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Neighboring countries ponder a post-occupation Afghanistan

By Karen DeYoung

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Worried that the administration is moving toward an endgame in [Afghanistan](#) - through troop withdrawals, negotiations or both - other countries in the region have stepped up efforts to protect security and economic interests that might conflict with those of the United States.

President Obama has argued that the long-term solution to Afghanistan's problems lies in the neighborhood. Yet while [Pakistan](#) and [India](#) - as well as [Iran](#), [Russia](#), [China](#) and the Central Asian republics - say they want stability and an end to the terrorist threat, each has its own idea of what a future Afghanistan should look like.

The administration has regularly consulted on Afghanistan beyond its comfort zone of Western allies. But early hopes that common goals in Afghanistan could lead to a U.S.-Iranian dialogue or a U.S.-assisted resolution of the India-Pakistan dispute faded long ago.

Solving Afghanistan's conflict poses complex policy problems far beyond the immediate neighbors. [Saudi Arabia](#), which has served as a venue for talks between the Afghan President Hamid Karzai's government and the Taliban, remains worried about Iranian

influence. Turkey, which sees itself as a bridge between the West and the Islamic world, is anxious to play a role.

India, Obama's first stop on an Asian tour that begins Friday, opposes a role for former insurgents in the Afghan government, the logical conclusion of nascent Afghan-Taliban talks. India worries that integrating the Taliban will come at the expense of New Delhi's Afghan proxy, the former Northern Alliance of ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks.

India's concern on this issue, shared by Iran and others in the region, is largely directed toward Pakistan. For ethnic and political reasons, Pakistan favors the southern Afghan Pashtuns, who dominate the Taliban.

Iran also has found common cause with Russia in pushing for tougher military action in Afghanistan against poppy cultivation and opium production, a priority the U.S.-led coalition has downgraded. Russia, while supporting the anti-terrorism fight, fears an extended U.S.-NATO military presence in the region and the indignity of an American success where its own forces failed in the 1980s.

China, in competition with India and Russia, has tightened its ties with Pakistan and poured money into potentially profitable Afghan development projects.

Beneath the political jockeying, government and private economic interests are competing for future wedges of Afghanistan's potential peacetime pie, including billions in untapped mineral wealth, hydrocarbons concessions and pipeline rights of way.

"There is a reason why everyone is taking an interest, and that is because things are moving," Mark Sedwill, NATO's top civilian representative in Afghanistan, said at last month's meeting in Rome of the International Contact Group on Afghanistan. U.S. and European officials expressed pleasure that Iran and the Organization of the Islamic Conference participated in the group for the first time.

But regional players have also been talking about the endgame among themselves, out of U.S. earshot. India has exchanged high-level delegations with Iran and Russia to discuss Afghanistan; Russia has consulted closely with the Central Asian republics. Iran, Russia and India have hosted Karzai this year.

Karzai appears to be leaving his options open. The "bags of money" his government receives from Iran, he said last month, are no different from the cash he receives from the United States. Both Washington and Tehran, he said, want things in return.

India, Iran and Russia agree "they don't want to do anything to make life difficult for the coalition," said Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a frequent administration adviser on the region. "They still see [the United States] as doing the right thing in beating up on a common enemy.

"But if they were to perceive that the coalition has moved toward actually trying to make a deal with the Taliban to the disadvantage of the three, then the stage is set," Tellis said. "The lines of communication have been put in place."

India, Iran and Russia have their own proxies inside Afghanistan, according to Tellis and other analysts. Karzai's move this year to rid his government of senior officials who opposed Taliban talks or cooperation with Pakistan - including former intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh and former interior minister Hanif Atmar - led to talk of a resurgent Northern Alliance girding for civil war.

"A variety of parties in Afghanistan have been hoarding weapons and sending family members and money overseas," said a former U.S. intelligence official with long-standing ties to the Northern Alliance groups, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "It's their version of contingency planning."

European allies also have expressed concern that the administration, in its expressions of enthusiasm for negotiations, is neglecting anti-Taliban power bases in Afghanistan.

"It's an element that is very often forgotten in the description" of a possible political solution, said a senior European official whose government is one of the leading contributors to the coalition effort. "It's sexy in a way to talk to the Taliban," the official said. But "it would not help us at all if we foster talks between the government and the Taliban and forget that the Taliban, as important as they and the Pashtuns are, are not the only group."

The administration sees improved relations between India and Pakistan as "a key piece of the puzzle . . . the heart of the deal" in Afghanistan, a senior U.S. official said. But it has only gingerly approached their bilateral differences, and its attempts to woo India and Pakistan separately have served largely to increase each's suspicion of the other and of U.S. intentions.

Their mutual sensitivity led Obama last month to rule out a Pakistan stop on his Asia trip, when all attention will be focused on India. After three days in India, he explained to top Pakistani officials at a White House meeting, he knew they would take it amiss if he spent only a half-day in their country. Instead, he told them, he would travel there separately next year.

Pakistan has said it needs to maintain a strong military presence along its eastern border with India, expending resources that could otherwise be devoted to the robust action the administration seeks against insurgent sanctuaries along the Afghanistan border to the west. Pakistan has asked the administration to intercede with India to resolve a broad range of issues, including the long-standing dispute over Kashmir, while also expressing strong concern about India's intentions in Afghanistan and questioning growing U.S.-India civil nuclear ties.

India, much larger and far more prosperous than its neighbor, has called the Pakistanis paranoid, an assessment many in the administration share. New Delhi has raised concerns with Washington about rapidly increasing U.S. military aid to Pakistan and urged the administration to restrict its assistance to counterterrorism weaponry.

If Pakistan truly wanted to improve relations, the Indians argue, it would move against domestic terrorist groups that have launched repeated attacks inside India, including the 2008 attacks in Mumbai. Obama plans to spend at least half of his three-day Indian visit in Mumbai, where he will commemorate the dozens killed in the attacks.

But while Afghanistan is on the agenda for talks between Obama and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the Indians have made it clear that they neither want nor need American assistance in their bilateral dealings with Pakistan.