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The "International Community" – Rhetoric or Reality?

Tracing a seemingly well-known apparition

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Abstract: The term "International Community" is commonly understood to refer either to the norms of international policy or to a coalition of concerned actors. However, in this article, we argue that it is the interplay of the term's image and the practice of its invocation that shapes its character. It can be used by many different groups, state and non-state alike, to locate their political goals in the context of a wider array of values. Usually these norms are state-related and can be used to simulate political relevance. Conversely, actors defying widely accepted values can be excluded and policies against them legitimized. Addressing domestic as well as international audiences, the claim to be acting as or on behalf of the "International Community" is mostly rhetorical but has very real political consequences.

Keywords: Internationale Gemeinschaft, Staatlichkeit, nichtstaatliche internationale Akteure, Legitimation, politische Normen, International community, statehood, non-state international actors, legitimization, political norms

1. Introduction

Of the (scarce) literature on the "international community", a 2002 issue of Foreign Policy offers a broad impression of the concept's complexity. Nine thinkers, policymakers, journalists and activists were asked about what the term constituted for them. Some authors identified the "international community" as "essentially, the United States and Europe" (Gowers 2002: 33), or as "the United States joined by some allies and clients" (Chomsky 2002: 34). Others excoriated it as "the false community composed of an inchoate global majority and organized ruling elites" (Bello 2002: 41), or dismissed the term as being "for the naïve", since "[i]ts diffusion of responsibility excuses countries that have no intention of lending a hand" (Wedgwood 2002: 44). Yet others viewed the "international community" as a body of globalized moral ideas that "can shape institutions and inform policy choices" (Hehir 2002: 38) and are enshrined in (international) law, institutions, and civil society, which together with states bear responsibil-

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ity for upholding these values (Annan 2002). For some, "the United Nations – the most universal international organization with 190 member states – is the closest embodiment of the international community" (Ogata 2002: 39), while for others, transnational civil society is the most promising locus of a "new community in the making [that] comprises many communities tied by common interests and values, but its social expression is inflected by different histories and cultures" (Bello 2002: 41). As such, the "international community" not only comprises state actors and international organizations, but a wide range of transnational societal actors including international NGOs, social movements, and religious authorities. These views share the institutionalist idea that states and their societies are increasingly interdependent and that today's problems need concerted action. In his "Doctrine of the International Community" Tony Blair (1999) outlined "that today more than ever before, we are mutually dependent, that national interest is to a significant extent governed by international collaboration and that we need a clear and coherent debate as to the direction this doctrine takes us in each field of international endeavour."

The perceptions and usages of the term "international community" fit two broad categories: Normatively, the "international community" represents "some form of moral collectivity of humankind which exists as an ethical referent if not organized in any way" (Buzan/Gonzalez-Pelaez 2005: 32). As a moral marker, it bears the idea of universal values that are (or should be) shared by a majority of actors, and of an imperative of solidarity among states or even among all human beings (Kovach 2003; May 2007). International institutions, especially international law, organizations – above all the UN – and regimes in various policy fields, such as environmental protection, disarmament, or human rights, are seen as precursors and foundations of a collective encompassing all states and, ultimately, their citizens. Yet, power relations, domination and dependency are analytically largely missing.

Descriptively, the "international community" is a particularistic term "usually referring to the West, or more broadly to a set of liberal democratic states, although with overtones that this group somehow speaks (and sometimes acts) for humankind as a whole" (Buzan/Gonzalez-Pelaez 2005: 32). This notion captures power asymmetries and points to corresponding functions of the idea of "international community" neglecting universalistic goals. Yet, highlighting realist concepts such as power and interests disregards ideational factors that influence the "international community's" discursive and practical construction. This includes internal and external expectations, public opinion and control, the (self-)binding effects of international agreements, as well as social mechanisms of guilt, shame and honour (e.g. Lebow 2006; Schlichte/Veit 2007: 11-17).

Escaping these categories' seeming antagonism, we claim that analytically, both approaches fall short of fully capturing the essence of the "international community". A concept of "international community" needs to account for different aspects of the phenomenon and offer analytical tools able to capture their implications for rhetoric and reality, instead of adding more layers to the discussion. Accordingly, we elaborate on the idea of the "international community" and its inherent aspects, and conclude with an overview of the contributions to this guest-edited issue, all of which have been subject to two double-blind reviews.

2. Capturing the "international community"

Aware of the term's diverse facets encompassing discourses as well as practices, we construe the "international community" as both a specific, but not *a priori* determined actor group, and a rhetorical device. It can be invoked by a range of actors from the local to the international level and for different purposes; its practical relevance derives from interests and ideas.

As an actor group, the "international community" is composed in relation to the policy issue concerned. Actors share values and norms or simply define political problems as concerning. They become involved in designing policy to tackle an issue that is framed as a matter of common interest or international importance. The "international community" is only called upon in specific situations, which tend to be compared to similar events and to be classified insinuating a certain set of reactions commonly accepted as appropriate. This can include labelling and demarcating actors as deviant. Hence, instead of being an all-encompassing description of international politics' constituents, the "international community" helps to construct in-group/out-group relations and may be an exclusive concept.

As a practical and rhetorical device, the "international community" can be invoked by different actors and for different purposes. Actors include state and non-state agents as well as heterogeneous stakeholders straddling the contested field of in-group/out-group dichotomies. They can make use of the image of and ideas attached to the "international community", as well as of tensions arising between image and practices. A common purpose of invoking the "international community" is the legitimization of domestic and international politics.

2.1 The dynamic composition and normative foundation of the "international community"

In its most general sense, the "international community" is a discursively formed group of agents who interact in the international political realm. Its constituent parts can be specified with regard to a specific policy issue or political situation. It is simultaneously unspecific, however, in that the composition, normative foundations and functions of the "international community" can differ from case to case and may change dynamically over time. Its collective political action in the international realm is at least partly codified in the UN system and international law. Yet, also political actions outside this system – like military interventions that are not authorised by the UN Security Council – can be discursively framed as politics by and/or in the name of the "international community". Especially when large-scale emergencies occur – be it natural disasters, gross human rights abuses or genocide – the "inter-

national community" is supposed to be responsible for an adequate response.[1]

As the implied set of "universal norms" is not necessarily agreed to by all, the concept is often used to construct them in the first place. In this context, political action is portrayed to be taken on behalf of a general will. This idea bears a notion of Rousseau's "volonté générale", which presupposes both the constituents' intention to *be* a community and their common will to *solve* political problems. The idea of a general will portrays the "international community" as unitary problem-solving agency, although the actors involved may be voluntary contributors or obliged to act due to security, economic, social or environmental concerns (cf. Ellis 2009). Hence, in reality, it is not as will-based and inclusive as it appears. The application of the concept nevertheless serves as a legitimization device for political action, disguising a lack of actual mechanisms to establish a common will; outside the proceedings of regular UN bodies, the "international community" acts on an emergency basis, rather than according to pre-prepared scripts of crisis management.

These practices show that the term is historic. As a value system, "international community" cannot claim universal validity. While from the early 17th century the idea of a community of states guided philosophical reasoning about international law, only after 1945 has it found its way into material law (Tomuschat 1995). Following the Cold War, liberalization of world politics intensified, in turn shaping normative perspectives. Unless one subscribes to the view of an "End of History" (Fukuyama), this value system might itself be transformed over time. Such changes may take place fast, triggered by force (e.g. terrorism) or systemic collapse, for example of the world economical structures. Usually, however, norms mutate gradually by different readings of law, by changes in its application or by emergent challenges calling for regulation (e.g. bird flu).

These regulations, in turn, reshape the views of the actors and their role in the "international community". As "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) shows, the sovereignty of states may be weakened as a binding norm when state functions gain importance for the definition of statehood. R2P legitimizes international interventions in states that fail to adhere to their protective duties towards their population. This transforms the norm of sovereignty, which has been a constitutive element of international relations for the last centuries. However, this transformation does not include all states, but rather reflects power relations. Also, as of yet, it can hardly be described as firmly codified. While the guiding image of international relations as being exclusively comprised of states has always overlooked societal factors, gradually the inviolability of sovereignty loses relevance even in legal terms.

2.2 The "international community" as a legitimization device

While reference to and formation of norms constitute the "international community", they also serve to explain, justify and legitimize its political action. Much of these norms correlate with international law. All states have access to the UN General Assembly's Sixth Committee and other UN agencies,[2] which consider legal questions and help to prepare conventions. Also, resolutions of the UN Security Council (SC) – especially if they declare a certain behaviour as illegal – can have quasi-judicial impact since they define legal terms and hence predetermine further perceptions of (il)legality (Samuels 2007: 61-70). Smaller states' little diplomatic capacity limits their chances of establishing norms, while politically more integrated states can instigate support. Therefore, UN regulations often reflect their views.

In addition, international/globalized media, as well as transnational societal actors play an important role in shaping political perceptions and triggering action. Until the ages of internet communications and influential non-Western media outlets such as *Al Jazeera*, public discussions were mainly led by Western media corporations, and the norms represented as the "international community's" could well be regarded as "Western-turned-global" values. Since access to electronic media has become prevalent in most parts of the world, web logs ("blogs"), independent media, information platforms of advocacy groups and activists as well as influential think tanks, such as the *International Crisis Group*, increasingly influence political agenda-setting.

The actors constituting the "international community" interact to frame their perceptions of reality to formulate policy (Goffman 1974). As such, the term "international community" can apply urgency to a matter - which it may lose over time. The security policy importance following the 9/11 attacks is a case in point; the Taliban were condemned for their support of terrorism, and the "international community" supported their removal from power in Afghanistan by military means. The invocation of the term "international community" assigns a distinct phenomenon with relevance to all, keeping potential free-riders at bay: if an issue concerns all, individual actors cannot stay out of the political process without sidelining themselves. However, in practice, the actual commitment to political measures often differs widely within the "international community" and is subject to disputes over what states or organizations ought to contribute – as vividly observable in the intricate bargaining processes regarding the international climate regime.

Finally, the concept allows keeping issues off the international agenda. While Afghanistan is a matter of the "international community", Chechnya was (and is) not; while global warming and its consequences are, the depletion of water and fertile soil are not. While piracy was not until recently, the "international community" has now sent warships to the Horn of Africa; after having been successfully "securitized" (Wæver 1995),

1 Searching Google for quotations using the phrase "the international community needs to act", results in over 2.100 documents of this wording. A brief review of these sources suggests an overwhelming use in the context of peace and security, mainly in the face of humanitarian crises such as refugee movements, starvation, diseases or human rights violations caused by internal wars, government abuses, or natural disasters.

2 E.g. the International Court of Justice, the UN Commission on International Trade Law or the International Law Commission.

piracy will be on the "international community's" priority list for a while. Bringing a problem into the public sphere and depicting it in a way that stresses its meaning to state, corporate or cultural interests, and connecting it to the "international community's" obligation to take action adds to the legitimization, which might be lacking otherwise. In a particular historic moment a group can thus make use of the term to enhance the validity of its own concerns (Kühn 2008).

2.3 The construction of exclusivity and its limits

International codified and customary law as a set of norms and values allows identifying and denouncing deviant behaviour. Although "international community" is an inclusive term, such labelling can demarcate outsiders and underscore the general validity of norms by demarcating aberrations. Also, it strengthens the "we"-feeling of those within the group. This is in line with the English School's idea of international society, which "exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules" (Bull 1977: 13). To be conscious of these rules (the 'statics' of international order, 1977: 19) means to acknowledge the virulence of "war and struggle for power among states, [...] transnational solidarity and conflict, cutting across the divisions among states, and [...] cooperation and regulated intercourse among states" (Bull 1977: 41). At the same time, it permits to locate where behaviour runs counter to basic assumptions about the rules, in turn reinforcing them.

However, "international community" transcends the ideas of international society in important ways. The English School's main focus rests on states' (conscious) behaviour in the international system. As the state system originates from historical developments in Europe, most of its basic values – such as sovereignty, territoriality, or secularism – are those of the European nation-state. To ascribe them global validity means to assume that "imposed values represent a strong society" (Buzan 1991: 167). Likewise, diverse and dynamic political challenges forbid the presupposition of rules, which states can know to exist and readily apply (Daase/Feske/Peters 2002: 268). Transnational relations are shaped by constructions of reality that can hardly be described as originating exclusively from states.

In the "international community", state and non-state ideas compete. On the state's level, perceived inequalities become the focal point of value discussions. The question of whether or not states may possess nuclear weapons is a case in point. Even G8 governments need to enhance the legitimacy of their policy against Iran's nuclear ambitions with a plea to the "international community" to act "as a united front on the basis of a mutually agreed position", as they did at the 2007 Heiligendamm summit (G8 2007). On the other hand, societal actors sometimes denounce the European form of statehood *per se*, for example on religious grounds. The Islamist's notion of an all-encompassing "Ummah" (Islamic Nation) transcends state borders in this regard (Roy 2004: 97-99). Ideational conflicts put the legitimacy of stigmatizing actors as outsiders to a test. Therefore, the idea of "international community", while being aware of the Western origin of most of its norms, must be able to capture competition and sometimes antagonism of values.

Legitimacy, hence, seems to be crucially important if individual states are to be successfully labelled as outside the community. Referring to standards within the community, political pressure can be exerted against those who fail to comply — beyond a Kantian notion of a *foedus pacificum* (League of Peace) of liberal democracies acting against outsiders in self-defence only (Giesen 2004). This leads to a paradoxical situation in which actors are morally excluded from the community while legally and structurally still being part of it. Even though being framed as out-group actors, deviators like "rogue states" remain part of the international system because excluding them from a value-based in-group does not deprive them of basic qualities like statehood or sovereignty (see Beck/Gerschewski in this volume). The "politics of inclusive exclusion" opens up a variety of possible reactions. For example, opposition groups can present themselves as part of a global norms community in order to advance their political stance, including calls for sanctions; the African National Congress (ANC) claimed "[b]etter to suffer the hardships of sanctions [...] than the brutalities of racial repression" (Cortright/Lopez 2002: 96). This shows how blurred the internal-external distinction can be: the global interrelation of world society which encompasses all states and societies simultaneously counteracts the constructed exclusion (Jung 2001).

The tension arising from the inconsistency between politics of exclusion and underlying inclusive structures creates leeway for navigating in and taking advantage of this complexity. A variety of actors, with mixed sets of ideas and interests, can make use of the concept of the "international community", transforming it case by case into quite a practical set of political actions.

2.4 Invoking the "international community" – and its intricate effects

Legitimizing and/or pursuing specific policies by invoking the "international community" is open to actors on both sides of the in-group/out-group distinction. Hence, it is the intricate, not always intended ways in which its image and reality can take effect that have to be at the centre of analysis.

Two main audiences of "international community"-related actions can be distinguished. One is the global public, that is the "international community" itself. Political actors, often governments, but also societal actors pursuing specific goals, may strive for international resources – ideational (e.g. recognition, legitimacy) as well as material (e.g. investments, donor aid). Signing on to regimes and treaties to present oneself as equal is common practice among newly emerging states (see Forster Rothbart in this volume). Subscription to environmental protection, human rights, disarmament and other regimes intents to show a state's dedication to participate in the "grown up"-field of international affairs. The Bosnian central government, for example, regards the participation in international interventions as a means to demonstrate the country's maturity to move on from being an international protectorate. Although

this contribution is militarily negligible, the political action is highly symbolical (Bliesemann de Guevara 2009).

A second audience is the domestic one. In this regard, invoking the "international community" may serve local state and non-state actors to generate support for internal political power struggles. In June 2008, for example, Zimbabwean opposition leader, Tsvangirai called for intervention to support the quest to oust President Mugabe's authoritarian rule (Geoghegan 2008). Likewise, civil society groups in Western states may refer to the "international community". For example, American activists press for the USA to join the International Criminal Court's Rome statute to allow it to support the prosecution of crimes against humanity by Sudanese officials. The activists point out that the USA has no legislation to pursue perpetrators itself – lagging behind the "international community's" legal standards (Lesser 2008).

The "international community's" role in domestic struggles can be real, as in the examples above, but it may also take forms of simulation. Groups at a sub-state level striving for territorial secession use a range of techniques to gain or simply simulate international support. Local groups voice interests to a broader audience using modern communication, as in the internet campaigns by Burmese activists or supporters of the Zapatistas movement in Chiapas/Mexico. In Transdniestria, creating façade organizations, false websites and reports served the political leadership of the secessionist Moldovan region to legitimize its state-building project vis-à-vis its constituency (see Isachenko in this volume).

Western states may point to a diffuse "international community" to dilute responsibility and back off from action. In international interventions, single states tend to deflect responsibility by citing the greater political weight of multilateral engagement. Security Sector Reform in Afghanistan is a case in point; lead nations have either abandoned or handed over to other actors their failed reform efforts (see Gross in this volume). Denoted "rogue states" can profit from the fact that the "international community" is not an all-encompassing category, but a specific group of states sharing some beliefs, yet following divergent interests and priorities. Factors such as energy demand and economic interests may undermine the efforts of the "international community", as with Iran where Russia and China hesitated to enforce policy against the country's nuclear ambitions (see Beck/Gerschewski in this volume).

Finally, institutional interests may guide actors to position themselves in the contested fields of in- and out-group definitions. Implementation bodies such as environmental regimes' secretariats may strive to get more states to sign the regimes' contractual agreements, to fulfil their mandates and justify their existence (see Forster Rothbart in this volume). The institutional self-interests of organizations find their satisfaction in, but also contribute to, the ambivalence between image and practice of the "international community".

3. Author's contributions

The dichotomy between rhetoric and reality is misleading. Also, the paradigmatic debate between normative-universalist and empirical-particularistic approaches fails to capture the issue's complexity. The "international community" is *both* rhetoric and reality, and it is the interplay between practical politics and its discursive construction, including the different meanings assigned to it by actors, upon which one needs to focus. Approaching it from different angles, the articles shed light upon different aspects of the concept of the "international community".

Eva Gross examines the changing images and actors of the "international community" in the context of intervention and statebuilding in Afghanistan. The construction of an "international community" of interveners concentrated, at first, on the ideal of a broad alliance of Western and non-Western states; the UN was supposed to take a leading and coordinating role. However, increasing political fragmentation and a deteriorating security situation soon reshaped the image, now meaning the political and military commitment of Western states and organizations, namely EU and NATO. This stronger emphasis on the West undermined the image of the "international community" and confronted the Western actors with growing legitimization problems. Concerns about an emerging anti-Western counter-narrative and about the regional impact of the intervention have recently led to attempts to actively broaden the "international community" again by including regional actors such as Pakistan, Iran and India. Yet, as *Gross* observes, tensions among regional players and a lack of Western actors' willingness to adopt inclusive concepts based on consensus among local, regional and international ideas indicate that simply redefining the "international community" will not resolve its inherent normative and practical contradictions.

Martin Beck and *Johannes Gerschewski* describe the paradoxical situation that "rogue states" are "simultaneously part of the international community and excluded from it: their statehood makes them part of the Westphalian system from which they are banned at the same time." Firstly, they scrutinize what leads to the labelling of states as "rogues", namely authoritarianism on the internal level and/or pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. On the surface, these criteria seem to be clear and easily discernible, yet they have not only been used interchangeably, but also inconsistently. Furthermore, while intended to legitimize political action, discursively excluding a state from the "international community" has self-entrapping implications for its members, as it impedes engagement of the "rogue". Secondly, the authors reflect upon "rogue states'" room for manoeuvre under international sanctions. Political leeway mainly arises from the paradox between political exclusion and structural inclusion. *Beck* and *Gerschewski* point to inconsistencies of the "international community" from which a "rogue regime" may profit, as ongoing multipolarization of the international system renders the making of an inclusive "international community", encompassing powerful states such as China, Russia, or India increasingly difficult. Furthermore, normative inconsistencies of the "international community", for example double standards of non-interference, provide "rogues" with arguments against the sanctioning states. Additionally, "rogues" profit internally from their strength vis-à-vis their society, which derives partly from structural inclusion in the world economy: states financing rule by economic or political rents

enjoy a high degree of independence from societal demands and are therefore usually resistant despite coercive measures by the "international community".

Amy Forster Rothbart concentrates on post-Soviet states' membership in international environmental regimes, focussing on their ambitions to become part of and accepted by a wider "international community". She distinguishes three notions of the term: Firstly, in environmental politics there is not one single "international community" but many overlapping ones. Divisions and competence between different members – e.g. the EU and the USA, developed and developing countries, or diverse environmental institutions – sometimes allowed post-Soviet states to negotiate membership conditions. Secondly, the term refers to an image that new states' leaders have of an in-group of sovereign states implying certain rights and privileges. Rushing to sign on to environmental treaties followed the observation that full-fledged participation in the international system exceeds formal recognition; to become substantially "equal" and "accepted", participation in international regulation seemed crucial. Meeting international expectations regarding democratization by using the treaties as a form of "democracy by association" (instead of domestic institutional reforms), and a wish to present themselves as "rule of law states" and "good global citizens" not least aimed to attract foreign support and investments. While contributing to environmental protection was at most partly intended, the agreements triggered transformation in the post-Soviet states as treaties had to be implemented. This is the third role the "international community" plays: international agencies work "on the ground" with state and civil society actors, assisting implementation processes and fostering domestic demand for environmental policies.

Daria Isachenko elaborates on rhetoric and reality from the bottom-up perspective of the Moldovan secessionist republic of Transdniestria. She demonstrates how the image of the "international community" can be manipulated by local elites in internal power struggles. She distinguishes two notions: Firstly, the concept is used to legitimize political elites' statebuilding project vis-à-vis their constituency and to discipline internal opposition. Creating websites, for instance, helps to simulate international support for Transdniestrian statehood, while construction of negative images of the "international community" triggered a "rally-around-the-flag effect" known from sanctioned countries (cf. Beck/Gerschewski in this volume). Secondly, the concept of "international community" provides orientation as structural and political context for local power struggles. The simulation of politics in Transdniestria – e.g. creation of "civil society" groups to demonstrate democratic culture – serves to align with international values. In this sense, the illusion of democracy created by Transdniestria's political leaders hardly expresses their own ideas but reflects the dominant (liberal) values of the "international community" itself.

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Reconstructing Afghanistan:

Is the 'West' eclipsing the 'International Community'?

Eva Gross*

Abstract: This article considers the role of the 'international community' in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Although the UN has a coordinating and legitimizing role, the 'international community' has turned out to be fragmented, and the countries determining policy have predominantly been Western. Current efforts to include regional contributions do not necessarily reflect a more inclusive notion of 'the international community'. Rather than re-investing in the notion of the international community to reach a local, regional as well as international consensus, current thinking on Afghanistan tends to highlight fragmentation of what was initially framed as a task for the international community.

Keywords: Afghanistan, international community, NATO, UN, the West, Afghanistan, Internationale Gemeinschaft, NATO, UN, der Westen

1. Introduction

After the fall of the Taliban, brought about in response to the attacks on 11 September 2001, the task of reconstructing Afghanistan was placed under UN auspices both to lend legitimacy to international efforts and to coordinate economic and political measures on the part of the various international actors involved. Present at the creation of policies towards Afghanistan, however, were two factors that facilitated international fragmentation rather than a coherent and comprehensive approach. The first was the changing nature of international coalitions: the US, rather than calling on NATO for support in its fight against the Taliban through Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), relied on ad-hoc coalitions of the willing, which put into question the role and purpose of military alliances in the post-11 September era. The second was the emphasis – under the penmanship of Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN's Secretary General Special Representative – on a 'light footprint' approach that emphasized Afghan involvement in setting policy priorities (House of Commons 2003). These two factors led to a severely fragmented international environment in which reconstruction efforts have taken place to date. In light of the deteriorating security situation, the predominant discourse on Afghanistan has focused on military and political commitments among Western actors – the US and its allies, NATO, but increasingly also the EU – rather than a concern with engaging the 'international community'. These actors, which for the purpose of this article will be referred to as 'the West', therefore, have eclipsed 'the international community' in discourses over how to 'fix' Afghanistan.

This article reviews changing images of the international community in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and shows that the challenge faced by NATO and other Western governments and institutions has not just led to efforts at increasing coordination but also to discussions over the potential contribution of regional actors. The article discusses this potential contribution but concludes that the formulation of a regional strategy is hampered by the heterogeneity of political and security concerns in Afghanistan's neighborhood and the lack of an overarching political strategy towards Afghanistan on the part of Western actors. It also concludes that the current discourse of a regional approach coupled with a renewed emphasis on the UN in coordinating international efforts have brought debates over engagement in Afghanistan full circle. In light of a continued Western lead in both military and ideational terms,

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