

Surging Statecraft to Save Afghanistan

By Vikram J. Singh and Nathaniel C. Fick

We looked down into Pakistan in August from the Afghan border outpost of Torkham, high in the legendary Khyber Pass. Invaders have carved violent paths across this border in both directions since the time of Alexander the Great. Today, an invasion by proxy from Pakistan continues that bloody tradition.

Fighters flowing into Afghanistan from remote and rebellious western Pakistan have helped drive violence to its highest levels since U.S. forces ousted the Taliban in 2001, sparking concern in NATO capitals and anger from many Afghans who think Pakistan diverts U.S. aid dollars to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. "If you Americans are serious," one tribal elder in Kandahar told us in frustration, "then take care of Pakistan."

If only it were so simple. Stabilizing Afghanistan is going to require one of the most complicated exercises in statecraft undertaken by the United States in years. The next U.S. President must grasp both Pakistani and Indian motivations in Afghanistan, for these regional dynamics drive the "proxy invasion" that is undermining the coalition's efforts there. A sound regional approach should lead the United States to re-evaluate blank-check security assistance to Pakistan; increase investment in non-military aspects of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship; and actively try to build confidence between New Delhi, Islamabad, and Kabul.

The heart of the regional dysfunction is Pakistan, a nation that has always feared two things: an Indian invasion and its own disintegration along ethnic lines. Pakistani leaders view Afghanistan not as part of the "war on terror," but as an Islamic rear echelon in which Pakistani forces would join long-nurtured proxies to repel any Indian invasion and occupation. Pakistan's dominant Punjabis also fear that the British-imposed Afghan-Pakistan border, which splits ethnic-Pashtun lands and has never been accepted by Pashtun people or any modern Afghan government, will become a crack in Pakistan's foundation. Bangladesh split from Pakistan with Indian support in 1971 and Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, has supported radical Islamists who could undermine traditional (and potentially separatist) ethnic-Pashtun power structures ever since.

To the east, India seeks to deter Pakistan from supporting extremists who set off bombs in Indian cities. India enjoys provoking uncertainty in Islamabad through diplomatic activity in Afghanistan, stoking Pakistani fears that India will use Afghan territory as a base of support not just for Pashtuns, but also for the Baluchi and Sindhi separatists who have long agitated for independence in western Pakistan.

This Indo-Pak competition in Afghanistan explains why hundreds of millions of dollars in monthly U.S. military assistance for Islamabad has produced only greater instability, growing sanctuary for extremists, and a haven for those plotting global terrorism. Both nations meddle actively in the border areas, and for Pakistan in particular, the incentives are perverse. As one U.S. official explained to us, “Pakistan gets over a billion dollars per year for poor cooperation and is quite certain that improved cooperation or any success against Al Qaeda would result in less, not more, U.S. support.”

Only a genuine U.S. offer of long-term cooperation can make fighting al Qaeda more worthwhile to Pakistan than the status quo. The first component of such an offer must be ending blank-check security assistance to Pakistan. The next U.S. president needs Congressional support to send a new message and offer a new bargain to Pakistan's military and fractious civilian leaders: “Pakistan's progress as a modern state is at real risk either from Al Qaeda extremists or from any major international terrorist attack getting traced back to Pakistani territory, forcing western military action. We are ready to discuss a ten-year aid package, significant infrastructure investment, and security agreements in exchange for measurable progress along the border, concrete steps to address the grievances of minority populations, and investment in education, health, and basic infrastructure. The alternative is a drawing down of U.S. security assistance and additional unilateral military action inside your territory.”

Such a message would help the U.S. with the second facet of a truly regional strategy: moving beyond Pakistan's military to rebuild trust with the Pakistani people who now see us as friends of a dictator, rather than friends of average citizens. The U.S. should engage the academic elite on the possibility of opening an American University in Islamabad, and engage the business elite on the possibility of a bilateral investment treaty. America has initiatives underway to provide \$750 million in assistance to local populations in Pakistan, and to build up the Pakistani Frontier Corps, irregular forces that we hope will counter extremists. These efforts should be continued. Pakistan's new democratic government needs to be pressured to focus beyond infighting and look to the well-being of its people. If it fails to support schools, clinics and political rights, then the U.S. should threaten to refuse to transfer items such as spare parts for the F-16s that really matter to Pakistani leaders.

Finally, a regional strategy requires the U.S. to begin confidence-building initiatives that encourage New Delhi and Islamabad to stop using Afghanistan as a weapon in their own bilateral struggle. Even if it is unsympathetic to Pakistan's concerns about India and separatists, the U.S. should offer Islamabad long-term strategic support. This could include commitments from New Delhi not to support its own proxy invasion from Afghanistan into Pakistan and from Islamabad to end terrorist infiltration of Kashmir and Afghanistan. The place to start is with regular shuttle diplomacy between New Delhi, Islamabad and Kabul to discuss the concerns playing out in each capital. Only increased regional confidence and a real U.S. commitment to stick with Pakistan even after defeating al Qaeda can enable Pakistan's leaders to tackle the extremist elements within the ISI who equate peace with a loss of power.

These are hard steps that offer no instant gratification. For now, the real leader in Pakistan remains the military. The recently revived civilian government has already brought political

chaos and disunity. Without good partners in Pakistan, however, U.S. leaders will continue to be tempted by the two supposedly “simple solutions” we heard from many Afghans: sealing the border or expanding military operations into Pakistan without Pakistani consent. But neither credible border security nor unilateral western (or Afghan) military action against extremists in Pakistan has much hope of success.

The border, stretching 1,640 miles (equivalent to the distance from Washington D.C. to Albuquerque) through some of the most rugged territory on earth, will never be sealed. Locals pass back and forth without papers even at official crossings like Torkham. Many live on one side and work in fields on the other, and almost all have family on both sides of the line. Insurgents can easily cross through the open spaces between checkpoints, or blend into the scores of people we watched traverse the border on foot, in busses and atop the Technicolor “jingle trucks” carrying goods between countries.

Without Pakistani support, anything beyond limited covert military action to hunt militants in Pakistan is unworkable for two reasons. First, the U.S. does not and will not have enough forces to support a major counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, let alone in Pakistan. Second, coalition forces in Afghanistan depend on Pakistan for the delivery of virtually all their vital supplies. More than half of the goods passing through Torkham each day are destined for U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, and the only alternate routes from the sea are through Iran or through the Caucasus via Russia and Georgia. If Pakistan were to shut down access to its territory and airspace in response to any unilateral invasion, then coalition forces in Afghanistan would face strangulation.

Frustrating though it is, the United States is far from all-powerful in Afghanistan. The proxy war being waged from terrorist sanctuaries in Pakistan can only be stopped with cooperation from Islamabad to fight the militants on Pakistani soil, cultivate and support local tribal allies willing to fight Al Qaeda, and bring hope to the local populations with development and political rights. The extremist threat to Pakistan is seen by Islamabad as more bearable than Indian encirclement from Afghanistan. This is a foolish miscalculation given that the bigger threat to Pakistan is really from Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban, who likely killed former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and have driven suicide bombings like that at the Marriot hotel last month to intolerable levels. But perception too often becomes reality, and despite their promises, Pakistani leaders will only really cooperate when their concerns about Indian meddling are addressed.

A failed Pakistan helps no one. This is the one theater on earth where terrorism, radical Islam, traditional nation-state conflict, and confirmed weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, really come together. Given the overriding imperative to keep dangerous weapons out of dangerous hands, it is up to Washington to find the strategic interests common to the U.S., India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and to craft the necessary bargains to protect those interests. This is the essence of statecraft. While they think about more troops for Afghanistan and keeping America's military relationship with Pakistan sound, U.S. leaders must start down the diplomatic road to stability in Afghanistan. It runs through New Delhi, Islamabad, and Kabul.

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