

# Afghanistan and Pakistan: The Graveyard for US Foreign Policy Planning?

By Gordon Adams

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The foreign policy machinery in the Obama administration is finally grinding away on a difficult long-term policy and institutional problem: What should the US development and foreign assistance strategy be? Such an examination raises a seemingly endless set of questions: What roles should the Defense Department, State Department, and USAID play in the development, security, and foreign assistance mix? How should these agencies tackle their responsibilities in fragile and post-conflict states? What should be the long-term structure of the US military with respect to traditional combat missions and counterinsurgency missions? And, for the first time in history, what should be the [long-term missions](#) and capabilities of State and USAID?

The foreign policy establishment is taking these questions seriously. Defense is focusing on the next Quadrennial Defense Review, State is beginning its first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, and the National Security Council is undertaking broad interagency

reviews of US development, foreign, and security assistance programs and authorities. Despite this foreign policy soul-searching, the legacy of the last eight years is handcuffing the administration in the short term. All signs point to the United States pursuing a path of nation-building again, and it appears as though it will start in the two places that could sink all three longer-term planning exercises: Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Of course, this isn't the first time the United States has taken such a heady role. My friends in the development community suggest that USAID's involvement (and failure) in Vietnam's foreign assistance, economic development, and civil operations severely damaged the credibility of US bilateral development assistance for years. Our experience in Iraq also should have taught us a few lessons. One might have thought that after spending roughly \$23 billion on security assistance and another \$20 billion on economic and governance assistance in that country, the outcome--insecurity, unemployment, and a faltering economy--would have told us that Washington isn't very good at nation-building. There has been only minimal recovery from pre-war conditions, and a fair amount of criticism has been aimed at the Iraqi Relief and Reconstruction Fund, much of it from the US Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction itself.

But here we go again. Even though the failures in Iraq provided the impetus to begin some of the long-term planning being done today, we're about to leap into Afghanistan and Pakistan with an echo of past optimism that US nation-building efforts can succeed despite widespread evidence that they cannot.

First, Afghanistan. Gen. Stanley McChrystal's [recent assessment](#) of the country's situation implores the administration to increase the size of the international force, grow the Afghan security forces rapidly, "elevate the importance of governance," and "prioritize responsive and accountable governance." It's a nation-building agenda if I've ever seen one. What's more, the assessment gives Washington one year to demonstrate results on both the security and political-economic tracks.

Specifically, McChrystal wants to grow the Afghan army from 92,000 troops to 134,000 troops and the police force from 84,000 officers to 160,000 officers over the next 13 months in order to provide "demonstrable progress" that the insurgency is being defeated. At the same time, he acknowledges a slew of setbacks: Notably, the Taliban has gained the upper hand, increased its ability to strike, and begun governing throughout most of the country. Conversely, the Afghan forces aren't well-trained and have been only minimally engaged in the struggle. As for the US security capability, after years of training (underfunded, McChrystal says), an integrated coalition architecture for providing security force training was "stood up" only this September. The administration is seeking another \$9.5 billion for Afghan security assistance in the next fiscal year to add to the \$24 billion that has been invested in security since the war begun.

Success, McChrystal argues, will require appropriate governance and economic structures in place. He says the international coalition "will place support to responsive and accountable governance... on par with security." But he also notes that Afghans mistrust their existing government, which is ineffective, at best, in providing social or economic goods. Corruption is rampant, as narcotics operations have debauched individuals and organizations alike. Moreover,

the history of strong central governance in Afghanistan is thin (and some would say nonexistent); it's a place where local and regional power barons reign. So this isn't a case of "reconstruction," it's a case of long-term, ground-up change.

Not unlike the military strategy, the administration is scrambling to create a coherent political-economic program and to pull together the human resources to deliver such a program in Afghanistan. The State Department also has made an effort to find civilian personnel for this task, but so it has far fallen short.

Taken together, the prospect for failure in Afghanistan is high. And failure will have long-term consequences. Specifically, it will call into question the ability of both military and civilian operations to carry out governance and economic development and could discredit both Defense's economic programs and the nascent effort to create a civilian surge capability for post-conflict reconstruction at either State or USAID.

Let's now turn to Pakistan, which poses some similar challenges and some different challenges. Washington has invested roughly \$11 billion in security assistance there since fiscal year 2002. (The figure may be significantly greater, as [suggested](#) by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.) That's less aid than for Afghanistan, but the internal situation is different. Pakistan has significant military and security forces, though they have done precious little until recently to ensure security in the regions that matter most to their own and Afghanistan's stability. Moreover, some of Pakistan's security forces are in league with Pashtun insurgents (including the Taliban), making US efforts at security cooperation even more difficult. It's not clear that more security assistance is likely to produce a better outcome, however, particularly when it comes to internal counterextremist operations or better control at the Afghan border.

US support for Pakistani governance and the economy has been thriftier, amounting to \$4 billion since fiscal year 2002, leading the Obama administration to call for a major increase and to endorse the congressional proposal to commit another \$7.5 billion in foreign assistance to Pakistan over the next five years. It's far from clear that the Pakistanis will welcome such a broad and potentially intrusive US civilian presence. But there is a functioning Pakistani economy (even if it relies a good deal on international institutions for life support) and a central government, whose authority extends through most, but not all, of the country.

Examining the case of Pakistan suggests significant challenges for US assistance--both civilian and military. Failure there, seen as the absence of a successful strategy at the border or in providing internal security and development, will raise serious doubts as to whether Washington is up to the task there--or anywhere else for that matter. Meanwhile, US Special Representative Richard Holbrooke is urging a major investment in power generation and distribution, further raising questions about whether the United States has its sights on the right goal.

The agencies that feed into US security assistance programs in Pakistan and Afghanistan are deeply engaged in reviewing whether they have set the right priorities and what the distribution of responsibilities should be between State and Defense. The aims of these assessments are certainly welcome. After all, State has spent more than \$150 billion on security assistance since

the Cold War began, but with mixed results: It helped bring peace in some parts of the Middle East, but it did not succeed in Vietnam.

The Obama administration is committed to doubling US foreign assistance by 2015--to roughly \$50 billion a year. But it now has only one or, at the most, two years to demonstrate that US security and economic assistance can make a difference. And it hopes to do so in Afghanistan and Pakistan, two of the most difficult test beds in the world. The prospects are not promising. In fact, the impact of failure, or minimal results, could very well kill long-term reform and increased support for US foreign assistance before they are even born.

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