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Reconsidering Afghanistan: Time for an "Azimuth Check"

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Reconsidering Afghanistan: Time for an "Azimuth Check"

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For some time now, our trajectory and strategy in Afghanistan have been flat. We are not losing, and we are not winning. We find ourselves in an operational stalemate where progress on governance, reconstruction, and economic development—the core of our state-building strategy—is slowing while requirements for security and additional military force are accelerating. This condition is dangerous, given the American cultural urge to move on to new challenges. The Pakistanis and Afghans are not only aware of this tendency, they remember it, rendering our protestations of constancy moot. Even Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, ousted by the United States in 2001, understands the virtue of patience. "Americans have all the watches," he once observed, "but we have all the time."

What Mullah Omar is suggesting is that if we are not winning, we are losing. He seems to grasp, possibly better than we do, that the United States and the international community cannot maintain their current level of commitment to Afghanistan indefinitely, probably not even for another five years. His prognosis, if correct, carries profound implications for US strategy.

Two Strategic Mistakes

Why we are not winning is complex but can be traced to two strategic errors, both of which are remediable. The first error centers on state-building: We have adopted a standard western state-building template that does not fit Afghan conditions particularly well. Expectations, both ours and the Afghans', are not aligned with reality, not just in terms of outcomes but

also in terms of the time it will take to achieve them. The second mistake is more dangerous to our overall objectives in Afghanistan. It centers on the Taliban insurgency, which we perceive in one dimension (as a military—our military—problem). This perception drives American strategy and the instruments of US power we choose, with decreasing returns, to apply to it. But there are other parties to the conflict. Pakistan, the Afghan people, and the insurgents themselves view the insurgency in ways that differ significantly from our perspective. A successful strategy for defeating the insurgency needs to be based on a clearer, deeper understanding of what these parties want.

Barring a major revision in strategy, our trajectory in Afghanistan is likely to continue to be flat, or worse. Most Afghans still think things are a little better now than they were before we came. But they also wonder why things are not a lot better, and a lot safer. The longer they wonder, the harder our task becomes, because while we may have a reputation for impatience, we do not own it outright. Thus the Mullah's strategy: If he is not losing, he is winning.

A Matter of Time

The current approach is an acceptable strategy, but it is not without flaws. The Taliban cannot defeat NATO militarily, but they do not have to; their best weapon is time. They can retard governance, reconstruction, and development, diminish security for the population, and erode national will. In essence, they can shorten the time available for state-building. A waiting game, however, is passive. It cedes the tactical domain to the United States, NATO, and the international community, betting that under the conditions that support the insurgency those actors will make operational mistakes that will result in their losing the contest in the long run. This strategy also assumes that America lacks the vision and agility either to recover from our operational mistakes or to craft an overall strategy that could make time switch sides.

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That line of reasoning makes Afghanistan still ours to win or lose. If we are to win, it is commonly understood, we have to identify the mistakes being made in our operations, militarily as well as in project assistance. But beyond the simple identification of mistakes, we are actually expected to fix these errors and omissions, a much more difficult proposition that is often overcome by doctrine, politics, and budgets. We do not lack sound prescriptions for improving our performance: more road building; better coordination of international aid and more of it; better implementation of projects, including faster disbursement of project money; more civilian risk-taking; and smarter—much smarter—military operations that reduce or eliminate collateral casualties.

While all of these measures are necessary, the real question is, are they sufficient? If time is central to the enemy's strategy, it would be wise to make it a central focus of our strategy. Would these adjustments, if successfully implemented, be sufficient to give our state-building strategy the momentum necessary to establish the program within sight of a functioning, stable, and moderate Afghan state—in the time available?

This question is difficult to answer for a number of reasons. We should have at least some idea of how much time it would take and how much time is available. We can get a sense of the dimensions for each by examining our state-building operations and the dynamic created between these operations and Afghan culture.

A second, and more important, question is whether a successful outcome in Afghanistan is solely a function of current operations, that is, the military defeat of the Taliban and the construction of a stable Afghan state, or whether it can only be accomplished with a broader strategy extending beyond Afghanistan itself. Here there is less uncertainty. It is difficult to maintain, in the face of an extended stalemate, that America's strategy in Afghanistan, a strategy centered on state-building, is completely sound; that it is merely distracted by a relentless insurgency and the kind of operational challenges that are endemic in places like Afghanistan and can be remedied with more time, resources, and better execution. Increased pledges of assistance from the international community and additional deployments of US forces to Afghanistan—including a mini-surge from 19,000 troops in 2006, raising the force level to 48,000 troops today—have not generated hoped for results. Something is missing. Today, we have a good idea of where at least part of the problem lies—Pakistan—but we do not seem to understand the roots of the problem.

As we reach 2009, our eighth year in Afghanistan, it is past the time to try to answer these questions. One approach to doing so is to use a methodology the infantry calls an "azimuth check," originally a tactical technique to determine whether fired rounds were on target. Today, the Army uses the term more broadly; an azimuth check is much more than simply verifying bearings and coordinates at a given place and time. It is a full diagnostic; it conveys a holistic depiction of why we are on target or why not. To make these determinations, it reviews an entire mission—objectives, strategy, and operations—usually in three steps.

Three Steps

The first step in any azimuth check is to understand the commander's intent—in this case, to understand what the objective in Afghanistan really is. What are we trying to achieve? Is Afghanistan to be a model state, a democratic oasis in South Central Asia? Is it to be a stable state? Or is it merely to be a garrison space filled with almost anything and anyone except terrorists?

Most Americans believe that if you work hard, you can grow up to be whatever you want; inherent in this belief, however, is the assumption that you will have the time to do it. Others have less idealistic beliefs, especially with regard to Afghanistan, noting that culture, history, and geography have conspired to place it perennially among the world's poorest states. There is, nevertheless, a broad and consistent consensus that Afghanistan can, with hard work, become a stable and moderate Islamic state.

The second step in the azimuth check is twofold. First, we should determine whether the field operations that support our state-building strategy are being effectively executed, and if not, why not. Metrics and benchmarks can provide a fair indication of how we are doing. They are linear. We can measure our progress, for example, in building the 80,000-strong Afghan National Army by counting kandaks (battalions) as they come off the production-line and by observing how well they fight. Such metrics will tell us that we are making good progress. The army is reasonably diverse, seems to have public support, and the kandaks fight well. Metrics for education and, increasingly, for reconstruction would also reflect success.

The metrics for governance, which include law enforcement and the justice system, appear satisfactory on paper, but a closer examination reveals results that are dramatically less encouraging. For counternarcotics,

the metrics would not at all be encouraging. The exponential growth of poppy cultivation and its links to governance and the insurgency will factor significantly in the success of our state-building efforts and strategy. These metrics comprise a category of their own and, perhaps, require a multilateral strategy distinct and separate from the state-building strategy, one well beyond the scope of this article.

To complete the second step of the azimuth check, we need to ascertain whether our operations, even the most effective ones, actually support our state-building strategy. Metrics are less useful for this step because by nature they are operational; they do not address strategic issues. In fact, they may even provide false readings. For example, building an 80,000-man army (possibly an even larger one) will satisfy the metric, even though Afghanistan cannot afford to equip, or even pay, a force that large. Does building such a force help stabilize the country in the long run?

The final step in an azimuth check is the commander's responsibility. He is required to determine whether the strategy itself is sound. Will it enable us to reach the objective? If not, why not?

Azimuth checks are not popular, even in the infantry. At the policy level, the notion of strategic adjustment and the risks associated with it, both substantive and political, can be difficult to accept, especially when current policy has not yet forced us to consider the possibility of defeat. Nevertheless, a reexamination of some of the factors that sustain the unfavorable stalemate in Afghanistan yields a surprisingly short list of adjustments—principally strategic, a few operational, all practicable—that might rob Mullah Omar of his most effective weapon and, ultimately, of his prize by producing a historical anomaly: a stable Afghanistan at peace with itself and with its neighbors.

Commander's Intent

Strategy can be defined as how to get what you want. In Afghanistan, what we wanted was established while the World Trade Center was still smoldering. We wanted security. By December 2001 we had it, at least momentarily. The Taliban, never the objective, was defeated. But al Qaeda, always the primary objective, was not; it was damaged and shoved east, out of Afghanistan, into Pakistan, but not destroyed. There was nothing left in the geographical space called Afghanistan that would prevent its eventual

return. America believed that a stable Afghan state, capable of keeping al Qaeda out, would have to be established.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. No one asked how, even if everything went perfectly, this stable state could actually keep anyone from crossing a 2,400-kilometer border with Pakistan, across some of the world's harshest terrain. Perhaps someone should have raised the issue, given the limited success our own nation had in securing its borders. In fact, this aspect of the strategic situation never seemed to be a real concern. The Taliban insurgency and its degrading effects on state-building were not foreseen. Our immediate needs in the war against al Qaeda could be met indefinitely by the pincers of the expensive ($90 million per month) new counterterrorism alliance with Pakistan and US Special Forces operations in the east and south of Afghanistan. The Afghan portion of the war on terrorism began to ebb, and Afghanistan began to slip out of the cross hairs of American national security strategy. US military objectives in Afghanistan became an operational subset of the state-building strategy, measurable in metrics: build an army; co-opt Afghanistan's warlords and militia commanders; and provide security until the army, police, and justice system were ready.

Afghanistan became the land of metrics. In December 2001 and January 2002, respectively, multiyear milestones were established; for good reason, many were focused on governance and the management of power relationships among Afghanistan's elites. State-building tasks were assigned to various donor states and international funding was pledged. The assumption was that as the metrics were met, a stable state would emerge. By 2006, many of the original milestones had been met, including adoption of a constitution, the naming of a Supreme Court, and the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections. New milestones were set, and more international funding was pledged. But there was still little sign of a functioning state, let alone a stable one.

The US strategic focus remained squarely on al Qaeda and Pakistan. Mullah Omar and the tattered remnants of the Taliban leadership found safe haven across the border, in Baluchistan to the south and in the eastern half of their traditional Pashtun tribal homeland, Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Pashtun tribesmen can and do ignore the British-demarcated border that, in 1893, superimposed two states over their homeland, splitting it in two, but American forces cannot. Beyond reach in the FATA, the Taliban

reconstituted itself and began the Afghan insurgency. Pakistan had an interest in keeping American aid flowing by hunting down and delivering the occasional al Qaeda leader. Oddly, though, Pakistan could not seem to locate Taliban leaders, even when given directions by Afghan intelligence. In fact, as late as 2005, Islamabad adamantly denied the presence, in the FATA or anywhere else in Pakistan, of any Taliban. Those assertions should have triggered a major rethink regarding the strategic premise behind our goals of state-building in Afghanistan. Insurgencies that enjoy a safe haven are nearly impossible to defeat.

We resisted the notion. American policymakers seemed to believe that the Islamabad government had already been pushed to the breaking point in its efforts to accommodate US demands against al Qaeda. They did not want to risk forcing an end to Islamabad's sporadic cooperation, including its grudging tolerance of US airstrikes against al Qaeda targets in the FATA, by insisting that Pakistan target the Taliban's leadership nodes in South Waziristan, Quetta, and Peshawar—something it clearly did not wish to do.

The fact that the insurgency did not pose a significant military threat to Afghanistan made it easy to avoid tough decisions related to our Pakistan strategy, even as the security mission in Afghanistan began to witness a resurgence of combat operations, with areas in the east and south becoming too dangerous for reconstruction work. The target was always al Qaeda. That mission was sacred. Our Afghanistan state-building strategy, comprising operational goals that were difficult and time-consuming to reach even under benign conditions, approached the quixotic under insurgency conditions. The strategy was, nevertheless, left to fend for itself.

That is where we are today. Despite the passage of time and significant change in Afghanistan and Pakistan, neither strategy has yet been modified, though the insurgency has put both under increasing strain. There has been renewed pressure on Islamabad to come to grips with its militants, but, beyond an increase in the pace of US airstrikes inside Pakistani territory, there has been no clear, fundamental shift in policy and no rearrangement of the terms and conditions of the US-Pakistan relationship.

In Afghanistan, the objective remains the establishment of a stable state. Unwilling or unable to consider strategic alternatives for achieving this goal, for example by directly linking our policy objectives in Pakistan and Afghanistan, we continue to view our inability to establish a stable government primarily as a failure in our operational shortcomings,

exacerbated by the insurgency. Each of these is, truly, a problem. But they are not the primary problem.

Assessing Operations

Step two is to assess whether the stability operations that comprise the strategy for building the stable government are being executed effectively. Do they support the strategy? If not, why not? State-building is difficult in places where a functioning national government and its institutions either never existed or have been forgotten. Afghanistan certainly qualifies, although it is difficult to decide on which count. In Afghanistan, as elsewhere, the approach to state-building relies on reconstruction, governance, and economic development initiatives—often portrayed as "pillars." We measure progress in state-building through a time and quantity lens—a perspective defined by our budget processes—focused on how much is being spent to achieve a particular milestone in a predetermined amount of time.

There seems to be little debate among donors regarding this quantitative approach to state-building, as the $31 billion pledged by donor nations since 2006 would suggest. The idea persists that if enough money is poured into Afghanistan, a nation that looks distinctly western will eventually emerge.

Reconstruction

The time and quantity lens works well with regard to reconstruction projects, the easiest pillar to support. With sufficient funding, roads, bridges, schools, and electrical grids can be built, and a wide range of smaller projects can be implemented. Their connection to the strategic objective—establishing a stable state—is direct and obvious. In this arena operational mistakes are easily identified and addressed. In fiscal years 2003-2006, for example, America and its Coalition partners did not provide sufficient infrastructure funding, especially for a number of larger projects. Despite agreement by virtually all involved that road building was a critical task, we were unable to build as many roads as were needed. The problem was not simply that the Administration did not plan sufficiently or that Congress failed to approve funds. The problem was distinctly operational: We were not well-positioned, in the field or in Washington, to execute large infrastructure projects. Significant amounts of unspent money remained

in the budget "pipeline." Under these conditions, Congress could not be persuaded to spend more and, in fact, the Administration was reluctant even to ask for additional funding.

In the current environment, while reconstruction operations still face seemingly intractable obstacles in southern portions of Afghanistan—difficulty exists in the construction of roads in contested areas, and schools are being destroyed by the Taliban—we are still executing these heavy construction missions quite well. Practitioners and analysts have offered a number of excellent ideas for improving operations even further; most suggestions are focused generally on speed, efficiency, coordination, and implementation. Consistent with the Afghan National Development Strategy, and coordinated with the Government of Afghanistan, these measures are in line with expectations and desires of not only Afghanistan's elites, but also from the greater citizenry.

Culture, History, and Time

What works for reconstruction does not always work in support of the other pillars, particularly that of governance, justice, and law enforcement, where progress has been much slower, at least when measured as a product of time and money. These pillars require a great deal more than cash and efficiency. They are directly linked to culture, history, and human behavior that outsiders often do not fully comprehend.

For many, it is difficult to understand that there are those who do not aspire to be like us. The fact is that Afghanistan is full of good, ordinary, everyday people. They are mainly Pashtuns, with a conservative social code that is so at odds with our own that, as one observer noted, it "constantly brings one up with a jolt." Afghans want a better life, but as is often reflected in the more rural areas, they do not necessarily want our better life.

America's culture thrives on change, in fact, demands it; our form of governance, the one with which we are trying to transform Afghanistan, reflects this preference. In Afghanistan, however, the culture defines itself by what it has always been. It resists change. It resists outside authority, as the Soviets and the British before them discovered. The culture can accept minimal change, as it is presently doing, driven by the historical disaster and upheaval it has experienced. But it cannot accept wholesale societal transformation, particularly at a pace that would satisfy western expectations.

Yet our vision for Afghanistan is built on unprecedented and almost instantaneous change across every dimension of Afghan life. We envision a strong central government and a national police force, concepts that Afghans have never accepted because they directly threaten tribal preferences for local autonomy. Culture is not the only barrier to success; while strong central governance may appear to be important to effective counterterrorism, it is questionable whether Afghanistan, where government revenues cover only 20 to 25 percent of recurring expenses, can afford it. Not surprisingly, progress in building these institutions has been frustratingly slow.

In state-building, it is easy to overlook a central truth: To build a stable state, culture cannot be merely given cursory attention, and it cannot be instantly "transformed." Local culture has to be accommodated, and in a timeframe of its own choosing, not ours.

Governance and Justice

Two examples of governance reform illustrate the problem. A major milestone for democratic governance in Afghanistan was apparently met when the Parliament was elected in 2005. The challenge, however, was never about democracy, which the Afghans have practiced for centuries in an almost Greek form, the tribal jirga, in which everyone gets a say. The challenge was to mesh this tradition with a representative, republican form of democracy in the establishment of a Parliament. The outcome of the 2005 parliamentary elections looked good on paper and satisfied the metric, but the result was not a true form of representative governance. It merely reflected a variant of representative governance, presumably, a forum where regional power elites could do battle with each other without the customary slaughter of the recent past.

Similarly, when the Supreme Court was established in 2004, another key milestone appeared to have been met. The court, however, was dominated by conservative religious figures, named primarily to satisfy power-balancing considerations. It was ineffective, and judicial reform, in which the courts are mandated to play a significant role, stagnated. By 2006, however, key relationships had shifted; the incumbent justices were replaced by nine generally moderate technocrats with varying legal backgrounds, including Shari'a. This change was met with great expectation in the West, but five years—and one donor cycle later—minimal success has been realized in reform of the justice system. While the prospects for

judicial reform may be improving, there is no guarantee that recent strides in establishing legitimacy for the court will be permanent. Neither is there any assurance that an Afghan consensus will result, permitting initiatives related to judicial reform to become linear (predictable in terms of time) rather than circular, conceptual, and unpredictable.

The greater challenge is the enormous task of meshing Afghan content with western form—what Americans might call "Afghanization." The problem here is the refusal to respect the mechanics of donor states' assistance programs and budget processes. The milestones and expectations are linear in nature, but the goals and the processes for achieving them are anything but. Money is spent, time passes, and milestones are met superficially or not at all. Donor expectations with regard to money, time, and verifiable progress are likely to be disappointed as they grind into direct contact with the culture. This can generate perceptions of failure even when, in fact, there may be progress, although it may occur at a pace that fails to match western expectations.

Afghanistan's recent history does not provide an optimistic prognosis for state-building. In its tortured, 22-year journey through the Soviet invasion, civil war, and Taliban years, Afghanistan did not lose just its elites. It lost almost everything, including most of its craftsmen and merchants, along with an entire generation of young, educated Afghans. Afghanistan lost a generation of knowledge. Replacing it will require a period closer in length to a generation, not the five or ten years most westerners expect.

Time Available

The next step is to put the foregoing observations related to state-building into the context of time, the central element in competing strategies—ours and the Taliban's. The earlier discussion suggests some broad parameters related to the time required to establish a stable state in Afghanistan, even under optimal conditions. We can now examine the critical issue of how much time is actually available.

The time available is, essentially, linked to patience. It is a product, not a sum, of two factors: international willingness to continue state-building operations in Afghanistan and the willingness of the Afghan people to accept the presence of foreigners on their soil. Taliban activity, to a greater or lesser extent, diminishes both; if either factor approaches zero, there is no more time available.

Assessing Afghan patience is difficult. Here, we would do well to look past the Afghan elites with whom we are comfortable, and look to broader Afghan society for the answer. What do they want, and are they receiving it?

In doing so, it is important to remember Afghan history and culture. For the majority of Afghan citizens, the goals of their struggle are not quite the same as our fight. For them it is about security, justice, and income, rather than hearts and minds. To the extent we can help them acquire those things, we are welcome. Excluding the cities in the east, west, and south of the country, many Afghans living in rural areas still have not experienced any of these benefits. Complicating this situation is the fact that the Taliban reinforces these operational challenges by actually providing services and security. We unwittingly compound the problem when we generate civilian casualties as a result of collateral damage, even when we assume a greater degree of empathy related to such events. The message that is often lost in this debate is the fact that Taliban-inflicted casualties are far higher. In myriad ways, as we pursue our military and development objectives, we diminish the basic tenets of Afghan tradition and culture, constantly diminishing Afghan patience.

Patience is lowest in locations where promised security does not exist, where the roads end, where the insurgency has disrupted reconstruction efforts, and where well-intentioned advice about how life should be lived runs contrary to age-old custom. Yet these are the places, ultimately, where decisions regarding Afghanistan's future will be made, by local Afghans. History tells us that Afghanistan's wars are often won in the countryside; it is the cities, with their elites, that are the spoils of such conflicts. This war is no exception. The operational principle, whether related to combat operations or stabilization projects, should be: know the locals, not just the elites; do it their way.

We are not following this principle. Although huge sums of money are being spent, little of it benefits rural Afghans. The time and quantity lens means that anyone with money is welcome to spend it in Afghanistan, on virtually any project. Assistance is broadly uncoordinated. Nongovernmental organizations roam the countryside looking for opportunities to liberate, reform, pronounce, instruct, judge, measure, and even proselytize, retracing the footsteps of the Soviet-inspired kolkhoz builders of the past. To be sure, Afghanistan now has more women judges than any other Muslim state. But it still does not have a working justice system.

Peddling alien ideas that threaten tribal life while failing to deliver the assistance that might improve it seems like a recipe for shortening our welcome, and our time, in Afghanistan. Afghans still want our help, but perhaps not if the asking price is their very identity. The Taliban are asking less. To be certain, there is a definite relationship between all the metrics, milestones, and international commitments to Afghanistan, each contributing to the ability of the international community to exercise patience. The five- or ten-year window envisioned in the time and quantity lens may not sufficiently account for donors' expected timelines related to the emergence of a stable state, especially when these commitments are weighed against the investment of national blood and treasure. It is virtually impossible for any of these large amounts of money to be absorbed by the Afghan government or society in time to meet the ambitious milestones that have been established for security, governance, and economic development; the majority of these goals being outlined in the Afghanistan Compact. Afghanistan is not positioned to command large-scale commitments of resources, due mainly to the fact that the majority of international donors simply cannot justify continued expenditures to their constituents.

Strategy and the Way Forward

Having completed the first two steps of the azimuth check, we can reach some basic conclusions. First, the time required to build a stable state will exceed the time available. Second, our operations are not sufficiently effective to support the current state-building strategy. Third, the strategies attributed to Mullah Omar and others like him would appear to be reasonably sound.

Afghanistan nevertheless remains ours to win or lose. To the extent that adjustments to operations within the country would help determine the outcome, two key changes might advance our progress considerably. Behind each of these initiatives is the need for a deeper, clearer vision, particularly at the policy level, of what the country of Afghanistan actually is, what it can be, and when.

First, we need to develop a more realistic concept of what a successful outcome in Afghanistan would look like, then develop the optimal strategy for achieving such an outcome. The process begins with the recognition that building an Afghan state is not a job for the United States and its supporters; rather, it is a job for Afghans. The nation that will eventually emerge is one in which local culture, history, and political

norms are predominant. With assistance from donor nations, Afghanistan can become a stable and moderate state, capable of sustaining an educated population, representative governance, and other attributes associated with modern societies. Certainly, the nation that emerges will not resemble the template we are currently attempting to apply. The resulting nation would, for example, be less centralized and more federal in governmental structure. Regardless of the balance agreed upon between the elites in Kabul and the regional leadership, the structure of Afghan governance will be the product of a consensus forged among all Afghans.

The second change in strategy is resultant of the first, namely to bring America's assistance and military strategy in line with this vision of an amalgamated Afghanistan. We need to place less emphasis on how much money we spend in Afghanistan and devote greater attention to results. One way to do this is to rationalize (not diminish) our aid expenditures and concentrate on what has produced the greatest success in the past seven years. Some examples of these successes are the reconstruction projects, to include large infrastructure projects; education, including vocational training; health; rural development; and other projects directly supporting quality of life for the people of Afghanistan.

Concurrently, we should encourage the Afghan government to rationalize its own expenditures. Too much aid money, as is probably the case today, can be as damaging as too little. Excess aid tends to encourage dependence, resentment, and corruption. The abundance of aid programs tends to diminish any government inclination to institute financial discipline. One of the greatest threats is that when the money is gone its absence will generate major voids throughout Afghan society. With few exceptions, the trend for external and off-budget support should be downward, not up. Such a trend would force Afghans to make the difficult choices regarding revenues and expenditures. The objective is stability, and stability demands fiscal responsibility.

Finally, America's strategy of continued reliance on the nearly exclusive use of military power to address the insurgency is a losing proposition. The insurgency is a little like an overflowing sink: We can use more and more rags to mop up the overflow, or we can try to figure out how to turn off the tap.

Regional Strategy

We will lose in Afghanistan if the insurgents continue to enjoy a safe haven in Pakistan. Even a flawless state-building strategy cannot succeed if it is not supported by a larger regional security strategy that encompasses Pakistan. Failure to address the insurgency with policy instruments beyond the use of military force will render our long-term strategy for operational improvement inside Afghanistan moot, or at best secondary.

Pakistan and Afghanistan thus form a single strategic unit, at least when viewed from Afghanistan. But for US officials focused on Pakistan, it does not necessarily look that way. Al Qaeda's presence, Pakistan's simmering instability, the nation's potential for failure, and the security of its nuclear arsenal are concerns that Afghanistan and the FATA utilize in their competition for international attention. Unfortunately, Afghanistan has not fared well in this competition.

The idea that Afghanistan's difficulties are more attributable to the nation's backwardness and America's operational clumsiness than the actions of the Pakistan-based Taliban is beginning to fade. Unfortunately, the United States seems unprepared to make fundamental adjustments in its Pakistan policy to accommodate this change in mindset. Tactical adjustments, including an increase in air-based operations in the FATA, are not likely to suffice. A change of strategy is necessary, but one that is centered primarily on the use of military power, whether intitated by the United States or Pakistan, is unlikely to succeed.

Certainly, a sustained, large-scale unilateral US action inside Pakistan would constitute a miscalculation of tremendous proportions, underscoring the strategic liabilities associated with the failure to exercise policy alternatives other than military action. Such an expansion of the current conflict would generate a public reaction in Pakistan so strong as to threaten not just the US/Pakistan relationship, but all the US policy objectives in Pakistan that, to date, have preceded Afghanistan: the war against al Qaeda, the maintenance of a stable secular government, and the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. Any significant military option within Pakistan must be initiated by Pakistanis.

But, in reality, it cannot be solely exercised by Pakistan, and the United States needs to understand why. We have been in this position before. In 2003, under US pressure to validate its bona fides as a partner in the war on al Qaeda, Islamabad agreed to deploy a 70,000-man force into

the FATA. The only tangible result of that campaign was the hundreds of casualties incurred by Pakistan's military—generated not by al Qaeda, but by the Taliban. Making this debacle even more complete were Pakistan's repeated diplomatic failures with the FATA insurgents.

America should not have expected more. Pakistan did not want to, nor was it capable of, executing successful military operations in the FATA. We almost casually accepted Pakistan's failure against the Taliban in the FATA and, specifically, its reluctance to attack Taliban leadership nodes.

Pakistan's record of failure against the Taliban is rooted in history. In Pakistan, all strategy is linked to India. Pakistan's Punjabi elites prefer to regard the FATA, with its distinct tribal culture and customs, as a colonial problem. Lawlessness there is accepted as normal, part of a traditional arrangement in which the Pashtun tribes are allowed their cherished autonomy. In return, they can be hired to serve Pakistan's interests in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Pashtun fighters are a problem Islamabad wants to keep sealed in the FATA, and at the same time they are a strategic asset that Islamabad needs to retain. These forces serve as an insurance policy should the United States again abandon Afghanistan, as it did in the early 1990s, leaving the country open to Indian power and influence—and leaving Pakistan encircled. Faced with a double threat, India's nuclear weapons and superior army, Pakistan's strategists have long considered the concept of "strategic depth" its saving strategy. This strategy, based on Pakistani influence in Afghanistan, has been Pakistan's hedge against Indian dominance, and the FATA's Pashtun fighters are central to it.

The US preoccupation with al Qaeda reinforced the conviction among Pakistan's leaders that the nation was, once again, just an outpost in a larger, and transitory, American war. It also convinced the Pakistanis that there was room to maneuver. It should come as no surprise that Pakistan's leadership was not willing to alienate, much less destroy, such a strategic asset as the FATA tribes in response to half-hearted US demarches.

Now, however, many of the old arrangements are beginning to unravel. "Normal" FATA lawlessness has morphed into a Taliban insurgency within Pakistan, free of its tribal moorings, and under the control of religious fanatics. Islamabad has lost even the semblance of control in the FATA as the insurgency spreads into Pakistan proper. There is growing recognition that Islamic militants pose a serious threat not just to Afghanistan (and India), but to Pakistan itself.

This scenario has provided the United States with an unexpected opportunity. Pakistan's February 2008 elections, in which a remarkably moderate electorate repudiated not only then-President Pervez Musharraf and his ruling party, but also the radical parties with ties to the militants, have energized prospects for change. One take-away from those elections is the fact that Islamic militants do not have broad public support. There is widespread popular consensus that Islamabad needs to address the Islamic militancy issue head-on.

Pakistan's new government now has a far more compelling reason to consider serious action against Islamic militants than it had in the past, and it can claim a political mandate for such action. There is a suggestion here that the political and perceived policy costs to the United States of pushing Pakistan toward a resolution of the problem have diminished, while the benefit to Pakistan has increased. Kabul and Islamabad now share a common problem, generating greater incentive to find a political accommodation. Baitullah Mehsud, a leader of Pakistan's insurgency, elegantly highlighted the evolving situation in early 2008 by threatening simultaneous war on Afghanistan and Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province.

These are significant changes that could serve as a precursor to policy initiatives beyond a purely military response to extremism and Islamic militancy in both countries. The opportunity for a diplomatic approach to the problem, one in which Pakistan would consider abandoning its strategy of strategic depth, is more distinct and promising than ever before.

There is, however, one piece still missing. Pakistan's internal debate regarding a national security strategy remains unresolved. The critical question facing Pakistan's leaders and strategists is whether there is a policy alternative to strategic depth. What strategy would replace it as a hedge against Indian power and US fickleness in Afghanistan? Until this question is resolved, Islamabad's decisionmakers are unlikely to abandon the concept. Unfortunately, until they do, the insurgency in Afghanistan will continue to enjoy safe haven inside Pakistan.

In a way, however, the question is moot, because Islamabad's ties with the FATA tribes have already been severed, with scores of tribal leaders once willing to cooperate with Islamabad slaughtered by the Taliban. This component of Pakistan's security strategy, at least for now, has been severely diminished. There is no hedge. So for Pakistan, there may be no alternative, a dilemma demanding a greater willingness to reconsider the

critical question: How does a weak Pakistan protect its national security against a stronger India short of nuclear war?

One approach to resolving this dilemma is diplomacy, but on a scale at once broader and more ambitious than has been the case to date. To resuscitate and expand the sputtering peace process, however, Pakistan would likely need the good offices of a guarantor, ideally some powerful state that has a strong relationship not just with Islamabad, but also with Afghanistan and India. The United States has been reluctant to assume the role of *demandeur* in this regard, preferring, as in the 1999 Kargil crisis and the bombing of the Indian Parliament, to play a behind-the-scenes role in defusing potential Pakistan-India conflict. India, too, has resisted the idea of international mediation regarding the status of Kashmir. Whether India would be open to a broader discussion incorporating economic and other incentives, for example overland access to critical Central Asian energy (something that Pakistan currently blocks), should be explored. The stakes for all three powers, however, are rising steeply, along with a recognition that there is common cause in the imperative of addressing Islamic militancy in Pakistan.

Any discussions, of course, would require a fundamentally different US approach to problemsolving in the region and to the decoupled framework for US South Asia policy. It would require a Pakistan strategy that is part of a unified regional policy that recognizes the links between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Such a strategy would need to leverage this linkage by drawing on the equities the United States enjoys in each relationship to support the whole.

Properly constructed, these are the components of a regional strategy that might, indeed, make time switch sides in Afghanistan. Barring such an approach, we can expect small periodic triumphs in Pakistan as a few al Qaeda leaders drift into our embrace. In Afghanistan, however, we can expect reaffirmation of the dictum that it is nearly impossible to defeat an insurgency that enjoys a safe haven. Lacking an effective strategy for governance and relying increasingly on military force, we will continue to struggle as the security situation deteriorates until, finally, we exhaust our national will. We will then move on, leaving in our wake not one, but possibly two failed states bobbing in a sea of militant Islam. Afghanistan's people will drift even further from the future they deserve, an outcome Mullah Omar is counting on.