

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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State Failure and Regional Containment: The Case of Central Asia and Afghanistan

“The international community is baffled about why all of Afghanistan’s neighbors are not helping with the recovery of the failed state,” summarized George Gavrilis, a political scientist from the University of Texas at Austin, who spoke at the Harriman Institute on April 29, 2010. Gavrilis is working on a book about Afghanistan’s relationship to its neighbors. “The question I am asking is why do the neighbors of a failed state sometimes assist, sometimes undermine, and sometimes ignore the recovery of that state?”

Gavrilis spent the past year-and-a-half on leave from the University of Texas, working with international organizations and focusing on Central Asia. “I noticed that policy makers inside and outside of the UN were constantly surprised that Afghanistan’s neighbors, who have all been showing up to multilateral conferences and making various promises to aid Afghanistan’s slow recovery, did not tend to follow up on what they promised.”

According to Gavrilis, Iran has been the most helpful in aiding Afghanistan’s recovery—since 2001, Iran’s leaders have been involved in discourse with both the UN and (through back channels) with the US, urging policy makers to ensure that whoever comes to power in Afghanistan will be a technocrat and not an ideologue. “Iran was adamant in pointing out that only a technocrat, not an ideologue, could effectively rule Afghanistan.” Iran supported Afghanistan’s new regime. In contrast, Pakistan was not happy with the government that came to power and gave little aid compared to Iran.

“There are a number of plausible explanations for why states do what they do when a neighbor fails,” reflected Gavrilis. “The decision to help or not might have to do with the international presence in that state. Or it could be based on a regional rivalry—using the failed state as a battle ground to duke out dilemmas with another state. Pakistan, for example, could be making its decisions as a response to India’s efforts in Afghanistan—Pakistan’s decision not to help might be a way of preventing India from what it perceives as the creation of an Indian front in

Afghanistan.” Gavrilis reasoned that cross border threats could also influence state decisions. “A heavy spill over of criminal activity from a failed neighbor could cause neighbors to seal their borders, or in some cases, like in Tajikistan, the criminal activity might help to support the economy of a fragmented regime.”

Gavrilis, who is still in the early stages of his research, has noticed a trend. “I am discovering that it is about domestic politics. Neighboring states tailor their policies towards Afghanistan not based on how it will affect security, but how it will affect them domestically.” He theorizes that two components factor into this domestically driven decision—revenue security and how the policy decision towards the failing neighbor state will affect political balance. Gavrilis stressed that his hypothesis is still abstract. During his presentation he focused on three of the six neighboring states—Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

“All three states have a stable border with Afghanistan—there are no territorial disputes.” Each state experiences “some spillover threat” resulting from the shared border. “None are safe from cross-border insurgents, weapons and narcotics trafficking.” All three neighboring countries also share ethnic, religious or cultural ties with Afghanistan. Despite these joint characteristics, the states have taken drastically different approaches to dealing with Afghanistan. Iran has been the most willing to assist, Uzbekistan has neither helped nor undermined, while Tajikistan has undermined Afghanistan’s recovery.

Iran has helped to put together Afghanistan’s government, collaborated in drug interdiction efforts, provided infrastructural assistance, as well as pledged and delivered \$500 million in aid in the first several years after 2001. “This is a lot of money for Iran, especially when you consider that China, a much richer country, has only forked over \$150 million in aid over the past 8 years.” Iran has also absorbed many Afghan refugees, cooperating with the UN in 2005 by halting its repatriation efforts. “The only thing Iran hasn’t done is

provide supply routes to Afghanistan because of its poor relations with the US and the EU.”

Gavrilis emphasized that Iran is a particularly interesting case. “Intuitively we would have expected Iran to act more like it did in Iraq and try to veto the West’s role in Afghanistan.” But despite poor relations with the US and the EU, Iran has continued to provide generous assistance. Iran’s decision to help was not motivated by revenue. “In fact, Iran spent a lot of money in Afghanistan, and not much of its revenue is directly threatened by Afghanistan.”

Gavrilis contends that Iran acted the way it did in order to appease its domestic constituencies. “A lot of its policy towards Afghanistan seemed to be conditioned by pressures from key constituencies, which lobbied for particular issues” The Revolutionary Guard, which is seen as a radical organization when it comes to the West, was one of the key sources of support for “ratcheting up border control—when it came to border of Iran, the Revolutionary Guard was pressuring the government to come up with a very proactive counter narcotics policy.” Private sector lobbies also exerted major pressure on Iran’s government. “Particularly bazaris, who are so important for the legitimacy and continued rule of Iran—they were pressuring Iran not only to sign but also implement a number of economic deals and measures that enabled them to access Afghanistan, to open up the Afghan consumer market to Iranian goods.” The government listened to its constituents.

Tajikistan’s actions have been counterproductive to Afghanistan’s recovery. While it allowed the US access to a transit route, the country has been aiding Afghanistan’s illicit cross-border trade. Gavrilis attributes this to the decentralized nature of Tajikistan’s regime—there are various political clients at the local level that benefit from illicit trade with Afghanistan and in turn provide revenue for the regime as a whole. “Provincial elites remain important in Tajikistan,” explained Gavrilis. “The regime has developed an interest in creating a balance across its territory with warlords. The warlords profit from trafficking

across the border with Afghanistan. The revenue is undocumented and untaxed, and comprises a large part of the overall income for the regime.” The resulting corruption negatively affects governance in Afghanistan.

Unlike Tajikistan, Uzbekistan is a strong, highly centralized regime. It responded to the crisis in Afghanistan by tightly sealing its borders after 2001, ending all legal cross-border traffic. “Before that it had given the US and the international community access to its territory for supply lines.” In 2005, Uzbekistan closed K2—a US military base that had been one of the principal ways of getting US assistance into Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan has a large domestic construction industry and could have “participated in lucrative construction investments, but it became clear that Uzbekistan didn’t want much to do with Afghanistan at all.” Gavrilis rationalized that Uzbekistan has isolated itself from Afghanistan because key sources of revenue are “firmly in the hands of the central government.”

Gavrilis plans to include an expanded case study of all six of Afghanistan’s neighbors in his book—Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, China (which is often forgotten as a neighbor, but does share a small part of its border with Afghanistan’s northeast), Turkmenistan and Pakistan. He urged that policy makers should consider more than just multilateral pledges and national security positions when trying to get help from Afghanistan’s neighbors. “If you’re going to try to get Afghanistan’s neighbors to do something to pitch in, you can’t just look at their national security positions and their multilateral pledges because at the multilateral level, they will promise you the world, but not necessarily deliver.” Gavrilis asserts that if policy makers want “to translate pledges into action” they have to approach countries with a regime security policy “that aligns with the kinds of policies that are going to help the long-term recovery of Afghanistan.”

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner

