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What is the state of the region? Where is it going?

Geopolitically, and with respect to trans-national links, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan have to be viewed as part of a larger Middle East conflict system that extends from the Levante to the Hindu Kush. The most decisive recent event – more decisive than other wars and interventions – has been the Iraq war of 2003. In more than one sense, the Iraq war has triggered a geopolitical revolution in the region. The old fragile regional order and the balances of power in the region were destroyed, but no new order has been shaped. Current geopolitical struggles in the region are not so much about borders or military might as such, but rather over the frontiers of domination. This is particularly visible in places, where foreign troops have withdrawn and left power vacuums (such as the Gaza Strip or Lebanon). In Iraq, a similar struggle is underway: The Maliki government and the United States are sparring over the future of U.S. forces in Iraq; the government is competing for local control with the Awakening Councils and the Kurdish parties; the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia are competing for influence in and over Iraq. Struggles over the frontiers of domination are also to be witnessed in Afghanistan and in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

What can be done to improve global and regional governance?

Not all the crises and conflicts in the region can be dealt with together. Different approaches are needed for Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Persian Gulf region, and the Arab-Israeli theatre. The relevance of the Arab-Israeli (particularly the Israeli-Palestinian) conflict for political dynamics in the entire region must not be underrated (this conflict is still the main element for instability in the Middle East proper, the main feeding ground for different forms of extremism, and the main test for the credibility of Western actors in much of the Muslim world). Still it may be wise to separate this conflict analytically and politically from attempts at conflict resolution in the region between Iraq and Afghanistan. For our discussion, three priorities and one principle for action may suffice:

International fuel-cycle solutions: Aside from continuing talks with Iran over its nuclear programme in the current EU-3+3 format and possible direct talks between the United States and Iran, we need to make more efforts to explore ideas for multi- and international arrangements that would secure the supply of nuclear fuel to all NPT-members, and at the same time reduce the threat of a proliferation of military usable nuclear technologies and fissile material production. Several ideas have been on the table: international fuel banks, multinational consortia, international enrichment-, fuel production- and reprocessing-centres under IAEA control, and others. Particularly with regard to the proliferation threats in the wider Middle East, the IAEA Secretariat should launch a study on the feasibility and acceptability of different models for such an undertaking, and explore formats that would involve Iran as well as other regional and international states. Such an initiative would not necessarily stop countries like Iran from pursuing their independent attempts at mastering the fuel cycle, but it would lend more credibility to the efforts of the international community to limit Iran's activities.

A regional security structure for the Persian Gulf region: It is high time not only to think about, but to start setting up regional security arrangements in the Persian Gulf region. If a model is needed, it would rather be the Balkan stability pact than the CSCE. The Iraq-Neighbours-Conference (which involves Iraq and its immediate neighbours, Bahrain, Egypt, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and the G8 countries) could be a useful platform to launch such a process. Incrementalism may be the right approach; eventually a structure with 4 – 5 regional desks (dealing with themes such as maritime security; environment; trade; drugs and arms traffic; confidence building measures) could evolve. Regional parties will have to find out where their interests overlap to make cooperation possible; international actors have to play a largely supportive role.

The stabilization of Afghanistan: Military action and the increase of military forces will not solve the problem. While ISAF has to stay as long as the elected Afghan authorities want it to remain, priority has to be given to the training of

Afghan forces, as well as for development and poverty reduction. Negotiation of a status-of-forces agreement between ISAF and the Afghan government may be considered. The international community should also consider another Petersberg-type of conference that brings together international, regional, and a broader range of local actors – including representatives of the opposition and of major ethnic groups. The international community should also consider a Marshall-plan type of development programme for the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

As a principle: inclusive solution should be pursued; the role of regional actors needs to increase: Regional actors need to play a stronger role. Turkey, for example, has recently increased its interest in mediating between Israel and Syria; Saudi Arabia has tried to bridge gaps between different Palestinian fractions; Qatar has helped to overcome the political stalemate in Lebanon. For the international community, it is essential to make best use of regional expertise and involve the interest of regional parties into attempts at conflict resolution and stabilization in the entire region. Similar to the role of the neighbours of Iraq, the neighbours of Afghanistan, namely India and Iran, should be encouraged to play a stronger role in stabilization and development efforts there. Fact is that over the past few years, not a few of these regional actors have been more pragmatic and less ideological than some international players. International actors, rather than playing on and enlarging divisions between the regional parties through attempts of building alliances against particular players, should follow the principle of inclusive multilateralism – inviting all regional parties to participate in efforts to stabilize the regional system.