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ALJAZEERA NETWORK

The Great Power Competition in the Af-Pak Belt

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3 July 2011

Imperial Britain created many unnatural constructs, including two countries that have searched endlessly to define a national identity — Afghanistan and Pakistan (or “Af-Pak”). Today, due to their internal contradictions and the open challenge by an array of Islamist or insurgent forces within, the two countries have reached a tipping point.

The decision of U.S. President Barack Obama to begin withdrawing American forces from Afghanistan and to end all combat operations there by 2014 has set the stage for sharpening geopolitical competition to shape the future political landscape in that country and in neighboring Pakistan. Another recent development — the daring U.S. military raid that killed Osama bin Laden in his hideout in Abbottabad, the cradle of the Pakistani army — has served as a reminder that this region remains the world’s main sanctuary for transnational terrorists and that the challenge to stabilize and de-radicalize the Af-Pak belt is daunting. In fact, bin Laden’s killing and the capture of a number of other al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders from towns in the heartland of Pakistan in the decade after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, have shown that leading militants operate not from mountain caves but from Pakistani cities, which have turned into citadels of jihadist organizations, including state-reared terror groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba, which means “the Army of the Pure.”

It is evident in hindsight that it was too much to expect unnatural creations to come of age naturally. The two countries seem to be inexorably edging ever closer to the abyss. Constituting the most problematic region on earth, Pakistan and Afghanistan are plagued by weak, unstable governments, runaway Islamist insurgencies, foreign-aid dependency, endemic corruption and rampant narcotics trade. By Westphalian standards, these are failing states, given the disintegration of their internal security, the blurring of the line between state and non-state actors, and the writ of the central government not extending to sizable areas.

In each of the two countries, the president is more like the mayor of the capital city. Whereas in Afghanistan the diverse warlords and tribal chieftains call the shots; in Pakistan it is the powerful, meddling military establishment, other than in the lawless western parts. The only major difference is that Pakistan has joined the list of failing states with nuclear weapons. For the foreseeable future, the Af-Pak belt is likely to remain the wellspring of international terrorism.

Against this background, the divergent interests of the U.S., China and India in the Af-Pak belt have compounded the regional situation.

American interests

The Af-Pak belt is the largest recipient of American aid in the world, underlining the strategic significance of this region for U.S. interests. In fact, after ending the Afghan war, the U.S. intends to maintain long-term military bases in Afghanistan, just as it plans to maintain a limited number of forces in Iraq to retain a strategic anchor there. In Afghanistan, however, America is likely — after the end of the war — to use its air power to rein in hostile elements there and to go after terrorist safe havens in Pakistan. In Obama’s recent words, “our efforts must also address terrorist safe havens in Pakistan” and that the U.S. goal in the Af-Pak belt “can be expressed simply: no safe haven from which al-Qaeda or its affiliates can launch attacks against our homeland or our allies.”

That is the reason why, with the start of the drawdown of U.S. troops, the American war focus in Afghanistan is shifting from the south to the east, along the border with Pakistan. As the raid on bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad demonstrated, the U.S. needs a base from where it can strike targets in Pakistan. Eastern Afghanistan thus will become an even more important launch-pad for U.S. drone and commando raids against militant networks inside

Pakistan and to ensure that Pakistan's fast-growing nuclear arsenal does not fall into jihadist hands.

The U.S. has been deeply involved in the Af-Pak belt since the 1950s. But the nature of that involvement was radically transformed in the period after the 1979 Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, with the U.S. first waging a CIA-orchestrated covert war through Pakistan to drive out the Soviets from that landlocked country and then waging an overt war following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The covert U.S. war against the nearly nine-year-long Soviet military intervention helped instill an Af-Pak jihad culture and created Frankenstein's like bin Laden and Mullah Mohammad Omar, the one-eyed chief of the Afghan Taliban.

The result of such a history of covert and overt wars and the continuing need to carry out drone and commando raids is that the U.S. is deeply unpopular in the Af-Pak belt among the masses. America's unfavorable rating is particularly striking in Pakistan, where critics of Pakistani ties with Washington are ascendant on the streets. According to a 2011 survey by the Washington-based Pew Research Center as part of its Global Attitudes Project, about three-quarters of Pakistanis have an unfavorable opinion of the U.S., with 7 in 10 considering America more an enemy of Pakistan than a partner.

The growing anti-Americanism on the street compounds Washington's Af-Pak challenges. Pakistan poses a particularly difficult challenge: despite providing more than \$21 billion to Pakistan in counterterrorism and other aid since 9/11, the U.S. has received grudging assistance, at best, and duplicitous cooperation, at worst. Today, amid the rising tide of anti-Americanism, U.S. policy on Pakistan is crumbling. Yet Pakistan, with one of the world's lowest tax-to-GDP ratios, has become more dependent on U.S. aid than ever.

U.S. policy, however, continues to be driven by short-term regional interests, in which Pakistan remains central to facilitating the end of all U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan. In fact, Obama's narrowing of the Afghan war goals has made the U.S. only more dependent on Pakistan. By moving away from the Bush-era counterinsurgency strategy toward limited objectives centered on political reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban, Obama now needs the Pakistani generals to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. After all, these generals provide sanctuary to the top Afghan Taliban leadership, besides allowing Taliban fighters to use Pakistan as a base from which to launch cross-border attacks. A face-saving U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan is simply inconceivable without Pakistani cooperation.

Chinese interests

China has long been an active player in Pakistan, which it describes as an "all-weather friend." The Sino-Pakistan strategic nexus against a common enemy, India, has been deepening in recent years. But China is a relatively new player in Afghanistan, where it has aggressively sought to exploit commercial and resource-extraction opportunities amid a raging war. In fact, during the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, China sought resource-import opportunities. The day the 9/11 attacks happened a Chinese delegation was in Kandahar, Afghanistan, negotiating with the Taliban leadership on energy and mineral contracts.

China's dealings with the Taliban regime were in line with its proclivity to assertively seek commercial opportunities in pariah regimes, extending from Burma to Sudan. Whenever Western sanctions are imposed against any regime, China is quick to exploit the new openings. For example, the withdrawal of Japanese and Indian firms from certain energy projects in Iran under U.S. pressure has proven a commercial boon for China, whose state-run firms were quick to fill the void.

In Afghanistan, it is China, not the U.S., which is mainly reaping mineral contracts. Afghanistan is a treasure trove of mineral deposits, including vast quantities of metals such as lithium, gold, cobalt, copper and iron, with the U.S. estimating the Afghan mineral wealth at nearly \$1 trillion in untapped deposits scattered throughout the country. While the U.S. and other NATO countries seek to provide some semblance of security in Afghanistan, Chinese firms are the largest beneficiaries of the resource boom there. For example, the state-owned China Metallurgical Group Corp. signed a \$2.9 billion agreement with the Afghan government in December 2007 to extract copper from the Aynak mines, which contain some of the world's largest unexploited copper deposits, with 240 million tons of ore estimated there. The Afghan mines minister was accused of taking \$30 million in bribes from the Chinese company in exchange for the contract — a charge he denied. Still, a new minister of mines was later appointed, and he vowed to clean up the culture of rampant corruption.

China's interests in Pakistan, by contrast, are more broad-based. China's deepening strategic penetration of Pakistan — and the joint plans to set up new oil pipelines, railroads, and even a naval base on the Arabian Sea that will serve as the first overseas location offering support to the Chinese navy for out-of-area missions — are spurring greater U.S. and Indian concerns. For India, the implications of the growing strategic nexus are particularly stark because both China and Pakistan refuse to accept the territorial status quo and lay claim to large tracts of Indian land.

An influx of up to 11,000 soldiers of the People's Liberation Army into Pakistan's Himalayan regions of Gilgit and Baltistan to supposedly work on new projects, including a railroad, an upgraded highway, dams, and secret tunnels, has raised concerns that those strategic borderlands could come under the Chinese sway. The predominantly Shiite Gilgit and Baltistan are in Kashmir, where the borders of China, India and Pakistan converge. The PLA influx has resulted, according to India, in the presence of Chinese troops close to Pakistan's line of control in Kashmir with India. This presents India with a two-front theater in the event of a war with either country.

Within days of bin Laden's killing, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani traveled to Beijing. The accompanying defense minister, Ahmed Mukhtar, reported that whatever requests for assistance the Pakistani side made, the Chinese government was more than happy to oblige, including agreeing to take over operation of the strategically positioned but underused port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea upon expiry of an existing contract with a Singaporean government company. Beijing also decided to gift Pakistan 50 JF-17 fighter jets.

More importantly, Mukhtar disclosed that Pakistan had asked China to begin building a naval base at Gwadar, where Beijing funded and built the port. "We would be ... grateful to the Chinese government if a naval base is ... constructed at the site of Gwadar for Pakistan," he said in a statement. He later told a British newspaper in an interview: "We have asked our Chinese brothers to please build a naval base at Gwadar." Mukhtar's comments on the naval base embarrassed Beijing, which wants no publicity. China usually makes strategic moves by stealth. It launched work even on the Gwadar port quietly. So it responded to Mukhtar's comments with equivocation, saying "this issue was not touched upon" during the visit. But the Chinese Communist Party's hawkish *Global Times* was not shy about advertising China's interest in setting up bases overseas. In an editorial titled, "China Needs Overseas Bases for Global Role," the newspaper urged the outside world to "understand the need of China to set up overseas military bases."

Whereas Pakistan wants to help the Chinese navy counterbalance India's naval forces, China's aim is to have important naval presence in the Indian Ocean to underpin its larger geopolitical ambitions and to get into the great-power maritime game. It thus needs Gwadar to plug its main weakness — the absence of a naval anchor in the region. China's plan also is to make Gwadar a major energy hub transporting Gulf and African oil by pipeline to the

Chinese heartland via Pakistan-held Kashmir and Xinjiang. Such piped oil would not only cut freight costs and supply time but also lower China's reliance on U.S.-policed shipping lanes through the Malacca and Taiwan Straits.

Indian interests

India is one of Afghanistan's largest aid donors, and has committed more than \$1.5 billion to reconstruction efforts and infrastructure projects in that country. In sharp contrast to the U.S. military surge that occurred up to 2010, India has concentrated on a civilian surge in Afghanistan, avoiding any kind of military footprint there. India has been building highways, hospitals and important installations, including Afghanistan's new Parliament building. Partly because of its focus on civilian reconstruction, India enjoys the highest positive rating among all countries in Afghanistan, according to a Pew survey.

India's involvement in Afghanistan, however, is not new. India and Afghanistan have been close partners for more than six decades, except during the time of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. India was a major sponsor of the Northern Alliance, which, with U.S. air support, drove the Taliban out of power after 9/11. The Indo-Afghan partnership — built on the principle that “enemy's enemy is a friend” — has spawned close cooperation in various fields. India indeed has been a major aid donor to Afghanistan since the 1950s.

After Pakistan was carved out of India in 1947, Afghanistan was the only country to openly oppose Pakistan's admission to the United Nations. Afghanistan has from the beginning refused to recognize the so-called Durand Line. The Durand Line separating Afghanistan and Pakistan was an artificial, British-colonial invention that left the large Pashtu community divided into two. Set up in 1893 as the border between British-led India and Afghanistan and named after the then British foreign secretary for India, the Durand Line had been despised and rejected by Afghanistan for long as a colonial imposition.

Today, the ethnic polarization in the Af-Pak belt has hardened and the Durand Line exists only in maps. On the ground, the line has little political, ethnic and economic relevance, even as the Af-Pak belt has become a magnet for the world's jihadists. With Islamists and terrorists expanding their hold on western Pakistan, it is already proving impossible to control the Af-Pak transboundary movement of armed militants.

For India, what happens in Afghanistan is critical to its long-term security. If the Taliban were to retake Afghanistan, India would face a radical Islamite stretching from its border with Pakistan deep into Central Asia and West Asia. In this scenario, jihadists would then direct their energies against India. That is why India will do what it can to prevent the Taliban from gaining ascendancy across Afghanistan. In recent years, India has stepped up its presence in Afghanistan, reopening the consulates it was forced to close down during the Taliban rule. Pakistan, however, sees the Indian consulates close to its border as, to borrow a phrase from Ayatollah Khomeini, “nests of spies.” Yet as the endgame in Afghanistan unfolds, India's non-military role there is set to deepen.

Specter of greater competition

The way the endgame in Afghanistan is being played out indicates sharpening geopolitical competition between outside powers in the Af-Pak belt. The U.S. objective is to ensure that by the time NATO's combat operations end in 2014, Afghanistan is securely in the hands of a friendly government and army that are backed by U.S. air power and Special Forces. This is an objective that meshes with Indian interests, although the U.S. and India differ on other Af-Pak issues. By contrast, China's interests in Afghanistan are more aligned with those of Pakistan's. The Pakistani objective is to help install the Taliban back in power.

The Taliban do have one distinct advantage: with their sanctuaries deep inside Pakistan, they are able to sustain their Afghan-war effort, relying on the free cross-border movement of men and material, a command-and-control network based in Pakistan's sprawling Baluchistan province, and ready recruitment of new fighters from the Pakistani madrassas. But the Taliban are hobbled by several disadvantages, including the hostility against them among non-Pashtun ethnic communities, the emergence of new militant groups, private armies and warlords in the Pashtu lands, and their overreliance on Pakistan making them very susceptible to Pakistani pressure.

The danger of political fragmentation of the Af-Pak belt is real. Afghanistan and Pakistan have not only ceased to be politically cohesive, but they also have turned into potent threats to regional and international security. The jihadist monster reared by the Pakistani military establishment is now increasingly turning on its creator. Fundamentalism, extremism and militarism have eaten into the vitals of Pakistan to the extent that it has become like a ship adrift on the high seas. Afghanistan, for its part, is no longer the buffer state that it was historically designed to be. Rather than separate empires and conflicts, it now a center of raging battles that are being fought on its Islamist ruins. In a de facto sense, Afghanistan is already fragmented, with the non-Pashtun provinces virtually autonomous.

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