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**“Afghanistan Policy at the Crossroads”
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"To defeat an enemy that heeds no borders or laws of war, we must recognize the fundamental connection between the future of Afghanistan and Pakistan--which is why I've appointed Ambassador Richard Holbrooke . . . to serve as Special Representative for both countries." That "fundamental connection" between Afghanistan and Pakistan was one of the important principles President Obama laid out in his March 27, 2009, speech announcing his policy in South Asia. It reflected a common criticism of the Bush policy in Afghanistan, which was often castigated as insufficiently "regional." It also reflected reality: The war against al Qaeda and its affiliates is a two-front conflict that must be fought on both sides of the Durand Line.

Now, however, some of the most vocal supporters of the regional approach are considering--or even advocating--a return to its antithesis, a purely counterterrorism (CT) strategy in Afghanistan. Such a reversion, based on the erroneous assumption that a collapsing Afghanistan would not derail efforts to dismantle terrorist groups in Pakistan, is bound to fail.

Recent discussions of the "CT option" have tended to be sterile, clinical, and removed from the complexity of the region--the opposite of the coherence with which the administration had previously sought to address the problem. In reality, any "CT option" will likely have to be executed against the backdrop of state collapse and civil war in Afghanistan, spiraling extremism and loss of will in Pakistan, and floods of refugees. These conditions would benefit al Qaeda greatly by creating an expanding area of chaos, an environment in which al Qaeda thrives. They would also make the collection of intelligence and the accurate targeting of terrorists extremely difficult.

If the United States should adopt a small-footprint counterterrorism strategy, Afghanistan would descend again into civil war. The Taliban group headed by Mullah Omar and operating in southern Afghanistan (including especially Helmand, Kandahar, and Oruzgan Provinces) is well positioned to take control of that area upon the withdrawal of American and allied combat forces. The remaining Afghan security forces would be unable to resist a Taliban offensive. They would be defeated and would disintegrate. The fear of renewed Taliban assaults would mobilize the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras in northern and central Afghanistan. The Taliban itself would certainly drive on Herat and Kabul, leading to war with northern militias. This conflict would collapse the Afghan state, mobilize the Afghan population, and cause many Afghans to flee into Pakistan and Iran.

Within Pakistan, the U.S. reversion to a counterterrorism strategy (from the counterinsurgency strategy for which Obama reaffirmed his support as recently as August) would disrupt the delicate balance that has made possible recent Pakistani progress against internal foes and al Qaeda.

Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari, army chief of staff General Ashfaq Kayani, and others who have supported Pakistani operations against the Taliban are facing an entrenched resistance within the military and among retired officers. This resistance stems from the decades-long relationships nurtured between the Taliban and Pakistan,

which started during the war to expel the Soviet Army. Advocates within Pakistan of continuing to support the Taliban argue that the United States will abandon Afghanistan as it did in 1989, creating chaos that only the Taliban will be able to fill in a manner that suits Pakistan.

Zardari and Kayani have been able to overcome this internal resistance sufficiently to mount major operations against Pakistani Taliban groups, in part because the rhetoric and actions of the Obama administration to date have seemed to prove the Taliban advocates wrong. The announcement of the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces would prove them right. Pakistani operations against their own insurgents--as well as against al Qaeda, which lives among those insurgents--would probably grind to a halt as Pakistan worked to reposition itself in support of a revived Taliban government in Afghanistan. And a renewed stream of Afghan refugees would likely overwhelm the Pakistani government and military, rendering coherent operations against insurgents and terrorists difficult or impossible.

The collapse of Pakistan, or even the revival of an aggressive and successful Islamist movement there, would be a calamity for the region and for the United States. It would significantly increase the risk that al Qaeda might obtain nuclear weapons from Pakistan's stockpile, as well as the risk that an Indo-Pakistani war might break out involving the use of nuclear weapons.

Not long ago, such a collapse seemed almost imminent. Islamist groups operating under the umbrella of the Tehrik-e Taliban-e Pakistan (TTP), led by Baitullah Mehsud until his recent death, had occupied areas in the Swat River Valley and elsewhere not far from Islamabad itself. Punjabi terrorists affiliated with the same group were launching attacks in the heart of metropolitan Pakistan.

Since then, Pakistani offensives in Swat, Waziristan, and elsewhere have rocked many of these groups back on their heels while rallying political support within Pakistan against the Taliban to an unprecedented degree. But these successes remain as fragile as the Pakistani state itself. The TTP and its allies are damaged but not defeated. Al Qaeda retains safe-havens along the Afghan border.

What if the United States did not withdraw the forces now in Afghanistan, but simply kept them at current levels while emphasizing both counterterrorism and the rapid expansion of the Afghan security forces? Within Afghanistan, the situation would continue to deteriorate. Neither the United States and NATO nor Afghan forces are now capable of defeating the Taliban in the south or east. At best, the recently arrived U.S. reinforcements in the south might be able to turn steady defeat into stalemate, but even that is unlikely.

The accelerated expansion of Afghan security forces, moreover, will be seriously hindered if we fail to deploy additional combat forces. As we discovered in Iraq, the fastest way to help indigenous forces grow in numbers and competence is to partner U.S. and allied units with them side by side in combat. Trainers and mentors are helpful--but their utility is multiplied many times when indigenous soldiers and officers have the opportunity to see what right looks like rather than simply being told about it. At the current troop levels, commanders have had to disperse Afghan and allied forces widely in an effort simply to cover important ground, without regard for partnering.

As a result, it is very likely that the insurgency will grow in size and strength in 2010 faster than Afghan security forces can be developed without the addition of significant numbers of American combat troops--which will likely lead to Afghan state failure and the consequences described above in Afghanistan and the region.

The Obama administration is not making this decision in a vacuum. Obama ran on a platform that made giving Afghanistan the resources it needed an overriding American priority. President Obama has repeated that commitment many times. He appointed a new commander to execute the policy he enunciated in his March 27 speech, in which he noted: "To focus on the greatest threat to our people, America must no longer deny resources to Afghanistan because of the war in Iraq." If he now rejects the request of his new commander for forces, his decision will be seen as the abandonment of the president's own commitment to the conflict.

In that case, no amount of rhetorical flourish is likely to persuade Afghans, Pakistanis, or anyone else otherwise. A president who overrules the apparently unanimous recommendation of his senior generals and admirals that he make good the resource shortfalls he himself called unacceptable can hardly convince others he is determined to succeed in Afghanistan. And if the United States is not determined to succeed, then, in the language of the region, it is getting ready to cut and run, whatever the president and his advisers may think or say.

That is a policy that will indeed have regional effects--extremely dangerous ones.

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