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U.S. and Pakistan: Afghan Strategies

By George Friedman
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U.S. President Barack Obama will give a speech on Afghanistan on June 22. Whatever he says, it is becoming apparent that the United States is exploring ways to accelerate the drawdown of its forces in the country. It is also clear that U.S. relations with Pakistan are deteriorating to a point where cooperation — whatever level there was — is breaking down. These are two intimately related issues. Any withdrawal from Afghanistan, particularly an accelerated one, will leave a power vacuum in Afghanistan that the Kabul government will not be able to fill. Afghanistan is Pakistan's back door, and its evolution is a matter of fundamental interest to Pakistan. A U.S. withdrawal means an Afghanistan intertwined with and influenced by Pakistan. Therefore, the current dynamic with Pakistan challenges any withdrawal plan.

There may be some in the U.S. military who believe that the United States might prevail in Afghanistan, but they are few in number. The champion of this view, Gen. David Petraeus, has been relieved of his command of forces in Afghanistan and promoted (or kicked upstairs) to become director of the CIA. The conventional definition of victory has been the creation of a strong government in Kabul controlling an army and police force able to protect the regime and ultimately impose its will throughout Afghanistan. With President Hamid Karzai increasingly uncooperative with the United States, the likelihood of this outcome is evaporating. Karzai realizes his American protection will be withdrawn and understands that the Americans will blame him for any negative outcomes of the withdrawal because of his inability or unwillingness to control corruption.

Defining Success in Afghanistan

There is a prior definition of success that shaped the Bush administration's approach to Afghanistan in its early phases. The goal here was the disruption of al Qaeda's operations in Afghanistan and the prevention of further attacks on the United States from Afghanistan. This definition did not envisage the emergence of a stable and democratic Afghanistan free of corruption and able to control its territory. It was more modest and, in many ways, it was achieved in 2001-2002. Its defect, of course, was that the disruption of al Qaeda in Afghanistan, while useful, did not address the evolution of al Qaeda in other countries. In particular, it did not deal with the movement of al Qaeda operatives to Pakistan, nor did it address the Taliban, which were not defeated in 2001-2002 but simply declined combat on American terms, re-emerging as a viable insurgency when the United States became bogged down in Iraq.

The mission creep from denying Afghan bases to al Qaeda to the transformation of Afghan society had many roots and was well under way during the Bush administration, but the immediate origin of the current strategy was the attempt to transfer the lessons of Iraq to Afghanistan. The surge in Iraq, and the important political settlement with Sunni insurgents that brought them into the American fold, reduced the insurgency. It remains to be seen whether it will produce a stable Iraq not hostile to American interests. The ultimate Iraq strategy was a political settlement framed by an increase in forces, and its long-term success was never clear. The Obama administration was prepared to repeat the attempt in Afghanistan, at least by using Iraq as a template if not applying exactly the same tactics.

However, the United States found that the Taliban were less inclined to negotiate with the United States, and certainly not on the favorable terms of the Iraqi insurgents, simply because they believed they would win in the long run and did not face the dangers that the Sunni insurgents did. The military operations that framed the search for a political solution turned out to be a frame without a painting. In Iraq, it is not clear that the Petraeus strategy actually achieved a satisfactory political outcome, and its application to Afghanistan does not seem, as yet, to have drawn the Taliban into the political process in the way that incorporating the Sunnis made Iraq appear at least minimally successful.

As we pointed out after the death of Osama bin Laden, his demise, coupled with the transfer of Petraeus out of Afghanistan, offered two opportunities. The first was a return to the prior definition of success in Afghanistan, in which the goal was the disruption of al Qaeda. Second, the departure of Petraeus and his staff also removed the ideology of counterinsurgency, in which social transformation was seen as the means toward a practical and radical transformation of Afghanistan. These two events opened the door to the redefinition of the U.S. goal and the ability to claim mission accomplished for the earlier, more modest end, thereby building the basis for terminating the war.

The central battle was in the United States military, divided between conventional warfighters and counter-insurgents. Counterinsurgency draws its roots from theories of social development in emerging countries going back to the 1950s. It argues that victory in these sorts of wars depends on social and political mobilization and that the purpose of the military battle is to create a space to build a state and nation capable of defending itself.

The conventional understanding of war is that its purpose is to defeat the enemy military. It presents a more limited and focused view of military power. This faction, bitterly opposed to Petraeus' view of what was happening in Afghanistan, saw the war in terms of defeating the Taliban as a military force. In the view of this faction, defeating the Taliban was impossible with the force available and unlikely even with a more substantial force. There were two reasons for this. First, the Taliban comprised a light infantry force with a superior intelligence capability and the ability to withdraw from untenable operations (such as the battle for Helmand province) and re-engage on more favorable terms elsewhere. Second, sanctuaries in Pakistan allowed the Taliban to withdraw to safety and reconstitute themselves, thereby making their defeat in detail impossible. The option of invading Pakistan remained, but the idea of invading a country of 180 million people with some fraction of the nearly 150,000 U.S. and allied troops in Afghanistan was militarily unsupportable. Indeed, no force the United States could field would be in a position to compel Pakistan to conform to American wishes.

The alternative on the American side is a more conventional definition of war in which the primary purpose of the U.S. military in Afghanistan is to create a framework for special operations forces to disrupt al Qaeda in Afghanistan and potentially Pakistan, not to attempt to either defeat the Taliban strategically or transform Afghanistan politically and culturally. With the death of bin Laden, an argument can be made — at least for political purposes — that al Qaeda has been disrupted enough that the conventional military framework in Afghanistan is no longer needed. If al Qaeda revives in Afghanistan, then covert operations can be considered. The problem with al Qaeda is that it does not require any single country to regenerate. It is a global guerrilla force.

Asymmetry in U.S. and Pakistani Interests

The United States can choose to leave Afghanistan without suffering strategic disaster. Pakistan cannot leave Pakistan. It therefore cannot leave its border with Afghanistan nor can it evade the reality that Pakistani ethnic groups — particularly the Pashtun, which straddle the border and form the heart of the Taliban phenomenon — live on the Afghan side of the border as well. Therefore, while Afghanistan is a piece of American global strategy and not its whole, Afghanistan is central to Pakistan's national strategy. This asymmetry in U.S. and Pakistani interests is now the central issue.

When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, Pakistan joined with the United States to defeat the Soviets. Saudi Arabia provided money and recruits, the Pakistanis provided training facilities and intelligence and the United States provided trainers and other support. For Pakistan, the Soviet invasion was a matter of fundamental national interest. Facing a hostile India supported by the Soviets and a Soviet presence in Afghanistan, Pakistan was threatened on two fronts. Therefore, deep involvement with the jihadists in Afghanistan was essential to Pakistan because the jihadists tied down the Soviets. This was also beneficial to the United States.

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States became indifferent to Afghanistan's future. Pakistan could not be indifferent. It remained deeply involved with the Islamist forces that had defeated the Soviets and would govern Afghanistan, and it helped

facilitate the emergence of the Taliban as the dominant force in the country. The United States was quite content with this in the 1990s and accepted the fact that Pakistani intelligence had become intertwined not only with the forces that fought the Soviets but also with the Taliban, who, with Pakistani support, won the civil war that followed the Soviet defeat.

Intelligence organizations are as influenced by their clients as their clients are controlled by them. Consider anti-Castro Cubans in the 1960s and 1970s and their beginning as CIA assets and their end as major influencers of U.S. policy toward Cuba. The Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI) became entwined with its clients. As the influence of the Taliban and Islamist elements increased in Afghanistan, the sentiment spread to Pakistan, where a massive Islamist movement developed with influence in the government and intelligence services.

Sept. 11, 2001, posed a profound threat to Pakistan. On one side, Pakistan faced a United States in a state of crisis, demanding Pakistani support against both al Qaeda and the Taliban. On the other side Pakistan had a massive Islamist movement hostile to the United States and intelligence services that had, for a generation, been intimately linked to Afghan Islamists, first with whole-hearted U.S. support, then with its benign indifference. The American demands involved shredding close relationships in Afghanistan, supporting an American occupation in Afghanistan and therefore facing internal resistance and threats in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Pakistani solution was the only one it could come up with to placate both the United States and the forces in Pakistan that did not want to cooperate with the United States. The Pakistanis lied. To be more precise and fair, they did as much as they could for the United States without completely destabilizing Pakistan while making it appear that they were being far more cooperative with the Americans and far less cooperative with their public. As in any such strategy, the ISI and Islamabad found themselves engaged in a massive balancing act.

U.S. and Pakistani national interests widely diverged. The United States wanted to disrupt al Qaeda regardless of the cost. The Pakistanis wanted to avoid the collapse of their regime at any cost. These were not compatible goals. At the same time, the United States and Pakistan needed each other. The United States could not possibly operate in Afghanistan without some Pakistani support, ranging from the use of Karachi and the Karachi-Khyber and Karachi-Chaman lines of supply to at least some collaboration on intelligence sharing, at least on al Qaeda. The Pakistanis badly needed American support against India. If the United States simply became pro-Indian, the Pakistani position would be in severe jeopardy.

The United States was always aware of the limits of Pakistani assistance. The United States accepted this publicly because it made Pakistan appear to be an ally at a time when the United States was under attack for unilateralism. It accepted it privately as well because it did not want to see Pakistan destabilize. The Pakistanis were aware of the limits of American tolerance, so a game was played out.

The Endgame in Afghanistan

That game is now breaking down, not because the United States raided Pakistan and killed bin Laden but because it is becoming apparent to Pakistan that the United States will, sooner or later, be dramatically drawing down its forces in Afghanistan. This drawdown creates three facts. First, Pakistan will be facing the future on its western border with Afghanistan without an American force to support it. Pakistan does not want to alienate the Taliban, and not just for ideological reasons. It also expects the Taliban to govern Afghanistan in due course. India aside, Pakistan needs to maintain its ties to the Taliban in order to maintain its influence in Afghanistan and guard its western flank. Being cooperative with the United States is less important. Second, Pakistan is aware that as the United States draws down, it will need Pakistan to cover its withdrawal strategically. Afghanistan is not Iraq, and as the U.S. force draws down, it will be in greater danger. The U.S. needs Pakistani influence. Finally, there will be a negotiation with the Taliban, and elements of Pakistan, particularly the ISI, will be the intermediary.

The Pakistanis are preparing for the American drawdown. Publicly, it is important for them to appear as independent and even hostile to the Americans as possible in order to maintain their domestic credibility. Up to now, they have appeared to various factions in Pakistan as American lackeys. If the United States is leaving, the Pakistanis can't afford to appear that way anymore. There are genuine issues separating the two countries, but in the end, the show is as important as the issues. U.S. accusations that the government has not cooperated with the United States in fighting Islamists are exactly what the Pakistani establishment needs in order to move to the next phase. Publicly arresting CIA sources who aided the United States in capturing bin Laden also enhances this new image.

From the American point of view, the war in Afghanistan — and elsewhere — has not been a failure. There have been no more attacks on the United States on the order of 9/11, and that has not been for al Qaeda's lack of trying. U.S. intelligence and security services, fumbling in the early days, achieved a remarkable success, and that was aided by the massive disruption of al Qaeda by U.S. military operations. The measure of military success is simple. If the enemy was unable to strike, the military effort was a success. Obviously, there is no guarantee that al Qaeda will not regenerate or that another group will not emerge, but a continued presence in Afghanistan at this point doesn't affect that. This is particularly true as franchise operations like the Yemen-based al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula begin to overtake the old apex leadership in terms of both operational innovation in transnational efforts and the ideological underpinnings of those attacks.

In the end, the United States will leave Afghanistan (with the possible exception of some residual special operations forces). Pakistan will draw Afghanistan back into its sphere of influence. Pakistan will need American support against India (since China does not have the force needed to support Pakistan over the Himalayas nor the navy to protect Pakistan's coast). The United States will need Pakistan to do the basic work of preventing an intercontinental al Qaeda from forming again. Reflecting on the past 10 years, Pakistan will see that as being in its national interest. The United States will use Pakistan to balance India while retaining close ties to India.

A play will be acted out like the New Zealand Haka, with both sides making terrible sounds and frightening gestures at each other. But now that the counter-insurgency concept is being discarded, from all indications, and a fresh military analysis is under way, the script is being

rewritten and we can begin to see the end shaping up. The United States is furious at Pakistan for its willingness to protect American enemies. Pakistan is furious at the United States for conducting attacks on its sovereign territory. In the end it doesn't matter. They need each other. In the affairs of nations, like and dislike are not meaningful categories, and bullying and treachery are not blocks to cooperation. The two countries need each other more than they need to punish each other. Great friendships among nations are built on less.