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Afghanistan and Pakistan: More Realism Needed to Prevent US Failure

THE CHALLENGE

Afghanistan and Pakistan present distinct challenges to US policy. Yet they are closely linked by the political, historical and cultural unities that span their border. Instability and violence in each have had destructive effects on its neighbor. Security, political stability, and economic development in Afghanistan have been spiraling downward for a while with few prospects for improvement. The international community has already failed there. Pakistan now faces both the consequences of long-standing weaknesses of democratic governance and economic policy, and a present crisis of political authority, economic instability and violent threats to internal security. Despite mutual dependence between the US and Pakistan, the relationship is steadily deteriorating. The challenge for the US is to recalibrate Afghanistan policy in a time of acute crisis, while developing more long-term strategies for engaging Pakistan.

THE CONTEXT

Recent trends in Afghanistan include a 40% increase in civilian casualties; a higher mortality rate for US soldiers there than in Iraq; a steady trajectory of eroding control by the Kabul government; and military and political advances by its enemies. Foreign troops and civilian casualties are irritants to Afghan nationalism, prompting many to join the Taliban, often as an act of national resistance rather than of ideological sympathy. The Afghan Army suffers from a lack of legitimacy because it is seen as the instrument of a weak government that enjoys little popular legitimacy. The Afghan state fails to provide personal security; law and order routinely means predatory behavior by licensed law enforcement; courts are slow, capricious and unreliable; and corruption is pervasive.

Pakistan's border with Afghanistan has not contained armed insurgency, Taliban ideology, or Al Qaeda activities. Feeding on the political failure of the Pakistani state and the weakness of the Pakistani economy, these have emerged as a serious threat to personal security and government authority. Pakistan's democratic government is weak, and is struggling to establish its authority at a time of economic crisis. Its capacity to act on the security front is seriously hampered as a result.

WHERE TO START

- 🔗 **Recognize that fine-tuning of the current policy will not vouchsafe success: More troops will not work**

Recent experience suggests that it is likely that a larger and more aggressive presence would serve to increase Afghan nationalist

resistance. The West and the Afghan government have failed, not because of insufficient force, but because the present political arrangement is inherently unviable and a sure source of conflict. Recent talks between the Kabul government and the Taliban are a start but insufficient. The US, as the preeminent player in Afghanistan, should take the lead in promoting a fundamentally new approach that involves all stakeholders in discussion of a mutually agreeable settlement in Afghanistan. This will have two dimensions, an intra-Afghan one and one which involves Afghanistan's proximate neighbors and other key international players. Interested parties that could play the spoiler if excluded **must** be party to the conversation about Afghanistan's future.

Secure agreement from NATO allies and the Kabul government for a national consultation

Afghanistan is a complex society, comprising regional, tribal, sub-tribal, and local sources of loyalty and patronage. When it has found political equilibrium and stability, it has done so by careful balancing of disparate and potentially fissiparous interests, of rewards and obligations. Within Afghanistan, the traditional mechanism of the *jirga* or *shura* offers a means for negotiation of political compromise at all levels, from the most local to the national. The national process which produced the current constitution of Afghanistan was an attempt to use this traditional mechanism, and is to be faulted only because it excluded many significant stakeholders: those in the south in armed rebellion against the government, and unarmed political forces effectively excluded from the process.

A process of Afghanistan-wide reconciliation must include those forces now loosely clustered under the Taliban banner. They are significant numerically and geographically, and at least some of their new recruits are drawn by national sentiment rather than ideological commitment. Their military capacity would doom any process that excluded them. Such a process must also make room for unarmed political actors independent of the government, warlords or recently disarmed military factions. Members and other beneficiaries of the present government will be reluctant to risk their power. The Taliban may not agree to abide by a consensus. Therefore, the international community would need to be a highly interested guarantor of the fairness of any such process.

It will be important, in light of the close – almost symbiotic - historical, cultural, economic and social connections between border communities on in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to recognize that Pakistan will have to be a part of this pan-Afghan conversation, through some combination

of provincial authorities of the North West Frontier Province, tribal authorities, and the federal government in Islamabad.

❶ **Launch a diplomatic initiative to secure an international agreement among Afghanistan's neighbors and other highly interested outside parties**

The international supplement to the national Afghan process would be a modification of the "Six Plus Two" formula that was the basis for international deliberations during the period of Taliban rule in Kabul. In addition to all of Afghanistan's proximate neighbors, those governments required to endorse an agreement would have to include the United States, Russia, the European Union or NATO, and India. There will be objection to inclusion of one or another. Pakistan will not be happy with the recognition of India's role and interest in Afghanistan. The preferred inclusion of Pakistan as the only foreign participant in the pan-Afghan dialogue described above should go some way to mollifying this concern. And the need to "domesticate" all potential spoilers argues for bold inclusiveness.

❷ **Carefully focus US policy in Pakistan**

Pakistani resentment at what is perceived as US incomprehension and pressure renders most US initiatives problematical. The hint of political interference will be viewed askance. In any case the US capacity to influence political outcomes in Pakistan is limited, and Pakistan will have to address the political challenge of democratic consolidation and the rule of law on its own. There the US can help only by doing no harm. Where Pakistanis are likely to welcome US involvement is in addressing the very real challenges of livelihood and macro-economic stability that they face.

❸ **Accord high policy priority, and financial and diplomatic resources, to securing sufficient multilateral funds to stabilize the Pakistani economy**

Though resources are scarce all around, Pakistan should be the highest priority for such financial resources as the US and the international community can summon. In order to avoid spreading scarce resources thin, the focus of economic assistance should be on macro-economic stabilization and economic policy reform.

❹ **Let Pakistanis take the lead on security policy at the Afghan frontier**

The US should avoid pushing for more military action by the Pakistan government. There is wide variance among Pakistani opinion about the value of negotiations with armed insurgents in the North West Frontier Province and in the Tribal Agencies. All concur that the political configurations of any of the local conflicts are complex, and include

many sectarian and criminal rivalries, as well as local struggles for dominance; that there are limits to what can be accomplished by force; and that the drumbeat of US demands for more force and less negotiation can only lead to greater alienation of civilians hurt as innocent bystanders in military operations. From the Pakistani perspective, ill-conceived responses may make a bad situation worse.

Above all there are complex continuities of political affiliation and clan loyalty between many of those involved in armed activity and those involved in politics. These suggest both the extent of the problem and the difficulty of a military solution. Pakistanis see the US obsession with defeat of armed insurgents on the frontier as a distraction from the pressing need for political stabilization and response to the parlous economic situation of the country.

The temptation to involve the US in arming and training of tribal militias to fight Taliban and Al Qaeda forces is to be avoided. There is little promise of transparency or control over such a program, and considerable risk of unintended consequences detrimental to the goal of securing and pacifying the frontier.

WHAT'S ON THE LINE

As the collective capacity of the Kabul government, NATO and the US to control events weakens, Afghanistan's neighbors including Iran, Pakistan and India will pursue competitive military and security policies through proxies, with devastating consequences for the Afghan people. In the absence of a bold new initiative of political reconciliation, the reemergence of an unstable political order inimical to US interests is only a matter of time. Defeat in Afghanistan will seriously undercut NATO's credibility and call into question at the outset its capacity to conduct the new type of mission embodied in Afghanistan. Deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan will spill over into Pakistan, adding to the already high level of violence there.

In Pakistan, further economic deterioration of a country of 150 million people will add to political instability and the growth of armed militancy, which in turn will affect its neighbors and the world. US pressure for a military and paramilitary solution to the violence on the frontier will alienate civilian opinion in Pakistan and will in fact lead to further destabilization of the security environment.



Amit Pandya directs the Stimson's *Regional Voices: Transnational Challenges* project, which focuses on developing greater understanding of how experts in the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Africa approach transnational security issues, including human security and non-traditional security threats and challenges.

Pandya is a South Asia expert and international lawyer. He has been Counsel to the Government Operations and Foreign Affairs Committees of the House of Representatives, and held senior positions at the Departments of Defense and State and at the US Agency for International Development. He has also practiced law and worked in various civil and human rights non-profit organizations, and was formerly an ethnographer and teacher.

He holds degrees from Oxford, Yale, the University of Pennsylvania and Georgetown.

ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS

For additional original research on Afghanistan and Pakistan, please read the following publications by Mr. Pandya:

Transnational Trends: Middle Eastern and Asian Views (Stimson, 2008)

Should Pakistan Do More or the US Demand Less? (Stimson, July 28, 2008)

Fumbling with the Key: Building State Capacity in Afghanistan (Stimson, May 03, 2007)

Security, Reconstruction and Political Normalization in Afghanistan (Center for American Progress, 2004)

Waging Peace in Kashmir (Topic, 2002)