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The arc of crisis from Iraq to Pakistan presents a geographical continuity. It is however very heterogeneous ethnically, culturally, religiously and politically. There are international and transnational links between the four countries included in that arc of crisis but it would be too ambitious to comprehend this zone as one entity needing a “global settlement”.

Common features exist between Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan: they have to face fundamental issues such as the fragility of national identity compared to tribal and sectarian identities; except for Iran, they lack strong political and social institutions; they suffer from a high level of corruption; they have to deal with severe economic problems and glaring economic disparities. Finally, they have all been confronted – to various degrees – to the consequences of the American-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The strategic situation in those four countries is not the same. Two states – namely Afghanistan and Iraq – are struck by a full-scale insurgency. The situation has tended to improve in Iraq since the beginning of the “surge” but it remains highly unstable. In Afghanistan, the opposite trend can be observed as insurgent attacks have dramatically increased since 2005. Pakistan is frequently targeted by terrorist attacks and some argue, following Bruce Hoffman, that the tribal areas located on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan are Al Qaeda’s new sanctuary. The Pakistani situation could evolve towards a real insurgency, which would be particularly alarming considering Pakistan’s possession of nuclear warheads. Iran is for the moment pretty stable but the willingness of the current government to develop its own nuclear facilities is considered as a serious threat by the US and Israel.

A crisis is, by definition, the moment when the balance of power tends to shift. The arc of crisis from Iraq to Pakistan is indeed a zone where regional and international powers try to gain influence. Current geopolitical struggles in the region are not so much about borders or military might as such, but rather over the *frontiers of domination*. For instance, the US, Iran and Saudi Arabia are competing for influence in and over Iraq. Struggles over the *frontiers of domination* can also be witnessed in Afghanistan and in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

What is to be done in order to solve or at least contain the problems in this arc of crisis? Four priorities and one principle for action can be put forward:

- Understanding the potential and real dangers implied by sectarian strives in the whole region. The Sunni – Shi’a divide that has been so murderous in Iraq could well spread to other countries. In Northern Pakistan, for instance, attacks of Shi’as by Sunnis have been recently reported. In Iraq, the Sunnis have to be convinced that a return to the past is not possible. Not only are the Shi’as more numerous than the Sunnis but even the non-Arab populations – namely Kurds, Turkmen and Assyrians – represent at least a quarter of the Iraqi population.
- Trying to find international fuel-cycle solutions. Countries that signed the NPT should be supplied in nuclear fuel for civilian use if they can offer all the guarantees that they will not engage in a military nuclear program. Several ideas have been on the table: international fuel banks, multinational consortia, international enrichment-, fuel production and reprocessing-centers under IAEA control, and others. It is urgent to study more precisely the feasibility of such models that could provide a solution to the Iranian nuclear case.
- It is high time to start setting up a regional security structure for the Persian Gulf region. The model for such a structure cannot be the OSCE. It would rather be something like the Balkan stability pact. This loose organization would deal with topics such as confidence-building measures, maritime security, drug and arm traffic, trade, environment, etc. The Iraq-Neighbors-Conference (that is to say Iraq, its direct neighbors, Egypt, Bahrain, the permanent members of UN Security Council and the G8 countries) could offer a good basis to start building such a structure.

- It is crucial to stabilize Afghanistan. The Western objectives should not be too high. Afghanistan cannot become a peaceful democracy in a few years. This is to be a very long process. Stabilization is only the first step and will already take many years. Stabilizing Afghanistan is decisive for the future of Pakistan and of Central Asia. The solution cannot only be military. As David Galula – a French officer during the French war in Algeria – used to say, counter-insurgency is 20% military and 80% political.

- To conclude, it is worth insisting on a principle for action: the arc of crisis from Iraq to Pakistan cannot be stabilized without the involvement of regional powers. The evolution of Iraq partly depends on Iran's attitude. The same is true for Pakistan regarding the evolution of the situation in Afghanistan. What's more, countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and even smaller actors like Qatar can make a difference. Western countries must avoid two extreme attitudes: a complete disengagement and the sin of pride. In other words, they must understand that they cannot fix all the problems of this zone even if they created some of them. The solution relies on an integrated approach that would include the local populations, the regional actors and the international institutions.