



Future of Pakistan up in the Air: Interview with Bruce Riedel

by Octavian Manea

In early 2009 you were pivotal in directing and elaborating the basic strategic framework that it is still at the core of the current operations. How would you assess the progress in destroying AQ sanctuaries in the AfPak region since then? Did ISAF break the Afghan Taliban's momentum?

The death of Usama bin Laden is a major success for the American strategy as is the pressure the al Qaeda core is under from the drone program. Both those operations required bases in Afghanistan. The surge forces have also broken the Taliban's momentum in southern Afghanistan and prevented a catastrophic collapse of Afghan authority there. The progress we made is still fragile and reversible which suggests that a significant and rapid drawdown of the NATO forces in Afghanistan would be very dangerous and foolish at this point.

In early 2009 the "Riedel Review" called for the need of the Pakistani government to shut down the AQ and Taliban safe havens on its territory. Since then we have seen an impressive COIN campaign to clear some of the territories controlled by the militant insurgency. How would you assess the ability of the formal Pakistani state in securing the support—or at least the acquiescence—of the local population inside FATA?

The Pakistani counterinsurgency effort has developed considerably in the last two years. But it was mainly focused on the military component. There was very little progress towards the build part from the clear-hold-build spectrum. And this reflects the endemic weakness of the Pakistan civilian government which is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. The main problem that Pakistani have goes back to the Abbottabad example: the problem is not really simply a matter of the FATA and the border lands. It is a much bigger problem. The militants and jihadists are spreading now into the urban areas of Pakistan including Karachi, Lahore, to the Punjabi heartland of the country. The battle for the future of Pakistan is very much up in the air and the outcome is very much a question mark. Aside from stabilizing Afghanistan, the single most important thing that Europe and US can do directly is increasing trade and that means reducing tariffs on Pakistani exports. Trade, not aid, is the key to being able to help Pakistan to develop.

Why this current upsurge in militant activity in the Punjabi heartland?

Because the insurgents understand that to control Pakistan you have to build a base of popular support in the Punjab. They also understand that the Punjab is ripe for the militancy. There is a large lower class that is heavily against the feudal land holders that dominate Pakistani politics. They feel that they have very little future in the Pakistani political system, many have been educated in the madrassas and now live in a Pakistan that become increasingly Islamicized since General Zia took power in 1977. The Pakistani government faces an alliance of wide

various Islamic groups ranging from the Pakistani Taliban to Lashkar-e-Taiba, which although it is not a monolith, increasingly operates in a coordinated way to try to overthrow the Pakistani state. The biggest problem is that the Pakistani Army, the real power in the country, seems very dangerously ambivalent about whose side is on. It despises the civilian government, and is deeply penetrated by Jihadist sympathizers. We have seen this recently in the attack on the navy base in Karachi which clearly had inside assistance.

How appealing is the “The Pakistani Taliban” agenda outside the FATA and borderlands region?

The Pakistani Taliban are gaining popularity because they are appealing to the frustrations that many have with the feudal landholding system and they could in fact exploit the deep anger among landless peasants in Punjab and Sindh in order to mobilize their legitimate grievances, with the failings of the Pakistani government to provide education for its citizens, and with the many weaknesses of the Pakistani state.

Is the army on the verge of a “mindset shifting”? Traditionally the Army was a secular, profoundly nationalistic education system.

That began to change with General Zia and it has never been reversed. The Pakistani military of the past that was modern and secular is no longer the case. Moreover, the Pakistani military officer corps is increasingly sympathetic to Jihadism and extremism.

Why do sections of the Pakistani state cultivate & provide support to the militant groups (the Afghan Taliban and the LeT)?

I think it is explained by the Pakistani Army's obsession with India. They fought 4 wars with India, they lost all 4 of them and they are determined to find ways to address the balance and they come up with two: to develop a nuclear arsenal and to build militant groups which can be used against India both directly in Kashmir and indirectly in Afghanistan where Pakistanis fear that they will be encircled by a pro-Indian government in Kabul which will be in their strategic rear.

For most of its existence the Pakistani Army's mindset was focused on waging conventional war against India. Did the intensive counterinsurgency campaign in FATA change its organizational culture?

The obsession with India is deeply ingrained in the Pakistani military. I don't think it will be fundamentally changed until the issues that divide India and Pakistan are resolved which under the best circumstances is going to take a long time. The battle for the future of Pakistan is likely to be decided on a shorter time frame.

What would be the implications of a jihadist state in Pakistan?

A jihadist state is most likely to come about if we have another military coup in Pakistan that is led by a general similar in outlook and worldview to General Zia ul-Haq. That is certainly a possibility. It is not the most likely outcome but it is a possibility. A jihadist state would be a nightmare for South Asia and the world as a whole. It would very possibly move Pakistan toward accommodating the Taliban and al Qaeda, instead of fighting them. It would mean extremist Islamist forces in taking control of the 2nd largest Muslim country in the world and what is rapidly becoming the 5th largest nuclear arsenal in the world which is what Pakistan is building.

The ramifications of such an outcome are extraordinary dangerous and would leave the outside world-the West, US and India-only with bad options in dealing with it.

We are in a post Osama environment-could the Afghan Taliban be incentivized enough to make a decisive split from al Qaeda and join the political process of reconciliation?

I wished that to be the case, but I don't see any substantial evidence that suggests that Afghan Taliban is ready to split with the AQ. To the contrary they issued an eulogy that extolled him as a martyr that died for their cause. It will be wishful thinking to hope that the death of bin Laden means a break between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Until when should NATO remain in Afghanistan? How do you see the exit moment? It seems that we are not there yet.

I think that Abbottabad is very illuminating: we discovered in that compound that Al-Qaeda is very much alive, bin Laden was not hiding in a cave, and in fact that he was operating in a command center. The second thing we have discovered was that we cannot rely on the Pakistanis to take care of this problem. They were either incompetent or complicit in hiding it. Either way we cannot rely upon them which means that for the foreseeable future we need a base of operations in which to carry on both drones and commandos operations against Al-Qaeda threats coming out from Pakistan. And the only place we can do this from is Afghanistan. In a very important way, the Abbottabad raid underscores the importance of a long term NATO presence in Afghanistan. Of course it doesn't need to be 150.000. We are on track of building an Afghan army that will allow us to substantially reduce that presence.

Having in mind the possibility of another Mumbai attack that has the address on Pakistani territory, could India be inspired by the US Abbottabad precedent?

Of course India sees a precedent in the raid. If there is another mass casualty attack like the 26/11 Mumbai attack India may choose to follow the American example and send in commandoes to kill or capture Hafez Saeed or other Lashkar e Tayyiba commanders.

Bruce Riedel is senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. A former CIA officer, he was a senior advisor to three U.S. presidents on Middle East and South Asian issues. At the request of President Obama he chaired an interagency review of policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan for the White House that was completed in March 2009. Riedel's latest book is Deadly Embrace: Pakistan, America, and the Future of Global Jihad.

Octavian Manea is Editor of FP Romania, the Romanian edition of Foreign Policy.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2011, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).

