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An Unarguable Fact: American Security is Tied to Afghanistan and Pakistan

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Reasonable people can disagree about the desirability of committing to a long-term relationship with Afghanistan, keeping American troops there, giving large amounts of financial aid to Pakistan, and many other specific policy decisions in South Asia. We can argue about the relative importance of U.S. interests in that area compared with the costs of taking this or that action—and also compared with the costs of inaction or withdrawal. We can certainly argue about what strategies might work or probably won't work.

But all of these discussions should be based on a common set of facts that are not really arguable. American national security requires defeating al Qaeda and all other affiliated groups that seek to kill Americans, working with local partners to prevent those groups from maintaining or re-establishing safe-havens from which to do so, and retaining the ability to take direct action against those groups if and when required. It is also a fact that the war in Afghanistan is not yet either won or lost and it can still go either way. A more inconvenient fact is that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) will not be ready to secure their government or their territory without significant U.S. and international support, including military forces and enablers, after 2014.

A still more unpleasant fact is that Pakistan continues to harbor, shelter, and support some of the most virulent insurgent and terrorist groups, closely associated with al Qaeda, including serving as haven for some that have already tried to attack the U.S. homeland. Yet it is also a fact that Pakistan is a country of some 190 million people with perhaps 100 nuclear weapons and the deepest hatred for the U.S. of any nation on earth. Pakistan is also, moreover, perennially on the verge of complete economic collapse that would lead to political collapse and consequently, very likely, a massive increase in the number of terrorist groups operating there. In the very worst case, one or more of those terrorist groups might get control of a Pakistani nuclear weapon and use it—or at least try to use it—against India, the U.S., or another of our allies. The most distressing fact of all is that there is no single, clear policy or strategy that could reliably handle all of these other facts, and that offering simplistic solutions or focusing on one of these problems to the exclusion of the others will simply lead rapidly to failure.

Afghanistan in the Balance

International and Afghan forces have made tremendous gains against the Taliban in the past four years, largely sweeping them out of Kandahar, of which they had nearly gained control in 2009, driving them to the fringes of Helmand, securing the Konar River Valley to Asadabad and most of strategically-vital Nangarhar Province, and preventing the enemy from sustaining significant bases in other parts of the country. Isolated spectacular attacks in Herat and Kabul have not disrupted Afghan politics nor significantly affected the daily lives of most Afghans. Tragic instances of Afghan forces (or Taliban masquerading as Afghan forces) attacking NATO and U.S. troops have not destroyed the cooperation or cohesion of the coalition. Many seasons of tough fighting have not seen the erosion of the ANSF but, rather, have seen it improve in strength, size, skill, and determination.

But President Obama ordered reductions in U.S. forces prematurely, preventing them from completing critical clearing operations in southeastern Afghanistan, where the Haqqani Network operates from sanctuaries in Pakistan. Haqqani forces and their allies retain important safe-havens in Ghazni, Logar, Wardak, Paktia, Paktika, and Khost Provinces, and neither the U.S. nor the ANSF have the resources needed to clear them out. On the contrary, we can expect to see an increase in Haqqani Network activity over the coming months and years, including both spectacular attacks in Kabul and a regular drumbeat of attacks against U.S. and ANSF positions in Haqqani areas.

The ANSF will not be able to defend itself against that threat on its own after 2014. It lacks the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets that the U.S. and NATO provide, which give it decisive advantages over its enemies. It does not have enough artillery (or skill in using it) to overmatch the enemy, nor will it have enough of its own combat airpower to do so. A full U.S. withdrawal would very likely be followed by the collapse of ANSF forces facing the Haqqanis, and that would be very bad for the U.S.

The Haqqani Network is much older than the Taliban, dating back to the 1970s. Its ties with Osama bin Laden began in the mid-1980s, and the first al Qaeda camps (and most important training camps) were established and maintained in Haqqani territory in the 1990s. Neither Jalaluddin Haqqani, the group's founder, nor his son and successor, Sirajuddin, have shown the slightest inclination to break with al Qaeda, even after bin Laden's death. The Haqqanis are prominent in the Miramshah Shura (in North Waziristan, Pakistan), where they coordinate with al Qaeda representatives and the leaders of other al Qaeda-affiliated groups such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). A Haqqani victory in southeastern Afghanistan would give those groups and others room to expand in Afghanistan, where they could re-establish bases from which to plan and conduct future attacks against the U.S. and its allies. Preventing such a development remains a vital national security interest for the U.S., and it has not yet been secured—nor will it have been secured by the end of 2014.

Al Qaeda and Affiliates in Pakistan

The obvious rejoinder to the discussion above is that the Haqqanis are currently based in Pakistan, rather than Afghanistan, along with al Qaeda leaders, the TTP, IMU, and many others. It is reasonable to ask why the U.S. should continue to spend blood and treasure trying to solve a problem in Afghanistan that emanates from Pakistan. The answer is that there is no solution to the problem that does not operate on both sides of the Durand Line.

Even today, groups such as the Haqqanis, al Qaeda, and the IMU do not operate with full freedom or impunity in Pakistan. Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence Directorate (ISI) supports some of them and turns a blind eye to the activities of others, but it also requires them to keep their profile in Pakistan down, to avoid attacking Pakistani targets, and not to develop plans for attacking the U.S. easily traceable to Pakistani territory. In addition, Pakistani forces have

conducted significant operations against groups that directly threaten Pakistan but are still linked into this mélange, especially the TTP and the IMU. Those operations have disrupted and distracted the Afghan-focused groups that the ISI actually supports, albeit briefly. Those limitations may not seem like much, but we know that these groups chafe under even this degree of Pakistani control. Yet they generally adhere to Pakistani requirements for the simple reason that they know that the Pakistani Army could, if it chose, round them up at any moment. That fact does constrain both the actions and the ambitions of these groups, as we can see from the periodic efforts their leaders make to rein in the handful of groups, such as the TTP, that persist in violating Islamabad's strictures.

Were the Haqqanis and their allies able to relocate some or all of their most important bases to an ungoverned Afghanistan, those constraints would fall away. They would be free to attack their erstwhile Pakistani hosts (which some of them surely would do) and to plan attacks on the U.S. and its allies without having to worry that the heavy arm of the ISI might come down on them at any moment. The re-establishment of Haqqani safe-havens in Afghanistan would be worse than the expansion of the safe-havens across the border in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)—it would be the liberation of one of the most lethal Islamist terrorist groups in the world to expand its aims, methods, and targets.

It is equally true, of course, that the status quo is unacceptable. Pakistan must be made to see that it cannot continue to protect and support such lethal extremist groups—certainly not while pocketing large amounts of money from the U.S. in exchange for “counter-terrorism” cooperation that seems almost laughable after the Abbottabad raid. Surely U.S. aid money could be spent better elsewhere—or even at home, as some would have it. Alas, supporting Pakistan financially remains an important pillar of American strategy, distasteful as it is.

Pakistan: Always on the Brink

Pakistan's economy epitomizes dysfunction. Government revenues are far too low due to corruption, absurd tax rates, and pervasive tax-cheating. The government heavily subsidizes electricity, theoretically making it available to a broad swath of Pakistan's poor. But the electrical infrastructure is inadequate, antiquated, and suffers from extensive theft. As a result, rolling blackouts and extended periods without power are common, so that the enormous sums the government spends subsidizing electricity leads only to more popular anger over its lack. Pakistan has subsisted on large loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in addition to the much smaller U.S. assistance, but the IMF lost patience with Pakistan toward the end of President Asif Ali Zardari's tenure and has insisted on a series of painful economic and fiscal corrections that the current government is struggling to undertake. The economy is further distorted by the ubiquitous influence of the military establishment both directly through an exorbitant military budget and military industries and indirectly through the assets of current and retired military officers. The survival of the Pakistani economy at any time seems improbable.

It seemed especially improbable under Zardari, whose reputation for corruption was well-earned. But Zardari also refused to undertake badly-needed economic reforms for fear of angering institutions already anathema to him and alienating voting constituencies going into the recent election. He therefore achieved nothing at all—he lost the election and left the Pakistani economy in free-fall.

The peaceful succession of Nawaz Sharif to the premiership after the completion of a full term in office by a civilian government was a landmark in Pakistan's history. Such a thing has never happened before. More interestingly, Sharif appears to have understood that his political survival, along with the survival of his country, depends on righting the economy somehow. He has therefore focused his efforts intently on meeting IMF goals (or coming close), managing the energy crisis, expanding the economy, and even reaching out to India (although spoilers on both sides of the border are making that prospect daunting). Sharif is an unlikely hero from the American perspective. Ousted from his previous premiership by Pervez Musharraf, Sharif has long been seen as virulently anti-American. So far he has not shown such tendencies, perhaps because he realizes the depth of his domestic problems.

It is difficult to believe that Sharif will actually turn the Pakistani economy around. It seems clear, however, that he is trying to do so. It is almost as much in our interest that he succeed as it is in his. A viable Pakistani economy could supply the Pakistani state—as distinct from the Army—with revenues it needs actually to govern and provide services to its people. After the first successful transition from one civilian government to another after a full term, Pakistani representative government can only be solidified by the emergence of a functional and solvent state. Such a development would weaken the influence of the military significantly. It would also weaken the attractiveness of groups such as Jamat-ud-Dawa (the front group for Lashkar-e-Tayyiba), which flourish by providing services when the state does not.

Now is not the time, therefore, to undercut whatever long-shot prospects Sharif might have by cutting off U.S. aid, even if Pakistan shows no greater willingness to cut support to America's enemies than it has hitherto. It is also vital to keep in mind that Sharif really does not control that policy. The Army does. And the best long-term strategy for pulling Pakistan away from support to extremist groups is to work to strengthen the elected civilian government. That cannot be done by cutting off aid—even aid to the Army, which will demand its cut from the state regardless of what the U.S. gives it. Whatever leverage the U.S. has with Pakistan, finally, will vanish with the end of American assistance.

Conclusion

There can be no rapid conclusion to the problems of South Asia, nor is there any end in sight to the threats to American security and its interests emanating from that region. The White House is quite wrong to keep repeating that al Qaeda is “decimated,” “on its last legs,” or nearly defeated. Even the “core group” still in Pakistan remains functional, but that core group is far

from being the only threat to Americans. Al Qaeda franchises are expanding in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and North Africa, which should cause us great concern. But the sheer number and complexity of extremist Islamist terrorist groups based along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border remains by far the greatest single concentration of threats. A strategic partnership with Afghanistan, underwritten with aid and with troops, along with continued engagement with Pakistan, is the only hope for securing American interests and the safety of Americans in this region.