
What Should the United States do in Southwest Asia?

A DISCUSSION WITH
AMBASSADOR ZALMAY KHALILZAD

FLETCHER FORUM: *During your time at the United Nations, you supported the United States passing another resolution in the UN Security Council to impose additional sanctions on Iran under Chapter 7. What is your opinion on Iran today, primarily from a nuclear deterrence perspective? What would a nuclear, armed Iran look like in a reshaped Middle East and given post-conflict Iraq?*

KHALILZAD: Iran's acquisition of nuclear arms could have severe negative security consequences. It would incentivize others in the region to acquire nuclear weapons. In this unstable region of the world, the spread of nuclear weapons to different countries would increase the probability of preventative and preemptive conflicts. Iran itself might become emboldened and become more aggressive in its use of non-nuclear means of influence against rivals in the region, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. This could lead to problems, including enhancing their incentive to acquire nuclear weapons.

Once Iran's rivals cross that threshold, including of course Israel, which is now a nuclear power, then the nuclear balance will go through phases. Initially the number of nuclear weapons in each arsenal is likely to be limited, and there will be a temptation by Iran or its regional rivals to disarm a rival through a preventative attack on its nuclear facilities. That is not inevitable, as other countries have gone through such phases of vulnerability without war. However, the consequences of a nuclear exchange are so

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grave that even that low probability is not comforting. Therefore, I think, on balance, that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran would increase instability and the risk of catastrophic war in the region.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What is the best line of defense for the U.S. with regard to Iran's nuclear program? There seem to be major roadblocks in traditional diplomatic channels. Would the best defense be through the UN and a more multilateral approach?*

KHALILZAD: It is important for the U.S. to work in the UN because it ensures greater legitimacy and global political support. Also, it is important to create broad common interest among major powers with regard to

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the development of the Iranian nuclear program. There is a general consensus that a nuclear Iran would be undesirable, and no major power has supported that scenario. Therefore, a multilateral effort would better incentivize Iran—if in fact it is interested in producing nuclear energy and not weapons—to work with the international community to pursue its nuclear energy needs. This support could be in the form of reactors that use slightly enriched uranium or assured access to fuel for reactors. On the other hand, Iran must give reliable

assurances that it is not seeking a military program. This is not the case right now. As the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has stated, Iran has been working on the configuration mechanisms of a nuclear bomb. It has acquired a bomb design that could work. And there are indications that Iran is enriching up to twenty percent of enrichment levels. This is significant because enrichment levels of up to five percent would be sufficient to create fuel for reactors. If Iran enriches more than twenty percent, these higher levels could be used to produce weapon material.

While increasing pressure through the UN and other multilateral strategies have to be pursued, the U.S. has stated that it has not taken the options of working just with its Western allies or taking steps of its own, off the table. This is the right approach.

With regard to this important issue, all of these options—UN, multilateral, West-only, U.S.-only—are all in play, in my judgment.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Our relationship with Pakistan has proven to be a double-edged sword and rather contentious, not only after the death of Osama bin Laden but also amidst allegations that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is providing protection for Taliban militants. In your opinion, what should the U.S. strategic alliance be with Pakistan, particularly in regard to the alleged collusion between Al Qaeda militants, the ISI, and the military?*

KHALILZAD: The perception from the United States has been that Pakistan has acted both as friend and adversary in Afghanistan. On the one hand, Pakistan has supported the Taliban and others who are fighting the U.S. in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistan has allowed the United States to access its air space and territory to let American jets fly over Pakistan while they carry out missions in Afghanistan or transport supplies for U.S. forces. Pakistan has also helped with the arrests and detention of several Al Qaeda leaders. However, Pakistan has not moved as aggressively with regard to other key members in the Al Qaeda leadership. The death of Osama bin Laden has raised questions about whether Pakistan is part of the problem by hiding these key individuals. The United States ignored Afghanistan and Pakistan after the Soviets left Afghanistan in the 1980s. Pakistani leaders might be sustaining terrorism or the Taliban, believing that the U.S. will pay attention and fund Pakistan.

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There is a big trust deficit between the U.S. and Pakistan. This has been most salient with the current U.S. discussions with the Taliban, where the U.S. was able to bring Taliban to the table in Qatar. Pakistan asserts that it was not consulted about the U.S. approach and perspective on these discussions. Pakistan is recalibrating its relations with the United States, and the U.S. is looking to form other partnerships in the region.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Recently, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced that the U.S. will seek to wind down combat operations in Afghanistan during 2013, more than a year before a deadline for withdrawal. How do you picture 2014 when the international forces withdraw from Afghanistan?*

KHALILZAD: First, the U.S. forces will continue to support Afghan forces even after the lead for security is transferred to the Afghans. Second, the U.S. is still in discussions with Afghanistan about the post-2014 presence.

There are ongoing negotiations on keeping significant numbers as high as 20,000-30,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan for the next ten years, or even longer, in order to help Afghan forces in both a supportive capacity and for regional counterterrorism efforts to destroy residual Al Qaeda elements.

There are some issues to be resolved before the long term agreement is finalized. President Karzai has asked for American-led, combat night

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raids to end and for a resolution on the issue of the transfer of Afghan prisoners held by the U.S. to Afghan government control before he signs any kind of agreement. Many Afghans worry about total disengagement by the U.S. and want to continue a relationship involving military and economic support from the United States. What will happen after U.S. withdrawal will depend on several different factors: U.S.-Afghan relations, Pakistan-Afghan settlement and agreement with the Taliban, and finally what happens within Afghanistan between now and then.

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alized by those negotiations? Is the Afghan government trying to start separate negotiations with a different branch of the Taliban in Saudi Arabia and with the support of Pakistan?

FLETCHER FORUM: *Could you comment on the current negotiation going on between the U.S. and the Taliban in Qatar, and whether the Afghan government felt marginalized by those negotiations?*

KHALILZAD: At times, the Afghan government has indicated that Karzai and his government have not been in the loop with regards to the negotiations going on in Qatar, while the U.S. has stated that they have kept the Afghan government informed throughout the negotiations. In more recent times, the public statements by both sides emphasize close cooperation and coordination.

Currently, the U.S. and Afghanistan are handling pre-negotiation issues, including prisoner swaps and a ceasefire. Even if these issues are resolved, it will be very difficult to achieve a settlement or agreement without the Afghan government and other key Afghan forces taking the lead and staying engaged. Prospects would improve if Pakistan is included

or has a significant role along with other key players. Because internal rivalries and politics is an issue in Afghanistan and because many key Taliban political leaders have sanctuary in Pakistan, Pakistani positive involvement could be helpful in promoting a settlement. Pakistan must view engagement to be in its interest for a sustainable agreement to emerge. As of now, there is a long way to go for a successful settlement.

FLETCHER FORUM: *There has been a lot of talk about the increasing influence of China in Afghanistan, particularly in reconstruction efforts and oil and energy contracts. Do you think that China's role and influence in Afghanistan will expand? If so, how?*

KHALILZAD: China is a rising power globally, so it is increasing its economic and military power both internally and abroad. While China has had a limited role in Afghanistan's reconstruction, China has been very active in the country's resource development. China has not contributed significantly to increase security
in Afghanistan, although China and the U.S. have a common interest in preventing Afghanistan from becoming a sanctuary for terrorists and extremists. The U.S. and its allies have been doing the heavy lifting on security. This could change as Chinese economic interest grows.

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China has recently begun to extract copper near the village of Aynak and to develop the Tajik basin oil. With an increased stake in Afghanistan, China might play a bigger role in reconstruction efforts and use its influence to
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The copper fields in Aynak are home to a number of Buddhist shrines and have impacted a number of different civilizations over the course of thousands of years. These monuments must be protected. While Afghanistan certainly needs development and resources, it must be sensitive to the treasures of several civilizations, which are significant not only to Afghanistan but also to the rest of the world.

FLETCHER FORUM: *We are interested interested to hear about your current consulting work focused on investment services in Afghanistan and Iraq. Do you think foreign investment and economic engagement is the primary factor for stability, reconstruction, and development in both countries?*

KHALILZAD: It is very important in new political systems to produce better economic conditions. However, in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is very complicated for a multitude of reasons: weakness in the rule of law (can investors go in with confidence?), rules and procedures, corruption (some companies are less likely to conduct business if corruption is present), and security (capital is power but often cannot guarantee security). Foreign investment is part of a comprehensive approach for progress in order to put people to work, invest in sectors for economic development, and encourage locals to start businesses. This is an imperative as the coalition's military presence declines. Part of these countries' economic relations with the West must include investment by companies as a way to continue relationships that are less focused on the military and more on economic progress. ■