

Reversing the Failure of Strategy in Pakistan and Afghanistan

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Let me start off by saying what this book isn't about, it isn't about Iraq. But Iraq does pose a very serious background to this book because one of the thesis that I have in this book is that the part of the world that I'm writing about, central and south Asia, was neglected precisely because of the war in Iraq. The war in Iraq was a war of choice which the Bush administration made but in doing so they neglected the war of necessity which was the war in Afghanistan, and stabilizing Afghanistan which was the most important thing if extremism and terrorism were going to be checked.

Let me just start with the present situation which is very dire. We have a full-blown insurgency in Afghanistan, more than one-third of the country is controlled by the Taliban and al Qaeda even though there's some 60,000 foreign troops, half of them American the rest are NATO troops, in Afghanistan. Reconstruction has stopped in large parts of the country because of the insurgency and the insecurity. There's a drug epidemic, Afghanistan presently supplies 93 percent of the world's heroin to Europe and America. The Taliban and al Qaeda are getting massive funding by their involvement in the drug trade. They seem to have developed a kind of business venture which is making them incredibly rich and incredibly capable of launching an attack any where with the kind of money they have.

The United States and its allies seem to be at a crossroads as to what to do about Afghanistan. Yesterday there was a meeting in Paris with donors promising up to \$20 billion for the next five years and for the first time in seven years talking about investment in agriculture. This is something that people like myself were writing about back in 2001, saying that if the international community wanted to rebuild Afghanistan and stop the drug production they had to invest in agriculture. It's taken seven years for the Americans to wake up to the fact that in a country where 80 percent of the population are farmers you need to invest in agriculture.

In Pakistan you had a 18-month long political turmoil against President Musharraf who was an army general who seized power in 1999. This immense political turmoil lead to the assassination of Benazir Bhutto with the middle class population of Pakistan coming out into the streets last year in protest, that included loyalist groups, women, civil society groups and finally an election. But today you have a situation where we have now our own Taliban, a Pakistani Taliban, who are seizing large chunks of territory in northwestern Pakistan and are making life extremely difficult both for the new government that has just been elected and the military, which has not always been in partnership with the government and often tried to undermine the government. The

military has walked away from these tribal areas and is actually withdrawing troops from the tribal areas.

So the Taliban has been given literally a free hand there to seize territory and take control and that is creating a major crisis with the United States. You may have seen the editorial today in the *New York Times* and other stories in recent days that the U.S. has been urging the Pakistani military to get back into the fight and they are refusing to do so. We have a real crisis now between Pakistan and the U.S., and it seems that in the last months of the Bush administration—particularly for Republicans who wanted to posit Afghanistan as a success story as compared to Iraq—that the situation in both countries is getting much worse.

How did we get from 9/11 to here which is perhaps a more serious situation? I just want to very briefly touch on what I see as the three very positive points that the Bush administration emerged with after 9/11 and how literally within months they squandered those opportunities.

The first was that the attacks on New York and Washington elicited massive international support and the U.S. had an international alliance which it could have gone into with Afghanistan; instead, the U.S. snubbed NATO, it snubbed the international partners and said, “We want to do this unilaterally.” Now, having done that it made certain that the U.S. wanted to take on Afghanistan as its own responsibility rather than sharing the burden with the international community. That was a very serious mistake because, of course, two years down the road when it wanted to enlist other countries in the war in Iraq nobody wanted to do it.

The second major mistake was that the U.S. organized a regional alliance of countries in order to fight the war in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a landlocked country. It’s surrounded by six powerful neighbors and distant neighbors such as Saudi Arabia and Russia, and all these neighbors were interfering with Afghanistan, they were funding one warlord against another warlord and they were fueling the civil war which devastated the country in the 1990s. The U.S. brought all these neighbors together on one platform and they included India and Pakistan in order to facilitate the invasion of Afghanistan. They included Iran. The U.S. officials were talking to the Iranians for over four months after the September 11 attack. The Bonn agreement which installed President Karzai as president could not have been done without the Iranian-U.S. cooperation. They brought on board the Russians, President Putin, as well as the five central Asian states which are Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – three of these central Asian states, up in the north, are neighbors of Afghanistan—Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Yet within four weeks of winning the victory in Afghanistan this regional alliance was torn apart. India and Pakistan nearly went to war and if you remember the whole of 2002 there was a near war situation, there was fear of a nuclear war, between the two countries. Iran was dubbed the Great Satan along with North Korea and Syria, and Iran then went off at a tangent even though we didn’t have this current government in power we had, in comparison, a much more moderate government in power under President Khatami in Iran. All the neighboring countries went back to backing various proxies because they saw that the Americans had put 1,000 troops in Afghanistan – that’s all – and the Americans were already pulling out resources so that they could retrain for Iraq—the Iraq thing had already started—and the neighbors saw that in Afghanistan perhaps the Americans would walk away. Afghanistan doesn’t have any oil, why would the Americans stay? They don’t look very serious because they haven’t committed troops there, they haven’t started nation-building, they’re not reconstructing anything, and all the neighbors began to plot and back warlords and fueled tensions inside the country.

The last factor which really, I think, depressed the Afghan people was that when the U.S. invaded there was 90 percent support from the Afghan population. They welcomed the foreign troops as liberators because they had been fed up with the Taliban. There was this huge window of opportunity. Afghans welcomed the Americans, not because they loved the Americans but because they expected from the Americans that there would be reconstructions and rebuilding of their country after 30 years of war and a million and a half dead. Instead, the U.S. within weeks of coming in, was already planning Iraq and the essential order from Donald Rumsfeld to the forces in Afghanistan was “Keep everything quiet. We don’t want to be bothered with Afghanistan. We don’t want to do anything very much because we’re concentrating on Iraq.” As a result, the U.S. in Afghanistan empowered the warlords. Who would keep the peace in the countryside? There weren’t going to be international troops to do that and the government certainly was not effective enough to do that, so they empowered the warlords. These are the same hated warlords who had plagued Afghanistan in the ’90s, whom the Taliban had driven out, and who were now brought back to keep the so-called law and order. Everyone knew the warlords were the last people to keep law and order; they were the ones to break the law and to break order. Pillaging the people, stealing property, harassing women and creating general mayhem and then defying the central government. The CIA put a bunch of these warlords on its payroll, allowed them to enlist militias, allowed them to bring in heavy armaments, and for three years these warlords became, if you like, the representatives of the United States in Afghanistan. It is a devastatingly negative policy because it’s completely lost the hearts and minds of the Afghan population. It prevented the central government from expanding out into the countryside because the warlords would defy the president. The warlords would say, “Who are you Mr. President? We’ve been confirmed here by the CIA. Here’s my letter from the CIA and I get so much a month. I’m on a stipend.” So, there was really a breakdown in the country and apart from that, of course, for three and one-half years during this entire period up to about 2004 when the Bush reelection takes place there was minimal reconstruction. What was needed was rebuilding the infrastructure, the roads, the water, the power so that the economy could provide jobs so that people would not starve, they needed investment in agriculture so the farmers could grow something apart from poppy, and very little of this was done.

These are my three pluses, that were going for the Americans right after 9/11 and all these were squandered. When the Americans came back in 2004, just before the American elections—because again Bush was trying to show Afghanistan in a good light—they come in with money, with resources, with troops, and then bringing NATO the following year because by then the war in Iraq is going badly, but by then it’s too late. Three and one-half years have gone by, you’ve lost the confidence of the Afghan people and brought the warlords back in, the central government is irretrievably weakened and it’s too late to start thinking that you can come back up after a three year gap and pick up where you left off. Obviously things don’t happen like that. In the last three years, I’ve seen a lot of U.S. investments and I think unfortunately it has been too little too late.

I think there were two crucial mistakes made in Pakistan after 9/11. The first was that the Taliban and al Qaeda were never defeated in Afghanistan, they were routed. Many were killed but they were routed and most of them came into Pakistan to seek shelter. The U.S. had only one message to Pakistan and that was to hunt down al Qaeda. The U.S. said, “Don’t bother about the Taliban. We’re not interested in the Taliban. Hunt down the Arabs of al Qaeda,” which General Musharraf did to some extent. He hunted down senior members of al Qaeda but at the same time the Pakistanis gave sanctuary to the Taliban; in fact, the military gave sanction to the Taliban leadership and the thousands of Taliban who came across the border.

At the same time, President Musharraf now sought to legitimize his own rule. In 1999 he seized power in a coup and until 9/11 he'd been this international pariah, nobody wanted to deal with him and suddenly after 9/11 he was going to be the savior of Afghanistan because he decided to dump the Taliban and join the American alliance and help the Americans invade Afghanistan. There was enormous political ferment. This was the time to take Pakistan towards democracy, to have a free and fair election, bring back the opposition party in an attempt to bring a reconciliation because finally the world was taking Pakistan seriously. We were getting money, we were getting aid, we were getting debt write-offs; this was a time of prosperity, this was a time when we could take political risks and bring back democracy. The army was urged to act in a mature way and forget empowering Musharraf not just as the president with dictatorial ruler but to actually take the country back. Unfortunately, this never happened. As a consequence, the army herald a referendum which made Musharraf president, he was the only candidate in that referendum, and subsequently there were parliamentary elections that were rigged that brought to power a political party that was allied to the military and the Americans supported this whole process. The civil society movement and the opposition movement and everything that emerged at that point was brutally suppressed. Analysts said at that time that it was not sustainable in the long term. A rigged parliament, a rigged election, you've lost the hearts and minds, you're not going to be able to sustain this in the long-term and you will have to do more oppression and more oppression in order to keep the lid on the country. So, I think that we saw at the beginning of 2001-2002 was a series of mistakes that escalated and got worse and worse in each country, both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan.

I come to the present now. As I've said we had this turmoil last year now we have elections, we have continuing political turmoil because we have this long legacy of trying to get rid of all the debris that Musharraf accumulated over the past few years. He amended the constitution, he fired the judges, he censored the media, everyone is asking for their pound of flesh to restore what they lost under Musharraf and this is creating enormous political confusion and mayhem.

I hope this will settle down but at the same time the army has decided that it will not fight this war against extremism, it is withdrawing from the tribal areas and is leaving enormous areas of territory in the northwest under control of the Taliban and al Qaeda. The army's justification for this is that the Indians have been allowed to consolidate their position in Afghanistan. India, as you know, is Pakistan's long time enemy and India certainly is in Afghanistan but I think a lot of the paranoia about India is being highly exaggerated at the moment. In the last two days was the shooting on the borders, with the Americans bombing and killing 11 Pakistani soldiers and I fear this situation is going to get worse. Of course, what the Americans fear now is that with the Taliban freed up in Pakistan, and with the army withdrawing, these Pakistani Taliban and Afghan Taliban living on the Pakistani side are going to cross in large numbers into Afghanistan and launch attacks against the Afghan forces and the U.S. forces.

At the height of all this is al Qaeda. Now, where is al Qaeda now? Al Qaeda, I think, has morphed into many different directions and there have been a lot of arguments in the U.S. media about what is al Qaeda, where is al Qaeda. Yes, al Qaeda is on the Internet, and yes al Qaeda has lost some ground among its older supporters, and yes al Qaeda has tried to expand into Africa and Europe. But I still think that al Qaeda in many ways is a much older type of organization just like we had in the '60s—we had the left wing movement in Latin America and others who believed that you had to control territory and bases. Al Qaeda needs territory to operate on. Al Qaeda cannot operate in cyber space. It needs territory to arm, to fund, to raise money, to train, to buy clothes, to do all the things that an extremist group needs to do. This is precisely what al Qaeda is trying to do now in northwestern Pakistan and in parts of Afghanistan. It is trying to gain

territory, it has created in the last seven years, concentric rings of powerful elements which protect it. The Afghan Taliban, the allies of the Afghan Taliban are several big warlords; the Pakistani Taliban, groups from central Asia, groups from China from Turkey, all these groups are active in this region and they form these protective rings around al Qaeda and there's a huge fighting manpower base. The Arabs may number 300-400 or 800 but these people around al Qaeda now number in the tens of thousands.

What is worrisome is that al Qaeda has now moved onto a whole new generation of younger people who are coming in to train with it and trying to carry out suicide bombings. The European intelligence is now saying that al Qaeda is trying to create language capabilities for training. For example, if they bring Germans over, or Dutch over, they're going to be able to train people in the tribal areas in Dutch and in German or in the other European languages, because German, Dutch or British Muslim or French Algerians coming across may not speak Arabic or may not speak the local dialect. They are already developing the capability to do this. There have been so many foiled attacks in Europe in the last few months—in Germany, in Spain, in Holland, in Denmark—that one of these attacks is going to get through. One of these attacks is going to get through. The big fear here, certainly, is not perhaps an attack on the U.S. mainland but an attack on an American target in Europe or elsewhere which would be much easier to do than attacking the U.S. mainland.

So, al Qaeda is thriving at the center of a region that is very rapidly disintegrating. I hope that this issue will be resolved. It may need a new president, with a new strategy, and a new evaluation of the dangers and threats of what can be done to this region in order to really resolve this problem. I fear that the strategy adopted in the last seven years, which my book is all about, how we got from there to here, is a crying shame simply because things could have been done so differently, so easily, and extremely cheaply and not at the cost that we are paying now in terms of the lives of Americans and Afghans and Pakistanis.

Thank you very much.

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