



To the UN Secretary - General

TO: The UN secretary-general

FROM: Laurie Nathan and Nilofar Sakhi

SUBJECT: Establish a UN conflict prevention mechanism for the Afghanistan region

What does the UN secretary-general need to know? Our “memo to...” series has the answer with briefings on the world’s most pressing issues from our experts, drawing on their experience advising the highest levels of government.

Bottom line up front:

The risk of interstate conflict between Afghanistan and its neighbors has been rising since the Taliban returned to power in 2021, and is now at a critical point. The Taliban’s rule has created new tensions and exacerbated longstanding problems, such as conflicts over water use in the semi-arid region. Existing efforts to prevent conflict in the war-torn neighborhood are ad hoc, reactive, and ineffectual. The United Nations should urgently establish a standing conflict-prevention mechanism for the Afghanistan region, led by a UN special envoy with a mandate to prevent cross-border and regional disputes from becoming violent, prevent escalation if violence breaks out, and re-establish stability.

Background

This memo describes the cross-border tensions and security threats in the Afghanistan region, discusses recent efforts to address these tensions, and makes proposals for a conflict prevention mechanism led by the UN.

When he took office in 2016, UN Secretary-General António Guterres declared that the international community’s “most serious shortcoming” is “our inability to prevent crises.”¹ In A New Agenda for Peace of 2023, the secretary-general recommended that preventive diplomacy in an “era of divisions” should be strengthened as follows:

“Repair regional security architectures where they are in danger of collapsing; build them where they do not exist; and enhance them where they can be further developed. The UN can work to further such regional efforts in a convening and supporting role.”²

This memo proposes the formation of a standing UN conflict prevention mechanism for the Afghanistan region. The region is insecure and volatile and subject to cross-border violence. Experiences from other parts of the world suggest that standing conflict prevention mechanisms are more likely to be effective than ad-hoc and sporadic responses to regional crises.

More specifically, the conflict prevention mechanism for Afghanistan should comprise a UN special envoy; a UN Center for Preventive Diplomacy for the Afghanistan Region; and a regional consultative forum bringing together Afghanistan's contiguous neighbors: Pakistan, Iran, China, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. An essential step towards the formation of the mechanism would entail consultation with these states.

These proposals build on the report of the Independent Assessment on Afghanistan, written at the behest of the Security Council, which mandated the assessment in UN Resolution 2679 as the first step toward a coherent approach to post-2021 Afghanistan. The assessment, drafted by Turkish diplomat Feridun Sinirlioğlu, was presented to the UN Security Council in November 2023.³ The report highlighted concerns about Afghanistan's potential to generate destabilizing regional effects relating to illegal narcotics, transnational terrorism, and extremist ideologies. It recommended "international attention to and cooperation on issues that impact regional and global security and stability." It also recommended the appointment of a UN special envoy whose mandate would include diplomacy between Afghanistan and international stakeholders. In December 2023 the Security Council requested that the secretary-general appoint a special envoy for Afghanistan to promote implementation of the recommendations.⁴

This memo proposes specific mechanisms to give effect to the Independent Assessment's call for greater coordination and cooperation between international stakeholders and the de facto authorities in Afghanistan with respect to regional security issues.

A dangerous neighborhood

Since taking power in Afghanistan in 2021, the Taliban's relations with several neighboring countries have reached a critical juncture. By way of illustration:

- According to a 2023 UN report, a range of terrorist groups have greater freedom of maneuver under the Taliban.⁵ There are indications that al-Qaeda is rebuilding operational capability, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is launching attacks into Pakistan with support from the Taliban, groups of foreign terrorist fighters are projecting threats across Afghanistan's borders, and the operations of the Islamic State group's local affiliate are becoming more sophisticated and lethal. Links between the Taliban and both al-Qaeda and TTP remain strong and symbiotic.⁶
- In April 2023 Pakistan warned the Taliban that it would strike terrorist hideouts inside Afghanistan if the Taliban was unable to rein in anti-Pakistan militants.⁷
- Russia has similarly said that the Taliban's return to power has bolstered terrorist organizations operating in Afghanistan. Russia warned that increased terrorist risks from Afghanistan were threatening Central Asian neighbors where Russian troops were stationed.⁸
- In 2021 Tajikistan warned that "various terrorist groups are actively using the unstable military-political situation in Afghanistan in order to strengthen their positions."⁹ Taliban officials responded by condemning the Tajik government for meddling in Afghan affairs.
- Militants from the Islamic State Khorasan Province group (ISIS-K) based in Afghanistan fired rockets at Uzbekistan in 2022. More broadly, ISIS-K and other Islamic State groups seek to destabilize Afghanistan and some of its neighbors, raising the risk of terror threats to Central Asia.¹⁰

■ In April 2023 the Fourth Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan’s Neighboring States listed the following terrorist groups as based in Afghanistan: the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Al-Qaeda, the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, the Balochistan Liberation Army, Jundallah, Jaish al-Adl, Jamaat Ansarullah, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.¹¹ The ministerial meeting also highlighted the problem of drug production and trafficking.

■ There are long-standing and growing water tensions in the region. In May 2023 tensions led to an exchange of fire between Afghanistan and Iran.¹²

■ In November 2023 the report of the Independent Assessment on Afghanistan, requested by the UN Security Council, warned that the country “has the potential to generate destabilizing effects – as an origin country for illegal narcotics, as a base for transnational terrorism and extremist ideologies, and as a potential source of mass migration and displacement.”¹³ The report highlights “counterterrorism, counternarcotics and regional security” as priority issues for international attention.¹⁴

Previous efforts to address regional security

To date, there have been no effective international responses to the security problems of the Afghanistan region.

■ The Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, launched in 2017, is a regional platform on Afghanistan that has brought together representatives from Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The founding mandate was to ensure regional security and facilitate political reconciliation between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan under then-President Ashraf Ghani, whose government the international community backed. Moscow assumed the lead in this process because of its concerns about the regional spread of instability, violence, and extremism, as well as the growing inflow of Afghan heroin to the Russian market.¹⁵ This process has not proven successful, as it has failed to generate consensus among the stakeholders and actors involved in Afghan affairs.

■ The Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan’s Neighboring States, which focuses on regional security, held its fourth meeting in April 2023.¹⁶ It does not appear to have developed ongoing programs. This also appears to be true of the annual gathering of the national security advisers of Afghanistan’s neighbors.¹⁷

■ The multilateral bodies that cover the Afghanistan region—the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—have proven to be ineffectual mechanisms for regional security because of the mistrust among their respective member states.¹⁸

Most of the regional meetings have been one-off events, failing to delve deeply into the underlying crises and tensions between Afghanistan and its neighbors and failing to develop concrete plans for collective problems such as the water crisis, territorial disputes, identity conflicts, and narcotics networks. Complicating matters further, some of the regional countries are economically and militarily weak, leading

to dependence on stronger nations and to reduced autonomy to engage in meaningful regional cooperation. The complex web of insurgencies with cross-border affiliations has posed a severe challenge, with certain states covertly or overtly aligning with the nonstate armed actors.

The bottom line is that Afghanistan's neighbors evidently believe there is a clear and strong need to address regional security issues relating to Afghanistan but they have failed to meet this need.

Recommendations

Regional conflict prevention mechanisms (CPMs) take various forms and can be categorized as follows:

■ **Multilateral forums.** In many regions, states have established multilateral bodies whose aims include the maintenance of regional peace, security, and stability. These bodies include the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the African Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Southern African Development Community, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Some of them have developed protocols for conflict prevention, management, and resolution. Their effectiveness varies greatly.¹⁹

■ **UN political missions.** The UN has established over a dozen field-based political missions in regions wracked by destabilizing conflict, including regional offices in Central Africa, West Africa, and Central Asia. These missions serve as platforms for preventive diplomacy, support the work of peace envoys, and strengthen the capacity of states and regional actors to manage tensions peacefully.²⁰

■ **UN peacekeeping missions.** Certain UN peacekeeping missions and special representatives of the UN secretary-general perform conflict early-warning and early-action functions intended to prevent escalation and stabilize the situation when there are violent incidents. These missions include the UN Interim Force in Lebanon and the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara.

On the basis of our research on these mechanisms, the following proposals should guide the establishment and design of a standing CPM for the Afghanistan region.²¹

1. Why a CPM? Standing CPMs are preferable to ad hoc and sporadic responses to regional crises. This is because they encompass pre-established systems, procedures, and forums for conflict prevention. This leads to greater certainty and predictability regarding preventive diplomacy initiatives and methods. These methods can be fine-tuned over time and can respond quickly to crises because they are already in place. Consultations with regional states in setting up the mechanism make these states less resistant to prevention initiatives in tense situations, and even small achievements can build incremental regional confidence.

2. How should the CPM be structured? The CPM should include the following officials and structures:

- a UN special envoy;
- a UN Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for the Afghanistan Region, led by the special envoy; and
- a Regional Consultative Forum comprising Afghanistan's contiguous neighbors, namely China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Other countries, as well as regional bodies and initiatives, could be invited to join the forum where this would be advantageous.

UN leadership and coordination would have the benefit of drawing on the UN's extensive expertise in conflict early warning and preventive diplomacy. It would also mitigate and bridge mistrust between the members of the Consultative Forum.

The Consultative Forum would have the following benefits: It would ensure that the states in the region have direct participation in the CPM and view it as legitimate; it would facilitate interstate cooperation; and, over time, it could lead to confidence-building and collective problem-solving on security issues.

The member states of the Consultative Forum would be represented primarily by their ministries responsible for foreign affairs and security. The forum could comprise technical committees, ministerial committees, and a committee of permanent ambassadors. The UN Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for the Afghanistan Region would serve as the secretariat.

3. What should the CPM focus on? There is a distinction between structural prevention of conflict and operational prevention of conflict.²²

The former seeks to address the underlying structural and systemic causes of conflict. It is a long-term endeavor that typically has political, security, economic, and social dimensions. Operational prevention, on the other hand, relies mainly on preventive diplomacy to prevent disputes from becoming violent, prevent escalation if violence breaks out, and re-establish stability.

The CPM for the Afghanistan region should prioritize operational prevention, which would include a major focus on the problems of cross-border terrorism and violence. It could also develop structural prevention programs around a limited number of issues (e.g., water use and alternatives to narcotics production).

4. Goal and functions. The goal of the CPM would be to promote regional peace, security, and stability in the Afghanistan region. To this end, the CPM would have the following functions:

- identify, analyze, and monitor threats to regional security;
- set up preventive systems and protocols;
- take preventive action, as and when required, to minimize threats and resolve interstate disputes;
- identify opportunities for collective action to address causes of tension; and
- collaborate as appropriate with other regional organizations and initiatives.

5. Next steps. If there is interest in pursuing these ideas further, the UN could undertake informal consultations, including with relevant member states. The secretary-general could also mandate the special envoy, once appointed in light of UN Security Council Resolution 2721 (2023), to undertake consultations.

In conclusion, there is widespread awareness of regional security problems and risks in the Afghanistan region. Efforts to address these problems and risks have thus far been ineffectual. The establishment of a standing CPM—headed by a UN special envoy and involving Afghanistan's contiguous neighbors and other relevant actors—would be a more enduring, constructive and productive mechanism for conflict prevention and regional security.

Laurie Nathan is director of the Mediation Program of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame. He has participated in high-level peacemaking efforts in Africa and helped design the mediation unit of the African Union. He has been a consultant on mediation and related issues to the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States, the European Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the United Nations, as well as with the governments of Germany, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland, Switzerland, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

Nilofar Sakhi is a professorial lecturer of international affairs at the Elliott School of George Washington University and serves as the president of the Andiana Foundation, an organization focused on security and peace. Additionally, she holds the position of nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council. With expertise in regional security and Afghanistan and its region, she has authored numerous publications covering traditional and nontraditional security, regional security complexity, and the geopolitics of peacemaking.

Endnotes

- 1 António Guterres, 2016, "Secretary-General-Designate António Guterres' Remarks to the General Assembly on Taking the Oath of Office".
- 2 UN, 2023, Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace, pg. 18.
- 3 UN, 2023, "Report of the Independent Assessment Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2679 (2023)", UN doc. S/2023/856, 9 November.
- 4 UN, 2023, Security Council Resolution 2721, 29 December.
- 5 UN, 2023, "Fourteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2665 (2022) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan", UN Security Council document S/2023/370.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 S. Zaman, 2023, "Pakistan Will Hit Terror Hideouts Inside Afghanistan, Defense Minister Warns Kabul", Voice of America website, 12 April (<https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-will-hit-terror-hideouts-inside-afghanistan-defense-minister-warns-kabul/7047693.html>).
- 8 A. Dawi, 2023, "SCO Members Lack Unity on Taliban Terrorism Concerns", 22 June, Voice of America website (<https://www.voanews.com/a/sco-members-lack-unity-on-taliban-terrorism-concerns-/7149018.html>).
- 9 "Taliban, Tajikistan Embroiled in Battle of Words, Saber-Rattling", Eurasianet website, 30 September 2021 (<https://eurasianet.org/taliban-tajikistan-embroiled-in-battle-of-words-saber-rattling>).
- 10 J. Freund, 2022, "ISKP Rocket Attack toward Uzbekistan Warns of Terror Threat from Afghanistan", Caspian Policy Center, 10 May (<https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/iskp-rocket-attack-toward-uzbekistan-warns-of-terror-threat-from-afghanistan>).
- 11 "Samarkland Declaration of the Fourth Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan's Neighboring States", 14 April 2023 (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202304/t20230414_11059110.html).
- 12 E. Hessami, 2023, "Conflict, Crisis, and Peacebuilding: Afghanistan and Regional Water Security", NewSecurityBeat blog, Wilson Center, (<https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2023/06/conflict-crisis-peacebuilding-afghanistan-regional-water-security/>).
- 13 UN, 2023, "Report of the Independent Assessment", op. cit.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 N. Sakhi, 2022, "Reflections on the 2022 Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan and Regional Security", Atlantic Council website (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/reflections-on-the-2022-moscow-format-consultations-on-afghanistan-and-regional-security/>).
- 16 "Samarkland Declaration", op cit.
- 17 S. Rasooli, 2022, "Regional NSAs Meet in Tajikistan on Afghan Situation", 26 May, Tolonews (<https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-178189>).
- 18 E.g., Dawi, "SCO Members Lack Unity", op cit.
- 19 L. Nathan, 2010, The Peacemaking Effectiveness of Regional Organisations, Working Paper 81, Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics.
- 20 See the website of the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (<https://dppa.un.org/en/prevention-and-mediation>).
- 21 See Nathan, The Peacemaking Effectiveness of Regional Organisations, op cit; UN, Preventive Diplomacy: Delivering Results. Report of the Secretary-General, 2011; L. Nathan, A. Day, J. Honwana and R. Brubaker, 2018, Capturing UN Preventive Diplomacy Success: How and Why Does It Work?, Centre for Policy Research, UN University; L. Nathan, 2019, "When the Flames are Licking at the Door: Standing Mechanisms for Conflict Prevention", Global Policy, 10(2).
- 22 Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 1997, Preventing Deadly Conflict. Final Report, Carnegie Corporation of New York.