



Select Committee on International Relations and Defence

Corrected oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan

Wednesday 28 October 2020

11 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Alton of Liverpool; Baroness Blackstone; Baroness Fall; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Lord Mendelsohn; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Baroness Rawlings; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham.

Evidence Session No. 12

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 100 - 107

Witnesses

I: Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, Adjunct Associate Professor, Security Studies Program, Georgetown University, and Professor, Institute for Political Studies, (Sciences Po Paris); Dr Avinash Paliwal, Associate Professor and Deputy Director, South Asia Institute, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Dr Avinash Paliwal.

Q100 **The Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the second evidence-taking session today in our inquiry, The UK and Afghanistan. Our witnesses are Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, Adjunct Associate Professor at the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University, and Professor at the Institute for Political Studies (Sciences Po Paris), and Dr Avinash Paliwal, Associate Professor and Deputy Director of the South Asia Institute, School of Oriental and African Studies. Welcome to you and thank you very much indeed for agreeing to give your expert evidence to us in our inquiry.

I advise Members and witnesses that the session is broadcast. It is on the record and it will be transcribed. I again remind members of the Committee that when they put questions to our witnesses, if they have a relevant interest to declare they should do so as soon as possible.

As usual, I shall pose the first question. It is always of a general nature to set the scene. Then I shall turn to my colleagues to ask more detailed questions. How important a role do Afghanistan's neighbours play in its political and security affairs? How would you characterise those relationships?

Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh: Good morning. Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to speak to you. I will speak about Iran and a little bit about Central Asia.

On the first question, I think Iran and Central Asia play very different roles. Iran plays an extremely important role in the future of Afghanistan. It has a primordial role. For long-term sustainable peace in Afghanistan, we cannot bypass Iran, for a number of specific reasons.

First and foremost is the importance of geography. Iran shares 900 kilometres with Afghanistan and will always be a concerned neighbour. The Iranians are concerned about possible contingent insecurity across the border: extremism, terrorism and separatism for the Sunni minorities, narcotics trafficking and the problem of water sharing.

Secondly, historically, much of western Afghanistan—Herat, Nimruz and Farah provinces—were Iranian territory and part of the Persian empire until the settlement of the Anglo-Persian war assigned them to Afghanistan. It is not a question of reclaiming territory. The shared history means that the two countries share culture, language and ethnicity. The language is extremely similar. They are from the same family. It is Farsi in Iran and Dari in Afghanistan, which is spoken among the Tajiks and the Hazaras.

Thirdly, 10% to 15% of the people of Afghanistan adhere to Shi'ism, which is the main religion in Iran. Iran considers those people in Afghanistan their protégés. They protect the Hazaras of Afghanistan, because they share the same minority religion.

Moving to contemporary politics, Iran sees itself as a key regional player. It believes it has sway over the political scene in Afghanistan because of its recent history of ties with some of the political powers, the politicians and warlords involved in the civil wars in Afghanistan, and because of its different influence and ties with Afghan political elites.

Furthermore, although the numbers are extremely difficult to pin down because there is a lot of back and forth over the borders, the 1 million to 3 million Afghan immigrants who live in Iran make Iran a very interested actor in what happens in the future of Afghanistan. Some of the Afghans in Iran have been drafted into an army that Iran has sent to fight ISIS in Syria, so they are also a strategically important contingent for Iran.

Finally, the contentious relations between Iran and the US mean that Iran sees itself as an important player on questions that have to do with the future of Afghanistan in the region, with the understanding that, whatever happens in the relations between Iran and the US, at the end of the day it will have an impact on the scene in Afghanistan.

The Central Asian countries have a lesser role, because for a long time they were insulated. They were part of the Soviet army in Afghanistan, but because they were part of the USSR, and therefore on the other side, they had fewer interactions. The interactions have increased considerably and are expected to increase even more in the next few years. Central Asians share large quantities of border with Afghanistan, even more than with Iran. Tajikistan shares 1,357 kilometres; Turkmenistan, 804 kilometres; and Uzbekistan, 144 kilometres. All those border areas are through rugged territory, with mountains or fast rivers. Yet, they are borders from where narcotics and extremism go through.

For a long time, Central Asians were concerned about the entry from Afghanistan, through two Central Asian territories, of terrorists and extremists. We have seen in very recent history that, of the foreign terrorist fighters in Syria, almost 5,000 Central Asians went to ISIS territory, and many of them are now actually moving to Khorasan province, which is the new ISIS 2.0 caliphate territory being created in Afghanistan. More Central Asian extremists are going into Afghanistan than Afghans coming to Central Asia.

Now that Uzbekistan has opened up, there is a lot more interaction. Central Asians have more ambitions to play an economic role, which I can talk about later, and an international role. When Kazakhstan was a member of the Security Council, the President of Kazakhstan took a delegation of the Security Council to Afghanistan. It held an Arria-formula¹ meeting on Afghanistan and prepared a political declaration calling for the model of nexus between security and development as the model of peacebuilding for Afghanistan.

¹ Informal, gatherings which enable Security Council members to have a frank and private exchange of views.

In conclusion, Afghanistan is trapped by its geography. It needs to make sure that the security interests and dilemmas of the different regions around it will not be projected on its soil. Afghanistan needs to be a strong, sovereign and legitimate power to allow non-interference to happen.

Dr Avinash Paliwal: Good morning, everyone. I am deeply honoured to be here this morning to present evidence to the Committee on the UK and Afghanistan inquiry, and to share this platform with Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh.

I agree with Dr Tadjbakhsh's assessment that the role that Afghanistan's neighbours play in its regular day-to-day political and security life is absolutely essential. If one was to characterise those relationships, I would first use the term "structurally unequal". Iran and Pakistan are more powerful as countries in comparison with Afghanistan, which has witnessed conflict for nearly four decades, starting with the Soviet invasion in 1979. Despite the desire for equality in principle, they are unequal relationships in legal terms, institutional terms and representative terms at global level.

Secondly, I would characterise relationships, especially in the region, as interventionist. We have seen, whether it is Iran, Pakistan or even other countries in the neighbourhood, a tendency to intervene in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan with higher frequency than those countries would do with other countries, whether they are in the neighbourhood or elsewhere. There is an interventionist performance going on in the region. Despite some of the very important historical, cultural people-to-people relationships and economic relationships that Afghanistan has with its neighbours, the relationship, given the complicated security situation in the country for at least the past four decades, is also considerably troubled.

Afghanistan has a lot of asks, some very legitimate, from both Pakistan and Iran, but, today, I will talk a lot more about India and its role in Afghanistan, and about regional powers such as India, China and Russia. These are the three aspects that I would like to underline as far as the region is concerned. Often, whether it is Pakistan or India, regional powers have played out both their national insecurities and their regional geopolitical aspirations in Afghanistan, which often means that interventionism is of a sort that may or may not necessarily benefit the people of Afghanistan, but is seen through the prism of geopolitical state interest in the neighbourhood.

A very important corollary of that is that the war in Afghanistan, as we see today, would not have existed without Pakistan's strategic support for the Afghan Taliban both before and after 2001, and the terrorist attacks on 9/11 that triggered a military intervention, first by the US and then by its broader Western allies. Without the kind of support the Taliban has received over the decades in Pakistan and from Pakistan, that situation would not have existed. It was not just Pakistan of course; even Iran has had a relationship with the Taliban. Various countries in the region, over

a period of time, have started cultivating some sort of unofficial or at times informal relationship with the Taliban that has enabled and fed into the continuation of the conflict in the shape we see it today.

Q101 Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I declare an interest as having lived in both Iran and Afghanistan back in the 1960 in the British embassies in those two places.

Thank you, Dr Tadjbakhsh, for your opening remarks, which told us quite a lot about Iran's interest in Afghanistan. Could we go into a bit more detail? Could you say something about the balance, in pursuing those interests, between religious contacts with the Hazaras and other Shia in Afghanistan and a kind of geographically focused interest in the provinces of Herat, Farah and Helmand, which you referred to?

How is Iran pursuing those interests? What methods is it using to build its influence and where is it most visible? Which countries is Iran competing with? I think you mentioned some of them. Do you think that Iran's interests in Afghanistan, after a settlement at Doha, if there were to be one, would in any sense if not overlap then at least not conflict with those of western countries, including the US?

Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh: I mentioned a couple of Iran's interests, and I will reiterate them and go a bit deeper. The first is the strategic and security interest, which, basically, means the need to balance the influence of Pakistan. That is specifically because of the border issue. Iran is mending its eastern border with gendarmerie, police and border guards, but not the army. It is putting most of its attention on the western border. The eastern border with Afghanistan could become much more problematic, requiring deployment, and therefore Iran would not want to have to put a lot of attention on that front. It wants to balance the influence of Pakistan, which it sees making the future government of Afghanistan more hard-line on security issues, including separatism, Sunni extremism and terrorism, and more of a threat for Iran.

On the normative or religious issue, it is said that because Iran is a theocracy, it would want to see a theocracy in Afghanistan. In my opinion, that is not correct; Iran is a Shi'ite country and would like to see a government in Afghanistan that protects and supports the Shia minority and abides by the constitution of Afghanistan. Iran is not interested in the return of an emirate under hard-line Taliban, whether it be Sunni extremists, Salafi, Wahhabi or whatever. That is why Iran is closely watching the discussions in Doha about Islam and the potential changes in the Constitution. It would not want the return of a hard-line pro-Pakistan Taliban. As you remember, a number of their diplomats were killed in Mazar e-Sharif in 1998 by the Taliban.

Iran is interested in reviving its economy which is at under strain because of sanctions; it wants to keep the Afghanistan market and the transit routes and the use of Chabahar, which was excluded from the list of sanctions. Iran needs dollars, and the Afghan market is an extremely important one, so it has an interest in stability.

Iran wants an Afghanistan that is friendly to its interests and does not allow its soil to be used. It saw what happened to the commander of its forces who was killed in Iraq.

How does it do that? On security, it tries to compete with and balance the interests of Pakistan, but on the more religious normative issues it tries to compete with and balance the Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia. It does it through its soft power. Iran is spending money in western Afghanistan on schools, media, mosques, et cetera. But I do not think Iran has a big advantage there, especially in competition with the money that the Saudis can put into Afghanistan. Iran is under sanctions and has major economic problems today. It also does not necessarily have a very good reputation among Afghan politicians because of what they see as interference on behalf of the Hazaras, what they see as mistreatment of Afghan refugees in Iran and the hostility of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan who are more specifically pro Pakistan. Soft power has its limitations.

Iran is using two further cards: one is political jockeying, and the other is the security card, which is the last resort. The political jockeying gives rise to a very interesting issue. We have known about the influence of Iran over politicians in Afghanistan—Tajik and Hazara politicians—but recently we have been hearing about Iran opening up to the Taliban. There has been a lot of talk about that strategy being used as a way to curb the influence of the United States, or create harm for US troops, but there are other even more important and realistic interests that have forced Iran to open up to the Taliban.

The first is that, if there is a power-sharing agreement in Kabul in the future, Iran wants to up its leverage and would like to have influence over some of the people who would eventually enter a power-sharing government. That is a realistic factor. The second thing is that, although we talk a lot about Herat, there are other areas of Afghanistan that border Iran and are under Taliban control. On security issues, Iran must have discussions to try to influence the Taliban. The Iranians also say that they would like to make sure that the Taliban protect the rights of the Shi'ites and Hazaras, but I do not know how far it is possible for the Iranians to influence that.

There is another very important issue. Iran and other Central Asian countries are more concerned or scared by ISIS and their claim to an Islamic state or province than by the Taliban. As everybody knows, the Taliban have an Afghan-centred interest. They do not necessarily have sectarian interests. They may or may not have an ethnic bias, but the sectarian influence and interest of ISIS is very concerning, so the overtures to the Taliban have been to try to have it fight ISIS 2.0 as a paramilitary.

The interests of Iran and the United States and Western Governments are aligned in a number of areas: curbing extremism, curbing narcotics and ensuring that a law-abiding democratic constitutional government is maintained in Afghanistan. There are limitations, but I do not want to talk for too long. Maybe I will come back to the question of the US and Iran.

Finally, on the question of the security card that the Iranians could be using, there is the potential arming and release of the *Fatemiyoun* army² back to Afghanistan. It is a faction that has already been tested in Syria, fighting against Daesh. If it is unleashed in the messy situation in Afghanistan, that would be concerning.

For Iran, geography is on its side. As regards to competition, it does not have a lot of immediate possibilities but, in the long term, geography, time and its leverage at international level over the JCPOA³ make it an actor that needs to be taken into consideration.

I wanted to spend a few minutes talking about the water-sharing issue. I could talk about it now or in answer to somebody else's question.

The Chair: There will be an opportunity a little later to return to it.

Q102 **Baroness Blackstone:** Dr Paliwal, can you tell us what India's interests in Afghanistan are and how it is building its influence? It would also be helpful if you could say to what extent US, or broadly Western, interests, and Indian interests overlap in Afghanistan.

Dr Avinash Paliwal: India has a panoply of interests in Afghanistan, but the most important aspect of India's engagement and involvement with Afghanistan is its drive to ensure a strategic balance with Pakistan. The tumultuous relationship that India and Pakistan have had since partition in 1947 has had a decisive impact on the way India approaches the issue of Afghanistan and Afghan politics. That has continued regardless of the change in the larger geopolitical situation, whether during the Cold War, the 1990s, the moment of US primacy, and definitely during the global war on terror since 2001 and as things stand today.

The bilateral relationship is very important in guiding India's approach to Afghanistan. India's policy driver is geostrategic in nature, to make sure that in Pakistan's influence on the body politic of Afghanistan and the processes that are panning out, whether in Doha or on the ground, some degree of strategic balance remains between the two countries. India's interests are dictated so strongly by geostrategic issues because it sees its national security imperatives, whether in Kashmir or elsewhere, already deeply tied to the situation in Afghanistan and how Pakistan comes to manoeuvre that situation to its benefit, or not.

A constant refrain in India's policy circles—definitely since the mid-1980s, or, to be precise, in 1987 when armed insurgency broke out in Jammu and Kashmir—has been that Pakistan would use Afghan soil to train India-centric militants who can target Indian interests in Kashmir and elsewhere. That has been the case. That is a very important security driver for India. There is often a desire in Delhi to make sure that it cultivates relationships with political figures and constellations in Afghanistan that are not entirely dependent on or very much pro Pakistan in their political outlook and daily existence. In part, that is one of the

² An Iranian-backed military force made up of Afghans resident in Iran

³ The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal)

reasons why India has opposed the Taliban so strongly until now and invested a lot in the Kabul government, whether under President Hamid Karzai or President Ashraf Ghani. It is a very central strategic aspect of India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan.

Those security issues translate into political issues. In an ideal set-up, India would like to see a sovereign, stable, politically inclusive, democratic Afghanistan because that serves the purpose of India's broader security and political interests in south Asia. An inclusive Afghan government would ensure a certain degree of checks and balances in Afghanistan that prevented the use of its soil for militancy that could be exported beyond Afghanistan, whether towards India or elsewhere.

It also puts checks and balances on the more extreme religious tendencies one has witnessed over the decades within Afghanistan's body politic, whether under the Afghan Taliban umbrella as we know it or the rise of Isis and Islamic State-Khorasan Province in more recent years. India's political vision of more inclusive and more representative government in Kabul can perhaps deal with those issues better than an Islamic emirate. In the republic versus emirate discussion, India is very much interested in the continuation of an Islamic republic along democratic lines, however difficult it may be in practice to attain.

The last interest I mention as far as India and Afghanistan are concerned is the economic aspect of the relationship. There is a very powerful narrative that India is interested in Afghanistan for economic connectivity to central Asian states and the wider Middle East. Personally, I do not believe that is entirely the case. Bilateral trade between India and Afghanistan is about \$1.5 billion and focused mostly on dried fruit, nuts, melon, watermelon and herbs. It is small stuff. It is not fundamentally important for India, but trade with India is very important for Afghanistan in the long term. For Kabul, India is a very important market for Afghan exports, and there has been a constant issue because Pakistan has often not allowed Afghan exporters and traders to cross the Wagah border into India. The geopolitics of the region has hindered economic connectivity between those countries, regardless of which side desires that kind of economic activity more.

One thing that is important to note about how India has built its influence in Afghanistan's conflict theatre, at least over the past two decades, is that it has been a multi-pronged strategy. India was the last country to leave Afghanistan in 1996 when the Taliban came to power, and it was the first to come back in November 2001. Although its ally, the United States, did not want India to be the first country to open diplomatic relationships with the new Government, it went ahead, and it was very clear that there was no way India would accept reduced or almost zero diplomatic presence, or some kind of footprint, in Afghanistan, given the kind of security anxieties that Taliban rule between 1996 and 2001 created in India.

India has invested about \$3 billion in aid in Afghanistan over the past two decades. It is distributed in different sectors, but broadly there is a lot of

investment in big projects, whether the parliament building in Kabul, connecting the Delaram-Zaranj ring road to Iran so that there is better strategic connectivity by road, or creating the Salma dam, known today as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, in Herat province on the Hari river. Those are some very important big infrastructure signature projects that India has developed. They have generated a lot of good will among the people of Afghanistan and have signalled to the government in Kabul over the past two decades that India is a country that is deeply invested in strengthening the capacities and political capabilities of Kabul in its diplomacy with the world, and definitely with Pakistan.

Apart from those big projects, India has contributed to a lot of smaller development projects. Most of them are located in the south and east of the country, but not necessarily so. Such small development projects could be building a toilet or a school or letting local and provincial governors decide what they want to do with the money to support the development of their province. There are a lot of scholarships. India has tried to ensure that there is increased people-to-people connectivity between Afghanistan and India, and it is very conscious of the fact that the Afghan population is primarily very young. There is a lot of focus on bringing advanced students on fully paid scholarships to India, providing them with education over three or four years and perhaps sending them back, opening up more opportunities for them both in and outside Afghanistan.

On the question of the convergence or divergence of interests with the US, the Western engagement we have seen in Afghanistan since 2001 and India's interests, at a strategic level the interests converge very strongly. India has collaborated with the US, the UK and larger NATO-ISAF umbrella in ensuring that the democratic, human rights and women's rights dividend has been capitalised on over the past two decades. It has not played the role of spoiler. It has ensured that it does not enter the security sector of Afghanistan, because that further complicates the geopolitical situation with Pakistan. A request often made by Washington DC and London is for India to focus more on the developmental sphere. It has done that for the past two decades, even though security is the guiding principle in its policy.

Having said that, apart from the broader convergence on issues of political inclusivity, democracy and stability in Afghanistan, and the fact that Afghan soil should not be used by militant ideologues to continue violence in Afghanistan and export it to the region and beyond, there has also been a considerable lack of communication between the two entities. For a long time, the US and India never really talked about the situation in Afghanistan to try to figure out where they could work together.

It is not just the United States. The UK and India have never seen eye to eye on Afghanistan simply because of India's approach to the peace process and that of the United Kingdom. The UK advocated some sort of talks or reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban way back in 2008-09 and institutionalised that process in the Lancaster House conference in

January 2010. The only country that rejected that process, apart from the concerns about the process giving strategic primacy to Pakistan and the Taliban, was India. On some very key questions about talking to the Taliban about the kind of government that should exist, or how long the Western security footprint should remain in Afghanistan, there are fundamental differences in the way India views the situation and the way the situation is panning out today.

Until today, India is the only country that has not officially opened channels with the Afghan Taliban. It has very clearly taken the stand that any peace process in Afghanistan must be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led, by which it means that it will continue to support the Afghan government whatever their endeavours and however difficult the situation may be, instead of doing what the US did by having direct channels of communication with the Afghan Taliban at a formal level.

Q103 Lord Reid of Cardowan: I should declare that I am a former Secretary of State for Defence for the United Kingdom, so I have been involved in Afghanistan through some difficult periods for everyone.

Perhaps we could dwell for a little on the security question. Both witnesses have given massive testimony in a short period, not least on the question of security, and ranged right across a number of issues. Perhaps I can ask the impossible question of both witnesses. From the plethora of security issues perceived by India and Iran, could you try to identify the most important security issue between Afghanistan and India—perhaps Dr Paliwal would address that—and Afghanistan and Iran? Perhaps Dr Tadjbakhsh could attempt to do that. I know it is an impossible task because everything is interrelated, but if you could try to identify the primary security issue between Afghanistan and India and between Afghanistan and Iran, that would be helpful for us.

Dr Avinash Paliwal: It is a very important question. The most important security issue for India as far as Afghanistan is concerned is the use of Afghan soil and the use of the people of Afghanistan by Pakistani security agencies, in the Indian imagination, in Kashmir, targeting Indian interests in Kashmir and fomenting unrest, given the already fragile situation in Kashmir. It is not necessarily restricted to Kashmir, given the fact that the security concerns are much broader in scale, but that is the most important concern for India in its reading of the situation in Afghanistan. There is not much confidence in Delhi that the Afghan Taliban, even if it was unable to deliver on that kind of promise, would even bother committing itself to not allowing its territory to be used by anti-India militants.

Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh: First, Iran has the same security concerns and interests about the soil of Afghanistan being used against its security and allowing the growth of sectarian extremist groups, and the separatism of the Sunni Baloch, et cetera. The most important issue is border security, because the threats to national security from extremists and ideologues in Afghanistan could all come through the borders.

The second important concern for Iran, which India does not share, is the narcotics trade. Afghanistan still accounts for 90% of the world's heroin, and much of it goes through Iran on its way to Europe. Iran is not just a transit country; it is a very large consumer of that narcotic. Allowing the narcotics trade to go through the border corrupts border guards through bribery and corrupts the population through consumption, so it is seen as a security problem.

Another major issue is water security. Water sharing is not just an economic issue; it is a problem of human and national security for both nations. As we know, Iran is a downstream country, and its major rivers in the east originate in Afghanistan. There has only been one treaty, on the Hirmand or Helmand river, in 1973. There is no treaty on the Hari or Herat river, over which the dams are being built.

Iran considers that if dams continue to be built for the economic growth of Afghanistan, they will dry up downstream areas of Khorasan and Sistan-Baluchistan. The Afghan government says that, in all the years when they were not using the water-sharing treaty, Iran used more than its share and therefore should have no contentions in other areas. Afghanistan accused Iran of supporting Taliban exploitation or bombing of some of the dam projects and thus conducting water terrorism. Water security, water sharing and the potential conflict that can come from that is an area that needs to be discussed as a potential security problem that needs urgent water diplomacy mechanisms.

Finally, there is the question of migrants. From a human security perspective, the securitisation of migrants is something we do not like, but that is exactly what has happened. The movements of people from Afghanistan to Iran and back again is being used as leverage. Afghan migrants are being used in armies, and they are being used for pressure. There are also concerns that they illegal migration allows for more corruption, bribery and trafficking. The securitisation of migrants needs to be put on the agenda of security concerns of Iran and Afghanistan.

Q104 Lord Mendelsohn: Dr Paliwal, you raised some of the economic dimensions of the relationship with India, and Dr Tadjbakhsh raised the drugs trade. In the context of India being the second largest export market for Afghanistan and Iran being the largest importer to Afghanistan, can you give us a broader sense of the economic relationships and interrelationships between regional actors, not just current relationships but potential sources of opportunity and tension, whether the potential development of the Afghan economy, the use of different trade routes or even mineral resources?

The Chair: Can I turn to Dr Paliwal first with regard to India, and then to Dr Tadjbakhsh, to look more widely at Iran and central Asia?

Dr Avinash Paliwal: It is a very important question. Given the security situation, the bilateral economic relationship between Afghanistan and India has perhaps not met the potential that one would expect it to meet and is limited to a meagre \$1.5 billion. It is a big figure in some ways,

but not much, given the proximity of the Indian market to Afghanistan. Of course, distance is a relative concept there, because when you are crossing Pakistani territory, given the geopolitics of the region, developing that kind of trade is very difficult.

I will give two examples to address the aspect of opportunity and challenge. India, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkmenistan agreed to sign the TAPI pipeline deal, under which natural gas and oil would be transferred using pipelines from Turkmenistan all the way to India, crossing Afghanistan and Pakistan. There was a moment of considerable euphoria about four or five years ago when people thought that finally geo-economic logic had trumped geopolitical angst between those countries.

Finally, leaders and people across the board could see the value of co-operation over conflict and make that kind of pipeline happen, even the Iran-Pakistan-India—IPA—pipeline that has been on the table for a long time but never materialised. Soon after that, despite the signing of the agreements and despite all those countries coming together in a brief moment of bonhomie or reduced tension—perhaps bonhomie is the wrong term—in 2014-15, the whole project went into cold storage. Given the situation on the ground, that kind of connectivity, however much desired, has been difficult to achieve.

The second example is the Afghanistan-Pakistan transit trade agreement that was being crafted with a lot of support from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom, as it was then known, to get the two sides together and see whether, instead of having a rivalrous relationship because of their history of conflict and the disputed border, especially from the Afghan perspective—Afghanistan does not accept the Durand line as a legitimate border with Pakistan—economic logic would help assuage a lot of the concerns between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The sticking point was simply that Pakistan refused to let Afghan traders cross with their goods and trucks at the Wagah border near Lahore and Amritsar and sell their produce in India. It was a huge sticking point for Afghanistan. The argument was, “This is an opportunity for all of us to come together to do business”, but that was not how a lot of the security-minded leaders in those countries perceived the issue.

Economics has always been seen as a theatre of geopolitical competition rather than a solution to the conflicts and geopolitical anxieties that exist in the region. Connectivity itself, especially with the rise of the Belt and Road Initiative from Beijing, is not seen as a solution to the problem; it is seen very much as a lever that would exacerbate geopolitical strains rather than assuage them. That is a considerable challenge in getting those countries to come together and perhaps think like the European Economic Community, which uses economics as a template for co-operation rather than continued fighting.

The history is very different. Europe experienced a couple of world wars before that kind of realisation dawned and became publicly acceptable.

Having that expectation of economic connectivity in the region, especially between India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, is perhaps premature given the important geopolitical drivers that remain.

Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh: Iran does not want to lose the Afghan market. Everything that Iran produces can be used in Afghanistan. I do not have reliable updated numbers, especially given what is happening with the rate of the dollar in Iran, but in 2016 the trade was 1.8 billion; today it is said to be 2.8 billion dollars. Iran is a very important trading partner that competes with and sometimes surpasses Pakistan. Iran needs the Afghan market, especially because of the sanctions that it is undergoing.

Afghanistan is also a very important transit route. The shortest transit route for Central Asian goods is through the Chabahar port. That is why Iran is pushing for greater use of the Chabahar route, and was happy that the US cooperated and did not put the port under sanctions. Iran has recently opened trade routes between Iran and Central Asia through Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. What hampers that co-operation and could be a barrier is the continuation of maximum pressure sanctions on Iran. That is the main political and economic problem in expanding trade.

In parenthesis, Afghan immigrants in Iran play a considerable economic role. They are heavily involved in agriculture; they have a lobby. That should be also taken into consideration when thinking of economic interests.

The Central Asian countries have bilateral trade, including micro-trade which involve micro-bazaars over the borders between the two transborder communities. They are important, but not as important as the potential for supporting infrastructure, especially railroads, transit and electricity lines. Uzbekistan is now building an electricity grid and pumping a lot of energy into the Afghan market. Turkmenistan is building infrastructure and wants gas pipelines to go through Afghanistan through TAPI. Both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are building railroads in Afghanistan.

What could hamper co-operation there is the problem of insecurity and what can help is continued security guarantees by Russia and investments by China. Although Uzbekistan is trying to revive regional trade and its leadership in it, Central Asian economies are very much dependent on Chinese investments. They are much more dependent on what happens with the Chinese Belt and Road project than Iran would be.

The Chair: I have been told that the broadcast session can be extended by 10 minutes, but it still means that we are fairly tight for time. I ask Baroness Rawlings and Lord Grocott to ask their questions together and I invite our experts to answer them together, before I turn to the final question from Lord Purvis.

Q105 **Baroness Rawlings:** Thank you, Dr Paliwal, for your clear presentation

and your very interesting paper on the new alignments. As you say, India relies on the US to help maintain the stability that is so important, but what is the position of India towards the US-Taliban agreement and peace talks in Afghanistan? I know you touched on that in answer to Baroness Blackstone. How are they developing? What do you think is their desired outcome? Dr Tadjbakhsh, regarding Iran, how influential in this is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps?

Q106 **Lord Grocott:** My question in respect of both Iran and India is how their policy might or might not change in the event of US troops being withdrawn from Afghanistan. What kind of changes, if any, do you expect, and might they provide opportunities for the countries as well as perhaps disadvantages?

Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh: First, Iran and the US collaborated quite closely on the Afghan dossier in 2001. Iran provided military intelligence assistance on the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. But you will recall that, President Bush then called Iran the axis of evil, which was basically a slap in the face. Consequently the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan sandwiched Iran between US troops. With the withdrawal of the JCPOA, the Iranians have less appetite for collaborating with the US over Afghanistan, although they share a lot of common interests.

On the question of whether the Iranians are trying to sabotage the presence of the American army, I do not believe that is true. It is in the interests of the Iranians to have a stable Afghanistan and for US troops to leave. Therefore, in the Doha meetings we heard that the Iranians tried to negotiate with Afghan politicians on a common position for the intra-Afghan dialogue. However, the Iranians did not participate in the signing of the peace deal in February between the US and Taliban because they thought the US did not have legal legitimacy to be negotiating, especially as the Afghan government had been bypassed, and because they were not clear about the position of the Taliban on some of the issues I talked about earlier. I do not think the Iranians want the Americans to stay long term. They have common interests in seeing the withdrawal of NATO forces, stopping the Afghan heroin trade and the al-Qaeda-inspired Islamic State fighters.

A lot of what happens in the future will depend on what happens with the nuclear dossier, which is independent of the Afghan scene. It would be possible for the US and the Iranians to insulate Afghanistan from their broader strategy rivalry and collaborate, as the US has done with China and Russia over Afghanistan. At this point, what happens in the future over the nuclear negotiations depends on the US elections and whether the next President of the United States will be more or less hawkish towards Iran. That will influence the way that the Iranians will or will not want to collaborate in Afghanistan.

I am not sure the Iranians are very convinced about the full withdrawal of US troops because they have seen a lot of investments. I hear that Iran wants a clean withdrawal that will not result in the violence we all

witnessed in the 1990s. Therefore, the question is what type of withdrawal there would be and what will be in place after the withdrawal.

There could and should be alignment between Iran and US interests, because there is a common dossier of security interests, but the questions are: what happens at the next elections, what will the outcome be and what position will the Taliban take? We are all watching right now to see whether the Taliban are emboldened to take a hard-core position and go back to insistent demands over the establishment of an emirate, or have a position that is much closer to that of the government, which would be a much greater opening for the Iranians as well.

Dr Avinash Paliwal: Before I address the important question of India's approach to the US-Taliban deal in Doha more recently and the processes that have fanned out since then, an important feature or building block to remember is the story of increasing strategic alignment between the United States and India over the past two decades. It is a complete turnaround in a bilateral relationship that was deeply estranged during the Cold War, given the Cold War imperatives that guided American policy towards south Asia and the world, and India's closer relationship with the Soviet Union at that time.

Only last week, we saw that even in the security and defence sector, where India has traditionally been very wary of signing treaties with external partners, it has come a long way and is signing very important defence pacts with Western powers, including the US and, hopefully, the United Kingdom. That has an effect on how the two countries view the situation in Afghanistan. Even if their larger strategic alignment is guided by and aimed primarily towards the rise of a more assertive China over the past six or seven years, India has been deeply sceptical about the direct US outreach to the Taliban during the Trump Administration. That was something about which India was officially very wary, and it communicated that.

The idea had always been that, if a conversation was to be had, it must not be between the US and the Taliban but between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban. By talking to the Taliban directly, Washington DC essentially undermined the cards that Kabul might have to play in any sort of conversation with the Taliban at Afghan-to-Afghan level. That goes back to the 2012-13 moment before the process began under Trump. The US also tried to open that sort of channel by not keeping the then President, Hamid Karzai, in the loop. That created a lot of backlash both from Kabul and at international level, supported by India. That feature remains.

What has changed between 2012 and 2020 is increased co-ordination on the issue of Afghanistan between US and Indian policymakers. Today, there is an understanding in India that we cannot, beyond a point, influence American policy towards the Afghan Taliban and the conflict processes, given that the US's own national interests have kicked in. That is something India has accepted as a relatively peripheral player, if an important one, in Afghanistan's conflict dynamics, but it constantly seeks

guarantees from both the US and its other allies in the Western world that the issue of an Islamic republic and the gains made over the past two decades are not lost. That is one ask that is very persistent in India's approach to the whole process of the Doha goals, and that is perhaps one reason why it is so invested in supporting the Kabul government, and being the odd entity out by not talking to the Taliban when the whole world is talking to the Taliban.

That takes me to the second question. How might India's policy approach towards this country change in the post-US and post-Western scenario? I think the central driver of India's relationship with Afghanistan has been to ensure a strategic balance between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and that will remain even in a post-US scenario. That feature has remained ever since independence, since 1947. That driver remains the same. The question is, how will the policy adjust itself to whoever comes to power in Kabul, whether it is an interim government or a complete military takeover by the Taliban and its allies? Those situations will determine how India adjusts its relationship with entities on the ground.

There is ongoing debate in India's power corridors today on the question of whether or not to talk to the Taliban. The conciliatory idea of an advocacy policy, of having at least some sort of channel to ensure future strategic interests in the region, in Afghanistan in particular, is gaining ground, especially with the US leaving. There is clarity that the US will be leaving even if a Democrat Administration comes to power in November. Whether or not India talks to the Taliban in that situation is an open question, but the likelihood remains that it would. That would be a shift in India's position as it is today.

The question for Indian policymakers in that situation would be which Taliban faction to engage with. That is where regional powers such as Iran and Russia become so important for India. They are countries that have had some degree of linkage and tie with the Taliban over the past two decades. They have also tried to balance Pakistani influence in the insurgent landscape of Afghanistan.

If there could be some *modus operandi* between India, Iran and Russia about who to talk to within the Taliban umbrella and who to support in a post-US environment, I foresee that happening without too much difficulty, because there is a convergence of interests as far as those three regional powers are concerned. Russia, Iran and India do not want to see an emirate developing in Afghanistan, for their own national security interests. That evolution and policy adjustment is likely to happen, but as for the US-Taliban deal, India has accepted that as a fact and tried to adjust its policy to that reality.

The Chair: Thank you. We have about seven minutes remaining. I regret such constraints on broadcast time when we have such fascinating evidence.

Q107 **Lord Purvis of Tweed:** Dr Paliwal has answered very comprehensively on the UK's past relationship with India relating to Afghanistan, in answer

to the questions put by Baroness Blackstone and Baroness Rawlings, so I want to direct my question primarily to Dr Tadjbakhsh. It is about whether the UK has engaged in the past, or indeed is currently engaging with Iran in any way, in relation to Afghanistan. If there is time, would both witnesses say briefly what the opportunities are for the UK to engage with Iran and India in the future, if you see any such opportunities?

Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh: I have not been able to find much evidence of co-operation directly between Iran and the UK. There is a question for some Iranians about the position of the UK. Is it independent of the US? The position is not clear and the collaboration has not been there, but the areas of potential convergence for Central Asian interests, Iranian interests and UK interests are quite large.

If you will allow me, I will talk about the four areas on which I think it would be quite important to collaborate. Number one is the narcotics trade. Both Central Asians and Iranians, because their countries have become both transit and consumer countries, have been watching to see what happens to the narcotics trade under UK control or support. They have not been very optimistic about what we have seen in the past two decades. One area is to rethink a strategy to do something about the narcotics trade by involving the countries of the region more.

Secondly, there is the question of water sharing. I do not know whether that is something the UK could support. The problem of water sharing with Central Asia and Iran will come up quite a lot in the future. It needs to be solved through international agreement. Is it an area where the UK can provide support?

The third question is about support through the United Nations. I did not talk about this earlier. In both Central Asia and Iran, there is support for a possible revamp of the six plus two format, or the mediation of the United Nations, to get regional countries to play a more positive role, but one that is more consultative. I do not know whether the UK can work through the United Nations to revive it and give the UN a greater role.

Finally, the question of the return of foreign terrorist fighters—the FTFs—to the region is of much interest, especially to Central Asian countries. How we rehabilitate, reintegrate, return, screen and prosecute the foreign fighters is also an issue for the UK. It is not so much the question with Iran. Because we are seeing some kind of return of Central Asian extremists not to their countries of origin, but to a new theatre, which is the vacuum of an unstable Afghanistan, the question of rehabilitation is an area where more support from the UK could be forthcoming for Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Dr Avinash Paliwal: First, my personal view is that it is a shame that the UK-India relationship, especially on these issues, has been suboptimal. There is a very potent view in India that the UK has had a pro-Pakistan viewpoint on regional disputes, whether Kashmir or Afghanistan. It might not be rooted in fact, but that perception has never

been truly countered by London in its narrative and outreach to India. It has swept away the valuable relationship and reduced the potential until now of the idea of balancing India and Pakistan both in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Given the very large diasporas of both countries that reside in the UK, these are very important issues in guiding the bilateral relationship and perhaps limiting it to some extent.

For Afghanistan, there is a lot more room to co-ordinate some real-time measures to turn off the tap for the export of terrorism from Afghanistan. How can that be ensured? This is a security area on which the UK and India can co-operate jointly in some very practical ways. There are signs in recent times that the security conversation has started to take shape and bear some fruit, in that a defence logistics pact is to be signed between India and the United Kingdom.

Those are the kinds of pacts that can bring the two countries together to look at security issues, which are of paramount importance for India's perspective on Afghanistan, and to see whether something can be done to de-link them from larger India-Pakistan bilateral politics to whatever extent it possibly can. It is not an easy balance to strike, but it is something on which London and New Delhi can work together. In many ways, it is low-hanging fruit that has not been capitalised on. There are signs of improvement on these issues, and I hope that they will go in that direction as we move forward.

The Chair: Can I say a very big thank you to both of our witnesses for this fascinating session? In addressing the issues in the region, you stretched our minds accordingly. Thank you very much indeed. As I close our public session, I remind Members that we will very shortly start our private consideration to reflect on the valuable evidence we have heard today. Thank you very much, Dr Paliwal and Dr Tadjbakhsh.