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Regional Security

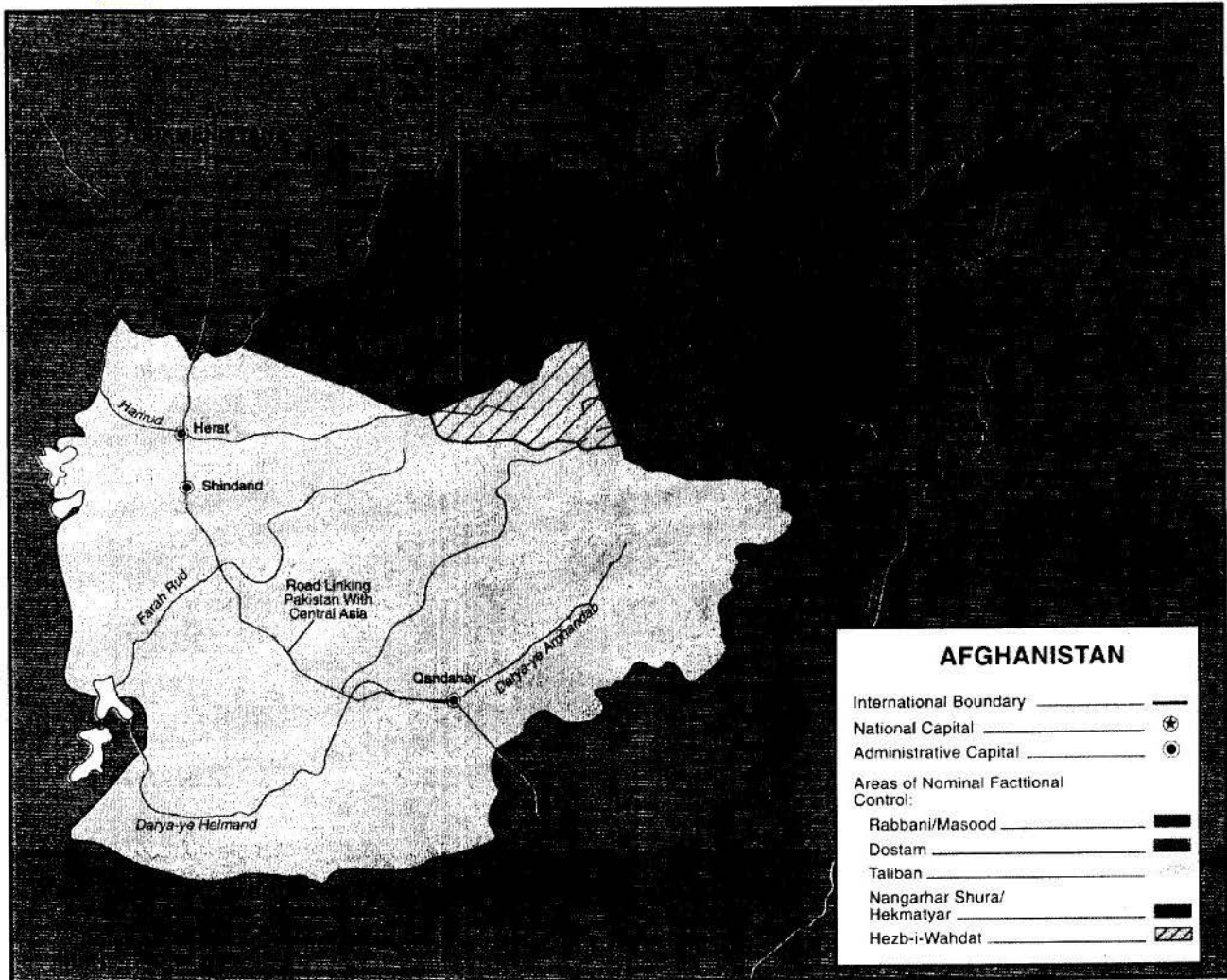
*Regional Conflicts,
Terrorism, Military-
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Afghanistan: Taliban Eyeing Herat

(C) The 5 September capture of the strategic western city of Herat by the ultra-fundamentalist Taliban militia was a serious, but probably not fatal, blow to interim president Rabbani. Opposition leaders are having difficulty forging a meaningful alliance with the Taliban, and these forces probably still lack the organization or strength to seize Kabul.

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Hardware Seized by the Taliban

The Taliban captured a sizable amount of heavy equipment when they occupied Herat, including at least 125 tanks, 98 artillery pieces, and 25 APCs. They also captured 34 fighter aircraft, 19 helicopters, and 13 air transports at 2 airfields, but only about half of these aircraft are believed operational. The Taliban have since moved eight of these aircraft — two FISHBEDs and six helicopters — to their base at Qandahar.

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Comment

(C) The loss of Herat will not lead to the downfall of Rabbani and Masood, his military commander. Masood still controls most of the military hardware in Afghanistan, and he continues to achieve tactical victories over the forces of Dostam, Hekmatyar, and the Shia Hezb-i-Wahdat. The Taliban still have not shown any military prowess, having captured most of their territory without a fight. Both times the militia encountered a well-organized army—in Kabul last March and in the west last June—it was defeated quickly. Taliban leaders probably are reluctant to repeat their mistakes.

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“The struggle for Herat...underscores the Pakistani-Iranian rivalry in the region.”

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On to Kabul?

Masood has Kabul well defended with mines, wire obstacles, and defense-in-depth. The Taliban realize they cannot seize the capital by force without the aid of other factions, and they are resisting the calls of other opposition figures to do so. The factions' distrust of each other, plus Masood's armed strength, makes a military takeover of the capital unlikely anytime soon. Another opposition option is to establish at least a partial blockade of the capital, in the hope of demoralizing Rabbani's supporters and Masood's troops. The opposition may not be prepared to institute a blockade, however, especially considering the humanitarian problems such an action could cause just as the United Nations is starting another reconciliation attempt.

(C) The Rabbani government has been quick to blame Pakistan for the loss of Herat. Much evidence links Islamabad with the Taliban. Opening the road from Qandahar to Herat serves Pakistan's interests, and the movement of Pakistani convoys along the road in coming weeks may be another sign of the degree of cooperation. Conversely, Iran probably prefers keeping the trade route closed and the Taliban at a distance, hence Tehran's active support of Ismael Khan in recent months. The struggle for Herat therefore underscores the Pakistani-Iranian rivalry in the region.

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Non-Responsive

"[M]ost counterdrug initiatives are stalled in Congress because of the drug scandal."