

Building Peace in Afghanistan through Regional Economic Integration: From RECCA-VI to the Heart of Asia Ministerial

Dr. Richard Ponzio

Abstract

Afghanistan, its neighbors, and international partners face a stark choice today: either promote Afghan economic development and stability by clinging to a continued – yet unsustainable – dependency on foreign aid and military assistance, or transform the country into a financially sustainable trade and transit hub that benefits its citizens and region through new economic opportunities and a durable peace. Given the regional nature of Afghanistan’s myriad economic, political and security challenges, the choice is clear.

Since November 2011, the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan, also known as “The Heart of Asia Istanbul Process”, has sought to combine a focus on regional political dialogue, security, and economic integration to address several of the most fundamental threats and challenges facing Afghanistan and its wider region. With the introduction of two confidence-building measures (CBMs) on Trade, Commerce & Investment and Regional Infrastructure in 2012, the Istanbul Process has built directly on progress achieved by the series of Regional Economic Cooperation Conferences on Afghanistan (RECCA), initiated in December 2005 in Kabul. In considering the way forward for advancing regional economic integration with Afghanistan, my paper examines the economic dimensions of Afghanistan’s decades-long conflict, reviews the respective strengths of the Istanbul Process and RECCA since 2011 in improving the conditions for peacebuilding and reconciliation and considers the level and effectiveness of collaboration between these two regional forums. Finally, it offers concrete recommendations for improving Istanbul Process-RECCA coordination, implementation and further strengthening of the regional economic and governance dimensions for achieving a durable peace in Afghanistan.

Keywords

Afghanistan, Economic Integration, Peacebuilding, New Silk Road



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The Afghan conflict's regional economic dimensions and the role of RECCA and the Istanbul Process

With Afghan security forces suffering casualty rates 50 percent higher during the first half of 2015 than in the same period a year earlier,¹ one could argue that the recently completed security and political transitions in Afghanistan are failing to deliver durable peace - just as Western-led forces and donors pull back their assistance. Equally problematic is that Afghanistan's third critical *economic* transition has yet to be completed. Without it, the growth, jobs and public revenue that create unique incentives for the currently stalled political reconciliation effort necessary to end the conflict – and are therefore essential to successful state and peacebuilding – will, indeed, remain elusive.

Since 2001, the Government of Afghanistan and its international partners have faced a crisis in generating immediate employment opportunities and reducing the pool of young men vulnerable to extremism. While the country's unemployment rate hovers around 8 percent (2013), according to the World Bank,² it is much higher in conflict-affected areas and is classified nationally as “vulnerable employment”.³ There has also been limited progress in attracting private sector investment and building adequate infrastructure for transportation, energy and trade facilitation.

At the same time, the huge potential scale and viability of continental land-transport across Afghanistan and other forms of regional economic cooperation (e.g., in the areas of energy, mineral extraction, agriculture and water management) remain largely untapped. For example, intraregional trade for the five Central Asian Republics, Afghanistan, and Pakistan is comparatively low, accounting for just 6.2 percent of the total global trade of these nations.⁴ Job creation efforts have yet to bear significant fruit in Afghanistan, in part due to the significant slowdown in Afghan economic growth in recent years, as well as the procedural and infrastructural deficiencies linked to cross-border commerce.⁵ Consequently, the demonstrable economic, social and political benefits of expanded regional trade, while potentially substantial (e.g., customs/border taxes account for nearly half of the country's public revenue), have been elusive.

Meanwhile, peace negotiations in Afghanistan are currently focused on engendering high-level reconciliations talks – formally between the Afghan Government and the Taliban, with the support of Pakistan, the U.S. and other regional and global powers. However, successful

1 Goldstein, J. “Afghan Security Forces Struggle Just to Maintain Stalemate.” The New York Times, 2015, July 2, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/23/world/asia/afghan-security-forces-struggle-just-to-maintain-stalemate.html?_r=2

2 “Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate).” World Bank Group, 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS>

3 According to the Government of Afghanistan's National Risks and Vulnerability Assessment 2007/8: A profile of Afghanistan, “More than 90 percent of jobs can be classified as vulnerable employment that do not secure stable and sufficient income.”

4 Krist, B. “Can Regional Connectivity Promote Development Along the New Silk Road?”, America's Trade Policy, 2014, July 14. Washington International Trade Association, <http://americatradepolicy.com/can-regional-connectivity-promote-development-along-the-new-silk-road/#.VeGWH86HqT>

5 Afghanistan's economic growth is estimated to have slowed down from a recent high of 17.2% in 2011 to 6.4% in 2014, with a growing trade imbalance of US \$7.12 billion and progressive devaluation of the Afghani also contributing to an uncertain macro-economic future. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. “Towards Regional Economic Growth & Stability: The Silk Road through Afghanistan.” Kabul: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2015): 5, <http://recca.af/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/main-document.pdf>

peace negotiations are normally more inclusive, both in terms of the stakeholders engaged and the issues addressed. Indeed, research shows that 50 percent of peace agreements fail when too few of the people affected by an agreement support it.⁶ At present, the Afghan government and its foreign partners face a growing credibility gap in the eyes of the Afghan people. By combining regional economic cooperation with political dialogue, reconciliation and the reintegration of former combatants, a comprehensive peace process that includes a strong economic component will further “incentivize peace”, improve neighboring country support and increase the likelihood that more Afghan citizens will accept the outcomes associated with peace negotiations. In other words, a skillful and continuous articulation of real short and medium-term economic benefits will increase the willingness within Afghan society and neighboring countries to invest in peace and to better accept inevitable set-backs along the way.

By redoubling support for a select number of ambitious, yet realistic regional economic investment priorities, Afghanistan’s neighbors – including both governments and private investors – will realize that the stakes are high, in economic and other terms, if regional diplomatic talks fail to result in durable peace. In other words, it is in their economic self-interest for political negotiations to succeed. Economic growth generated through new cross-border investment opportunities can contribute to jobs and public revenue generation. Besides serving as issues for peace and reconciliation talks, both jobs and public revenue are fundamental to building regional stability – which can, in turn, improve conditions for negotiations and building a durable peace in Afghanistan. Renewed attention toward job-creation and public revenue generation can also help address government corruption and legitimacy: important factors that affect how Afghanistan develops economically and attracts foreign direct investment and new trading partners.

Aside from what the academic literature says about the positive academic dimensions of peacebuilding, multiple, concurrent “Silk Road” regional economic initiatives promoted by major Eurasian economies, as well as global economic powers, have the potential to benefit Afghanistan directly – both economically and politically – by intensifying commercial ties with its neighbors. By far the most impressive to date is the Chinese led Silk Road Economic Belt (“One Belt, One Road” initiative) backed by over US \$100 billion in new investment pledges in transport, energy and other sectors across Central Asia.⁷ A complimentary effort, further initiated by China, is its Maritime Silk Road project, designed to expand commercial links via regional and global sea lanes. Also noteworthy in recent years are the Kazakh-initiated - and now regionally supported - Silk Wind project, Turkey’s Modern Silk Road project and the United States’ New Silk Road initiative. In adopting an Afghanistan-centric approach, the latter effort has sought, since July 2011, to “...bolster peace and stability in the region by supporting a transition to trade and helping open new markets connecting Afghanistan to Central Asia, Pakistan, India and beyond.”⁸ However the jury is still very much out as to whether these “*new Silk Roads*” will traverse through, or quite possibly in the end around, Afghanistan.

6 See, for example: Doyle, M. and Sambanis, N. *Making War and Building Peace*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006: 13).

7 See, for example: Brugier, C. *China’s way: the new Silk Road*. European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2014, May, http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief_14_New_Silk_Road.pdf; and Stokes, J. “China’s Road Rules: Beijing Looks West toward Eurasian Integration.” *Foreign Affairs*, 2015, April 19, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2015-04-19/chinas-road-rules>

8 U.S. Department of State. *U.S. Support for the New Silk Road*. N.d, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/ci/af/newsilkroad/>

RECCA and the Istanbul Process: Regional Economic Peacebuilding Pioneers

Two major international forums – the Sixth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA-VI) from 3-4 September 2015 in Kabul and the next Istanbul Process “Heart of Asia” Ministerial planned for 7-8 December 2015 in Islamabad – present timely opportunities to accelerate regional economic integration – and by association, Afghan economic transition – as a means of building greater confidence, trust and mutual dependency between Afghanistan and its neighbors. Earlier, the author has expounded on the inherent economic and social benefits of connecting Central, South and Southwest Asia through new transit, energy and communications corridors in Afghanistan.⁹ Binding Afghanistan’s economic future ever closer to its Eurasian neighbors might also be the best chance for a political breakthrough in the country’s decades-long conflict.

RECCA

Beginning in December 2005, successive rounds of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan have provided a regional platform for Central, South and Southwest Asian Foreign and Economic Ministers to engage their counterparts in Kabul in forging consensus around concrete policies and investment project opportunities that deepen cross-border economic relations centering on Afghanistan. For example, the Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA 1000) will net Afghanistan up to an estimated USD \$175 million annually, generate indirect employment opportunities for over 100,000 people and link the economies of Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. Similar tangible benefits are projected for other priority trade facilitation, natural resource extraction, and transport initiatives. Donor countries and organizations have provided technical and financial assistance to priorities identified by RECCA since the first meeting in Kabul. With subsequent gatherings in New Delhi, Islamabad, Istanbul and Dushanbe, private sector representatives and scholars have further grown in influence vis-à-vis this regional economic cooperation agenda.

Among the major strengths of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan are the following: (i) it has sustained a dialogue on Afghan regional economic priorities that matter to other South-Central Asian countries and their development partners on six successive occasions since 2005 across the region; (ii) RECCA’s inclusive approach to regional cooperation, which aims to harness the talents and resources of the governments, international agencies, scholars, the business community and civil society organizations; and (iii) through private sector exhibitions and steps to engage business leaders in policy dialogue, RECCA has created new opportunities for facilitating private investment and innovative regional public-private-partnerships.

Meanwhile, areas of this periodic forum in urgent need of improvement include: (i) a more serious and sustained commitment to follow-through on regional investment projects and policy priorities agreed to at RECCA forums; (ii) rigorous economic impact analyses for all regional investment projects identified; and (iii) the need for closer collaboration with the Istanbul Process and other regional cooperation platforms, including the South Asian

⁹ Ponzio, R. “In the Afterglow of the London Conference.” *Foreign Policy*, 2014, December 17, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/17/in-the-afterglow-of-the-london-conference/>; and Ponzio, R. “A Regional Economic Approach to Forging Sustainable Peace in Afghanistan.” *The Hague Institute for Global Justice*, 2014, April 11, <http://www.thehagueinstituteforglobaljustice.org/latest-insights/latest-insights/commentary/a-regional-economic-approach-to-forging-sustainable-peace-in-afghanistan/>

Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation program (CAREC), and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

As demonstrated in the RECCA-VI main strategy and stocktaking document, *Towards Regional Economic Growth & Stability: The Silk Road through Afghanistan*, as well as the Chairman's Statement, the Government of Afghanistan is making a concerted effort to address these three fundamental shortcomings.¹⁰ In particular, the Afghan Government's announcement to establish a virtual RECCA Commission to facilitate progress and to conduct Investment Road Shows to market its regional economic cooperation priorities, bodes well for transforming the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan into a results-oriented platform that aggressively cultivates and matches prospective regional and wider international investors with key partners in Afghanistan. However, with continued marked political and security challenges in Afghanistan and South-Central Asia, the full potential of RECCA will only be realized when an appropriate division of responsibilities is worked out between it, the Istanbul Process and other regional cooperation forums involving Afghanistan.

Istanbul Process

Since November 2011, the Istanbul "Heart of Asia" Process has - among fourteen Eurasian countries with another twenty "supporting" countries and regional and international organizations assuming observer status - sought to combine a focus on regional political dialogue, security, and economic cooperation in order to address several of the most pressing threats and challenges facing Afghanistan and its wider region. With the introduction of two confidence-building measures (CBMs) on Trade, Commerce & Investment and Regional Infrastructure in 2012, the Istanbul Process has built directly on progress achieved by the series of RECCA forums since 2005. In fact, the Istanbul Process economic CBMs designed in May 2012 - that were agreed to shortly after the Fifth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA-V), held in March 2012 in Dushanbe - adopted, nearly in full, the fifteen Regional Investment Projects and Policy Priorities introduced at RECCA-V.

Key strengths of the Istanbul Process include: (i) the pursuit of regional cooperation through a comprehensive approach with political, economic, and security elements; (ii) annual Ministerial-level meetings complemented by the periodic meetings of six confidence-building measure working groups, led by countries in the region; and (iii) a concern for, and careful analysis of, the tensions contributing to regional instability. Though not an overt focus of the Heart of Asia, the same factors driving instability across borders tend to preclude progress towards a negotiated peace settlement in Afghanistan.

At the same time, some shortcomings of the Istanbul Process include: (i) the privileging of political and security goals at the expense of far greater investments in regional economic cooperation goals; (ii) limited technical knowledge of regional economic priorities and follow-through to recommendations made in economic CBM working groups, let alone annual Ministerial-level meetings; and (iii) in general, poor coordination and identification of mutually beneficial opportunities with the RECCA forum, as well as other regional cooperation platforms such as SAARC, CAREC, ECO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

¹⁰ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. "Towards Regional Economic Growth & Stability: The Silk Road through Afghanistan." Kabul: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, August 2015, <http://recca.af/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/main-document.pdf>
For the RECCA-VI Chairman's Statement, visit: <http://recca.af/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Chairman-Statement-Combined-Version1.pdf>

Going forward, it is critical to undertake an honest appraisal of the Istanbul Process, both of its positive attributes and limitations. At its core, the Heart of Asia represents an important political forum with the ability to bring major governmental actors around the table to talk through some of the thorniest and most intractable issues causing friction in regional relationships. Skillfully managed, the various configurations of the Istanbul Process can also apply targeted and positive pressure in direct support of efforts to bring reluctant protagonists to the negotiating table and to help incentivize a sustained dialogue towards a negotiated peace in Afghanistan. They could also help to make political reconciliation talks more inclusive in terms of the number of actors and the scope of issues involved which, as argued earlier, has a tendency to result in a more durable and just peace process.

Bridging the Gap: Overcoming Coordination Deficiencies between RECCA and the Istanbul Process

Diplomats with a natural predilection toward political and security goals have tended to dominate Heart of Asia proceedings, often missing out on important connections achieved through a more holistic perspective on regional cooperation. For example, at a senior officials meeting on September 27, 2015 in New York, Heart of Asia member country representatives once again prioritized discussions on illicit narcotics and emerging security threats, including the Islamic State.¹¹ To the extent that economic cooperation was highlighted, it was only to stress the need to go beyond *ad hoc* or bilateral activities. This half-hearted approach to economic issues is worrying and needs to change.

Without a serious investment in the time, analytical skills and public-private partnership building required to advance major regional economic investment opportunities, short-term political and security concerns will continue to sidestep innovative economic initiatives that can genuinely help to unite the region. For instance, by only superficially adopting a comprehensive approach to regional cooperation (with economic, political, and security dimensions jointly pursued), the economic CBM working group meetings of the Istanbul Process reflect, more often than not, discussions around well-meaning aspirational goals rather than hard-nosed economic analysis and genuine problem-solving that is so critical to leveraging both private and public investors. They run the risk of the label “talk shop” diplomatic meetings without meaningful impact, even as time seems to be running out for Afghanistan. Furthermore, despite the significant overlap in the infrastructure and policy priorities identified through the Heart of Asia CBMs and the RECCA priorities, only limited efforts have been made to pursue follow-through in a common and mutually beneficial way that plays to the strengths of both forums.

Cognizant of Afghanistan’s current growth and revenue crisis, the latest RECCA action plan reinforces how the country’s economic future depends on transit, trade and extractives.¹²

¹¹ Summary, “Senior Officials Meeting of the ‘Heart of Asia’-Istanbul Process.” New York, 2015, September 27, http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Summary-of-HoA_IP-SOM-27092015-.pdf

¹² Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. “Towards Regional Economic Growth & Stability: The Silk Road through Afghanistan.” Kabul: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, August 2015, <http://recca.af/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/main-document.pdf>

Except for the illicit opium trade, Afghanistan exports very little (USD \$514 million in 2014) and maintains an enormous trade imbalance (USD \$7.12 billion in 2014). To counter the effects of the country's slowdown in growth to 6.4% in 2014 from 17.2% in 2011, and the progressive devaluation of the Afghani, the action plan privileges near-term transit (including in the energy sector) and private capital opportunities, with trade in extractives and other products to follow, in five-to-ten years, provided sufficient public and private investment is made in the next twelve to thirty-six months.

As argued above, the Heart of Asia forum does not lend itself to serious, technical-level problem-solving essential to unblocking regional economic cooperation bottlenecks in a timely and effective manner.¹³ On this point, its deepened relations and coordination with the RECCA would represent a “win-win”, by maximizing the Istanbul Process' true strengths and redirecting its energies more fully towards its ultimate peacebuilding goal. In short, through its primarily technical-level discussions, backed-up by robust economic analysis and aggressive private sector outreach, the RECCA is poised to deliver for the Heart of Asia forum tangible, cross-border commercial achievements essential for building the confidence and trust necessary in order for Afghanistan and its neighbors to be able to work through long-standing regional and bilateral political and security dilemmas.

With this year's RECCA determined to garner support over the next two years –between now and RECCA VII in 2017 in Turkmenistan – for a select group of viable, financially attractive and much-needed regional investment projects, an opportunity arises to achieve a more genuinely integrated approach to regional cooperation. By finally beginning to place economics on par with political and security goals, “non-traditional security issues” that underpin people's livelihoods and the overall health of a society can aid directly fundamental peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. In particular, the Istanbul Process can benefit from RECCA's latest innovations outlined above, including steps to attract capital through a combination of private investors, Sovereign Wealth Funds and Regional Development Banks. A new division of labor and comparative strengths is emerging, whereby the RECCA and Heart of Asia forums can build important connections and play to each other strengths in the closely inter-related areas of regional economic cooperation, regional stability, and political dialogue.

Toward a Common Approach to Economic Peacebuilding in Afghanistan and South-Central Asia

Around mid-way through Afghanistan's Bonn Process (2001-2005), initial explorations began to be made to end the country's long-standing conflict by bringing the Taliban movement into the political institution-building process, culminating in a new constitution (2004) and presidential and parliamentary elections (2004 and 2005, respectively).¹⁴ A U.S.-facilitated

13 This perspective stems from the author's examination of the Istanbul Process' two confidence-building measure working groups on Trade, Commerce & Investment and Regional Infrastructure since their formation in 2012 and related documents, coupled with interviews and discussions with diplomats and other contributors from the Istanbul Process. See also: Middlebrook, P. “Study of Funding Modalities for Heart of Asia Confidence Building Measures.” December 2013, <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Report-Study-of-Funding-Modalities-for-Heart-of-Asia-Confidence-Building-Measures-December-2013.pdf>

14 See, for example: Ponzio, R. “Democratic Peacebuilding: Aiding Afghanistan and other Fragile States.” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, chapters three and four).

“diplomatic surge”, beginning in early 2011, placed efforts toward a negotiated settlement, for the Afghan government and major actors in the international community, on par in importance alongside the “military and civilian surges” begun in 2009.¹⁵ Though the process has met significant obstacles along the way,¹⁶ the National Unity Government – in particular through the initiative of President Ashraf Ghani – has begun to reinvigorate the idea of formal negotiations with the Taliban through aggressive outreach to a still recalcitrant Pakistan.¹⁷

It is no coincidence that in July 2011, then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, during a speech in Chennai, India, announced American support for a “New Silk Road” initiative that aims to help the Afghan government and business community accelerate cross-border commercial ties and, over time, transform the country into a regional trade and transit hub.¹⁸ From this American perspective – and that of an increasing number of Afghan and international partners – regional economic cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbors is viewed as a fundamental building block for regional stability and improving the conditions for dialogue within the region on some of the most politically intractable and contentious issues. With work toward formal talks between the Afghan Government and Taliban movement currently in limbo, in part due to leadership succession questions following the confirmed death of Taliban leader Mullah Omar, it is time to redouble efforts to establish a more favorable regional climate to get the talks back on track, through a combination of this month’s RECCA-VI forum and the Istanbul Process Ministerial planned for December in Islamabad.

Combining the strengths of both the RECCA and Heart of Asia Ministerial forums, four concrete ways through which the two regional platforms can inject new energy, vision, and practical incentives into the currently stalled discussions toward a formal negotiation on a lasting political settlement are:

- ***Underscore Unifying Issues:*** Opinion leaders and civil society groups, especially from within the region, should remind governments, businesses, and people in Central, South, and Southwest Asia that the issues they have in common – near, medium, and long-term economic interests, a shared history (including along the ancient and *now re-emerging* Silk Roads), and an increasingly shared identity thanks to modern communications and cultural exchanges – are far greater than what divides them; conversely, violence and other tensions in one country adversely affects everyone in the wider region. Though the region’s war and illicit narcotics economies thrive from the continuation of terrorist activities and a breakdown in law and order, a vibrant, legal (and taxable) regional economy has already begun to demonstrate significant returns to growth, jobs and public revenue to Afghanistan and each of its neighbors.

15 Grossman, M. “Seven Cities and Two Years: The Diplomatic Campaign in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 08, Issue 02, Summer 2013: 66-67.

16 For example, throughout 2011, a series of altercations between Pakistan and the U.S. — including the assault on Osama bin Laden’s compound in May 2011 leading to his demise — heightened tensions between the two countries, leading to reduced cooperation by Pakistan in facilitating Afghan negotiations with the Taliban. In the late spring of 2013, progress toward formal Afghan Government-Taliban negotiations suffered another major setback when the Taliban insulted the Afghan government by raising its political flag in a compound in Doha provided by the Qatari government for the purpose of enabling peace negotiations.

17 Yusuf, M. and Smith, S. “Ashraf Ghani’s Pakistan Outreach: Fighting against the Odds.” *United States Institute of Peace Special Report*, July 2015.

18 U.S. Department of State. *U.S. Support for the New Silk Road*. N.d., <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/ci/af/newsilkroad/>

- ***Boost Bilateral Relations:*** Regional governments and international partners should capitalize on the decision to convene the two respective high-level and high-profile forums this year in Kabul and Islamabad to underscore the importance of Afghan-Pakistani relations as the lynchpin to wider regional economic cooperation and fundamental to mitigating regional tensions and addressing the root causes of both countries' unceasing violence. As noted above, Pakistan continues to evince a cool response to renewed Afghan outreach efforts designed to leverage Pakistani pressure to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Cooperation toward convening successful RECCA and Istanbul Process Ministerial Meetings this year will foster greater Afghan-Pakistani interaction at multiple levels of government, serving as building blocks for dialogue on sensitive peace negotiation topics.
- ***Creatively Confront Militancy:*** Offer a “new pull factor” to steer younger generation and would-be Taliban fighters away from violence and other criminal forms of behavior towards new, economically viable livelihood opportunities that benefit themselves, their families and their communities. When high unemployment (combined with high levels of illiteracy and intolerance) in conflict-affected regions crushes the aspirations of Afghan and Pakistani youth, and economic uncertainty prevails among those earning an honest income, the conditions are ripe for the younger generation to fall prey to ruthless Taliban recruiters.
- ***Improve Economic-Political-Security Coordination:*** Demarcate clearly a “division of comparative advantages”, whereby RECCA leads on purely economic and technical discussions (underpinned by rigorous research and continuous dialogue with prospective private investors and sovereign wealth funds) and the Istanbul Process translates the concrete economic incentives, good-will and trust generated from RECCA facilitated cross-border commercial cooperation into tangible political and security-building outcomes for the region.

As noted earlier, the main RECCA-VI strategy document, titled “Towards Regional Economic Growth & Stability: The Silk Road through Afghanistan”, has presented a compelling economic overview of current trends and challenges, as well as identifying a select group of realistic investment priorities and reforms. These strong analytical underpinnings - that include an assessment of progress since the last RECCA meeting in 2012 in Dushanbe and a roadmap for future regional economic cooperation - should be fully utilized to prepare the upcoming meetings of the Istanbul Process CBMs on Trade, Commerce & Investment and Regional Infrastructure

Coupled with the Afghan Government's newly proposed RECCA implementation support modalities (including, for example, (i) an Investment Road Show, (ii) a Virtual Commission supported by a user-friendly web-portal to provide timely updates on projects, assessments, and feasibility studies to key regional development partners, and (iii) a National RECCA Board to engage government, business groups and civil society in follow-through), the opportunities multiply for mutually beneficial links between RECCA and the Istanbul Process. Ideally, some of the visits to regional capitals as part of the Investment Road Show, perhaps in the Gulf States¹⁹ or maybe India and Kazakhstan, can take place in the months leading up to this December's Heart of Asia Ministerial in Islamabad, in order to demonstrate real progress and determination following this week's gathering here in Kabul.

¹⁹ At the RECCA-VI forum, Qatar announced its willingness to host the inaugural Investment Road Show.

Beyond the Istanbul Process links, it will be important that connections are strengthened for the upcoming CAREC Ministerial meeting later this month in Ulaanbaatar, a Silk Road regional economic cooperation conference planned for October in Georgia and the regular meetings of other regional forums, such as SAARC, ECO, and the SCO.

Conclusion: Economic Cooperation as a Key to Durable Peace in Afghanistan and South-Central Asia

Though far from being silver bullet solutions, these steps, taken together with an unwavering commitment from the region's leaders, can help to create a new political dynamic for dialogue among Afghanistan and its neighbors on a range of contentious economic, political and even security issues. They seek to invest greater resources and leadership in Afghanistan's unfinished economic transition, thereby ensuring greater parity with the country's earlier security and political transitions. Alongside the preceding analysis, they also seek to contribute a sober assessment of the strengths and limitations of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan and Istanbul "Heart of Asia" Process forums, with the aim of forging a more rational, effective and cost-conscious system of mutually reinforcing regional cooperation platforms in South-Central Asia and the wider region.

Furthermore, the above recommendations offer new opportunities to improve conditions for bringing the Taliban back to the negotiating table following the confusion that stems from the recent confirmation of the death of their leader Mullah Omar. With the potential to induce the Pakistani leadership to cooperate more to advance a growing number of common interests with Afghanistan on the one hand, and the threat of the Islamic State making inroads amongst a militant hardcore within the Taliban movement on the other, the decisions made in the coming four months to bind Afghanistan and its region's future for the coming forty years and beyond may prove decisive in averting yet more bloodshed and untold sorrow for a resilient people who have much to offer to their neighbors and the wider world.

There were several limitations within the research design. First, a longitudinal design would have been more appropriate, particularly due to the change to what was being measuring in the dependent variable – the process's impact on fear. Though such a design cannot establish absolute causality, it would allow for fear to be measured before and after the legal process occurs. Second, because the research was conducted within the framework of a larger project examining victim experiences with justice, focusing primarily on the quality of legal processes and outcomes, only a single-item measure was used to understand fear. Third, the limited sample size, due to the type of study, made it difficult to include a large number of independent variables within the analysis. It would have been interesting to control for other variables related to procedural and outcome justice, such as the accuracy of proceedings, past experiences with the formal or informal justice systems, or the offender being kept in a safe room during proceedings.

Even despite the limitations outlined above, the findings of this research are an important first step towards better understanding the role that legal processes can potentially play in humanitarian settings. Refugees generally have particularly strong exposure to violence, crime, and injustice – leading to pronounced fear in many refugee populations. For this reason, efforts to understand what processes can play a role in reducing and alleviating this fear are particularly important in refugee settings. The results of this research are a first step,

and provide initial findings that can be further researched. By conducting more focused studies, it will become possible to identify which mechanisms more specifically, within justice procedures, can help mitigate or reduce fear among victims of crime. Among the Bhutanese, for instance, it would be worthwhile to investigate which elements of legal procedures help increase victims' voice towards offender and decision-makers, and which elements contribute to healing the relationship between the two parties to a conflict.

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