well in the North, and that is where it should stay.
 - Some Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) make an active contribution to the reconstruction process. Others remain passive. PRT budgets should be allocated in accordance with the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS).
 - The international community’s engagement in Afghanistan is marked by a blatant lack of coordination. Therefore, establishing a new position in charge of co-coordinating the international activities and their links with the Karzai government (“super gorilla”) is a step in the right direction.
 - Constituting an agreement between equal partners, the Afghanistan Compact of 2006 remains the widely accepted framework for Afghan and international reconstruction efforts.
 - In order to more effectively implement the ANDS, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB) should
 - have an improved follow-up of its decisions. Mechanisms of oversight and accountability should be installed or improved – if already existing.
 - become more inclusive. Not only major donors, but also other additional actors should be invited to participate in the JCMB meetings, e.g. members of the National Assembly.
 - only comprise members who are mandated to take decisions by themselves.
 - raise its public profile.
 - The accessibility of the ANDS for Afghan decision-makers should be increased, and the ANDS itself

should become a sustainable comprehensive strategy for the economic development of Afghanistan.

III. Dealing with the Taleban

- What is described as “the Taleban” constitutes a very heterogeneous group of Islamic fundamentalists, tribal fighters and criminals.
- As of now, the Taleban control 40 out of 240 administrative districts in Afghanistan. About half a dozen districts were recently liberated, among them Musa Qala in the Southern province of Helmand.
- The majority of the Afghan population does not aspire to a return of the Taleban regime.
- In dealing with the Taleban, coercive and diplomatic means should be utilized.
- Before engaging with the Taleban, the degree of engagement (talking, negotiating?) as well as the target group within the Taleban movement must be clearly determined.
- No, talking with the Taleban leaders is a waste of time. Instead, the root causes of the problem should be tackled: “Before talking to the Taleban, talk to ISI,” as ISI engineered the Taleban movement. A sustainable democratization of Pakistan is likely to yield more fruit than a dialogue with the Taleban.
- No mixed messages should be sent to the Taleban – or to the Afghan people. It should be clearly stated that the Taleban agenda, i. e. a “Re-Talebanization of Afghanistan”, is not acceptable.
- Any contacts with the Taleban should be coordinated with the Afghan government.
- President Karzai’s reconciliation policy brought the Taleban back.
- The support of local leaders has proven to be more effective than a centralized approach in the fight against the Taleban.
- Former Taleban activists who have severed their ties with the movement should be re-integrated into society.
- Emulating the US strategy in Iraq’s Anbar province, the “moderate” insurgents should be divided from the extremist elements among the Taleban.
- A sense of ownership should be conferred to the rural population. Thus, the latter will become less susceptible to the Taleban ideology.

IV. Domestic Challenges in Afghanistan

- Afghanistan is on the verge of becoming a failed state.
- The absence of a functioning party system, the deficient civil society and the weakness of the current government form the main shortcomings of the political process in Afghanistan.
- The current Afghan government has failed to live up to the expectations of the Afghan people. Expectations should have been “managed”, kept realistic, from the very beginning.
- Fighting corruption, implementing the fundamental principles of good governance and the rule of law, holding Afghan authorities accountable as well as installing a strong government are essential prerequisites in order to establish a functioning state system in Afghanistan.

- The involvement of the Afghan National Assembly in the decision-making process should be increased. The ANDS should be developed in a broader consultative process in which the legislative branch plays a central role.
- The international community should not fund President Karzai's campaign for the upcoming elections in 2009. Rather, a "level playing field" should be created for new candidates. It is essential that the elections be perceived as free and fair by the Afghan people. Guaranteeing the democratic transition of power is a very important signal for the Afghan people. Were the elections to be held today, their practical implementation would be severely impeded by the security situation in approximately 50 districts.
- "Natural leaders" on the local level should be empowered to counterbalance the strong competencies of the central government. Local institutions, such as provincial councils, should be strengthened.
- Helmand province is the world's largest opium poppy-producing region. Yet, as long as there are no viable economic alternatives for Afghan farmers, the drug economy will not cease to flourish.
- More aid funds should be allocated to support the agricultural sector in which 80 per cent of the Afghan workforce is employed.