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Introduction

President Barack Obama publicly unveiled his administration's so-called AfPak (Afghanistan-Pakistan) strategy on March 27, 2009. Over the subsequent weeks, the White House has also briefed relevant congressional leaders and committees, the media, NATO allies, and other regional and international partners. The U.S. House of Representatives has moved ahead with its own legislative debate (the PEACE bill), and the administration recently submitted a 2009 supplemental budget request consistent with its new strategy.

While the broad contours are in place, clearly Washington's approach to South Asia remains a work in progress. The strategy's authors insist that it is intended to provide a framework, not a strait-jacket, for U.S. policy. Questions remain about the correct prioritization of U.S. objectives; the level of and manner in which U.S. diplomatic, military, intelligence, and economic resources should be deployed; and the appropriate sequencing and duration of U.S. efforts.

Context

Over the past two years, the security environment in Afghanistan and Pakistan has taken a significant turn for the worse. The spread of militancy, whether by terrorists connected with al-Qaeda, the Taliban of Mullah Omar or Baitullah Mehsud, criminal gangs, narco-traffickers, or sectarian extremists, among others, has destabilized the Pashtun belt in southern and eastern Afghanistan as well as western Pakistan. At the same time, a range of other violent actors—from Punjabi anti-Indian extremists to Central Asian warlords—operates in the non-Pashtun areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Pakistan and Afghanistan offer these groups an unusually hospitable environment, one that complicates and magnifies the danger. Well-worn smuggling routes link the region's notoriously remote and difficult terrain to globally interconnected megacities, creating nearly ideal conditions for al-Qaeda operatives and their sympathizers. The geographic proximity of Pakistan's nuclear program to these sophisticated terrorists and the recent history of illicit transfers of material and know-how also pose a unique threat.

Fragile state institutions, weak leadership, and inadequate resources limit the ability of Islamabad and Kabul to fight militancy in the near term or to foster moderation over the long run. Finally, a trust deficit burdens the United States; anti-Americanism is widespread, and many of Washington's closest partners in the region express deep scepticism about U.S. intentions and commitment.

Many of Washington's challenges in Pakistan and Afghanistan are linked, and so it is correct—and overdue—that the United States should formulate a strategy to address the region as a whole. But the specific threats and policy options across and within these two states range widely. Moreover, the diplomatic, military, and development tools available to the United States vary from one side of the border to the other.

The Obama Strategy

President Obama's remarks on March 27, 2009, and an administration white paper released the same day outline the basic elements of the administration's approach.2 Rooted in an assessment of persistent terrorist threat, the new AfPak strategy attempts to walk a middle path between a narrow counter terror mission and a much more ambitious nation-building agenda.

According to the White House, the fundamental objective for U.S. policy in Pakistan and Afghanistan should be to turn the tide against regional militants who offer safe haven to global terrorists, and to build indigenous security structures capable of prosecuting effective counter terror and counterinsurgency missions. A timely and generous injection of U.S. resources should be used to demonstrate the fundamental weakness of the Taliban, thereby offering breathing space to governments in Islamabad and Kabul.

As a U.S. senator and presidential candidate, President Obama stressed that the deterioration of security conditions in the region should be attributed to inadequate U.S. resources and attention since 2003. Al-Qaeda leaders eluded capture and the Taliban regrouped in Pakistan and Afghanistan while much of America's military, intelligence, and foreign policy machinery was dedicated to the war in Iraq. The sympathy and credibility the United States enjoyed in the region shortly after 9/11 have since evaporated, but the Taliban and al-Qaeda are by no means invincible. The ongoing draw-down in Iraq will—belatedly—offer significant new military and intelligence tools to commanders in the Pakistan-Afghanistan theater.

The basic counterinsurgency lessons from Iraq also appear to inform U.S. plans for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Washington will begin with a rapid expansion of military force to confront decisively the Afghan Taliban's offensive during the spring and summer fighting seasons. At the same time, the United States appears to be accelerating the use of Predator (unmanned aerial drone) strikes against Taliban leadership in Pakistan, while encouraging the Pakistani military to pursue offensive operations against militants based in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas along the Afghan border.

With these offensive operations underway, the United States plans to start a major expansion of the Afghan National Security Forces. The United States has already achieved significant success in building the Afghan National Army, while existing programs—such as Focused District Development, which takes entire district police forces off-site for an eight-week training course, then returns them with embedded trainers—appear to have the potential to improve the capacity of the Afghan police. In Pakistan, the Pentagon has already allocated roughly $400 million to train and equip the paramilitary Pakistani Frontier Corps and recently proposed a Pakistani Counterinsurgency Capability Fund, which would allocate $3 billion over the next five years to train and equip Pakistan's army and paramilitary forces for a counterinsurgency

mission. All of these efforts are likely to be accelerated and expanded within several years, provided Washington can supply more trainers, build new training facilities, and work closely with Pakistani and Afghan counterparts.

In addition, aid to Pakistan's army will be carefully tailored to improving its counterinsurgency capacity (rather than boosting defences against India) and conditioned upon effective action against militants along the border with Afghanistan. When possible, the United States and its partners (Afghanistan, Pakistan, NATO, and others) will seek to translate battlefield successes into political settlements with local populations, negotiating from a position of strength to win support against the most extreme militants and to eliminate sanctuaries available to global terrorists. Intelligence leads from newly pacified areas will, in time, help U.S. forces find and destroy al-Qaeda's senior leadership.

Quick-hitting economic assistance is also to be used to support counterinsurgency efforts on both sides of the border. U.S. forces will have access to flexible emergency funds so they can rush humanitarian, development, and reconstruction programs into areas immediately after offensive operations. This rapid-response programming is designed to win compliance from local populations and avoid swelling the ranks of the insurgency. Vastly expanded non-military assistance to Pakistan, along the lines of the Senate's soon-to-be-introduced Kerry-Lugar legislation (an updated version of the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2008, which was introduced by Senator Joe Biden and Senator Richard Lugar in July 2008 but did not pass before the end of the session) and the House's PEACE Act of 2009, will help to build the state's capacity to deliver basic services and to improve law and order. Non-military assistance will also provide a tangible, popular demonstration of the benefits of a U.S.-Pakistan partnership.

The Obama administration is prepared to foot a hefty bill for maintaining indigenous security forces in Afghanistan over at least the next decade or so. But compared to U.S. and NATO operations, the cost to U.S. taxpayers will be greatly reduced. By helping to stifle the Taliban-led insurgency and root out al-Qaeda's leaders while building and maintaining more effective indigenous security institutions, the White House hopes to reduce the footprint of American (and NATO) operations within several years and still achieve its vital security interests in the region.

An emerging debate

As a political statement, the AfPak strategy has been well received, perhaps in part because it leaves unresolved a number of contentious policy questions. In the public debates that will accompany congressional decisions on AfPak funding, as well as the Obama administration's internal debates on policy implementation, a middle-path strategy will face challenges from at least two competing alter-natives.

Some critics will argue that the strategy correctly diagnoses the urgent threat posed by al-Qaeda and global jihadists, but that the administration's policy prescriptions are too costly and wide-ranging to meet that narrowly defined challenge. Others will argue that the administration has astutely situated the problem of global terrorism within a regional political-economic context, but that important elements of the strategy are still too narrowly conceived or inadequate toward the enormous task of achieving U.S. national security interests

in Afghanistan, and even more so, in Pakistan.

These two alternative strategies are explored at greater length in the following sections.

Alternative 1: Focus Goals and Limit Costs

One alternative to the Obama administration's approach would be to limit U.S. costs by strictly focusing on the counter terror mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan, rather than getting bogged down in a messy quagmire of state capacity building and long-term development issues. From this perspective, the Obama administration is correct in its understanding that the fundamental objective for U.S. policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan should be the reduction of the threat to U.S. national security posed by al-Qaeda. But a clear and sustained focus on al-Qaeda will protect U.S. interests best by limiting financial and human costs and by avoiding a wide range of exceedingly complicated challenges that Washington appears ill-equipped to manage.

Building moderate, stable, and more effective governments in Islamabad and Kabul and tackling long-standing regional tensions may be admirable causes, but they will require expensive, long-term U.S. investments that pay—at best—limited, uncertain dividends. The United States has relatively few essential interests in this region; even a stable and economically viable Pakistan and Afghanistan would remain distant and poor, and would play virtually no positive role in Washington's long-term political, military, or economic considerations.

Realistically, even a narrow focus on the threat posed by al-Qaeda will require a far more extensive U.S. presence in the region than existed prior to 9/11. But that presence should not primarily take the form of U.S. armed forces, diplomats, or U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) officials. The expansion of these personnel in Afghanistan, as advocated by the White House, is therefore ill-advised. An effective counter terror strategy should instead demand sustained investments in surveillance and human intelligence capabilities as well as the means to strike individuals engaged in the training, planning, and managing of terror attacks against the United States or its interests.

High-tech platforms, from next-generation unmanned aerial vehicles to satellites, will help the United States manage counter terror operations without a heavy ground presence in Pakistan or Afghanistan. The U.S. military presence in Afghanistan should be phased out over the next several years, providing just enough time and security for U.S. intelligence operatives and Special Operations Forces to cultivate a sustainable network of local partners engaged in human intelligence collection.

The focus of U.S. partnerships with Afghan and Pakistani intelligence services (as well as with other intelligence actors in the region) should narrow and intensify on terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda, that have global aspirations. In Pakistan, the United States should transfer technologies and other assistance that will help to protect Islamabad's nuclear warheads, facilities, and scientists from attack or infiltration by al-Qaeda or its sympathizers. U.S. assistance to Pakistani and Afghan security forces should continue, but it should be employed primarily as a means for inducing cooperation against al-Qaeda. The United States should avoid investments in regional security forces—such as the massive expansion of the Afghan

National Army or the transformation of Pakistan's Frontier Corps—that are unlikely to be sustained by Kabul and Islamabad without permanent external assistance. Washington should instead encourage Pakistan and Afghanistan to seek alternative funding streams or redirect existing national resources in order to build those security institutions considered most vital to state stability.

The United States should also recognize that its own extensive presence in Afghanistan since 2002 has altered regional calculations—and not for the better. An open-ended U.S. commitment has created incentives for "free riding," encouraged the pursuit of parochial interests, and raised fears that the United States has ulterior motives for maintaining its presence in the region. U.S. diplomats should therefore clarify Washington's intention to rededicate itself to the fight against al-Qaeda, to find common cause with all actors who support that effort, and to accept regionally generated solutions as long as they do not directly undermine counter terror goals. In addition to existing partners, the United States should reach out to China, Iran, and Russia.

In sum, the United States should focus and intensify its efforts to finish the fight that al-Qaeda started and avoid conflating that specific threat with a much more diffuse set of regional challenges. A dire economic crisis at home and a world full of urgent and looming dangers require Washington to pick its battles carefully in order to win them. In its history, the United States has rarely demonstrated a capacity to rebuild broken states like Afghanistan or to transform enormous developing nations like Pakistan. In a region where American involvement is already unpopular, the Obama ad-ministration must understand that expanding U.S. engagement and investment is at least as likely to prove counterproductive as it is to yield the types of gains sought by the White House.

Alternative 2: Expand U.S. Effort, Focus on Pakistan

A second alternative to the Obama administration's approach would emphasize publicly just how long, difficult, and costly Washington's effort is likely to be and would focus on the hardest and most critical problem of the region—Pakistan—where relatively few resources have been spent compared to Afghanistan, U.S. policy tools are all too limited, and mutual distrust between Washington and Islamabad often proves debilitating.

The Obama strategy clearly recognizes that a fractured or incapacitated Pakistan would threaten core U.S. interests, not least because its nuclear weapons would be vulnerable to al-Qaeda or similar terrorist groups. Today, al-Qaeda's top leadership is most likely based in Pakistan, along with top Taliban leaders, both Afghan and Pakistani. In addition, the "Talibanisation" of Pakistan's Pashtun belt is gradually moving eastward into settled districts, creating new terrorist safe havens in once-tranquil locales such as the Swat valley. Pakistan's non-Pashtun extremist and sectarian groups, some of which were historically nurtured by the state as a means to project influence into India and Afghanis-tan, also have the potential to prove deeply destabilizing. Organizations like the banned Jaish-e-Mohammed or Jamaat-ud-Dawa are well resourced and globally interconnected. Some appear to retain significant influence within state institutions and enjoy public sympathy, in certain cases be-cause of the social services they provide. If present trends persist, the next generation of the world's most sophisticated terrorists will be born, indoctrinated, and trained in a nuclear-armed

Pakistan.

But the Obama administration's strategy does not establish that securing Islamabad's political stability and partnership should be Washington's primary regional objective. The White House's intensified focus on counter terror and counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and the Pakistani tri-bal belt is not misplaced, but it will prove entirely insufficient to overcoming these deeper challenges. The United States should therefore make broad and ample investments beyond the Pashtun tribal belt and in Pakistan's civilian and military institutions as a means to improve their capacity and to create incentives for sustainable bilateral cooperation in the fight against extremism and militancy over the long run.

In some ways, the Obama AfPak strategy makes a good start along precisely these lines, but critical gaps remain. While the president's remarks prioritized Pakistan as a U.S. national security concern, U.S. resources and attention are far more heavily engaged in Afghanistan. Since 9/11, the United States has spent (or requested for fiscal year 2009) roughly $170 billion on Operation Enduring Freedom and just over $15 billion in assistance and reimbursements to Pakistan.3 Of course, achieving greater stability in Afghanistan would mitigate some of the political and military pressures now faced by the Pakistani state. A comprehensive strategy for Pakistan should therefore include major counterinsurgency and counter terror operations in Afghanistan. But it must also be recognized that a victory against the Taliban in Afghanistan will be hollow and illusory if it yields a destabilized or adversarial regime in Pakistan. Tactics that flush militants out from Afghanistan and into Pakistan will prove counterproductive unless Pakistan's own security forces are ready to mount an adequate response. Today they are not. Similarly, the use of drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal belt must be weighed against the political costs they impose on U.S.-Pakistan cooperation, not least the role they play in amplifying popular anti-Americanism in parts of Pakistan well beyond the areas bordering Afghanistan.

The United States has relatively few direct policy tools for fighting extremism and improving state capacity inside Pakistan. Widespread anti-Americanism, official distrust, and poor security conditions now impose severe limits on U.S. military, intelligence, and even economic development efforts. The centrepiece of U.S. efforts should therefore be to win trust among partners within Pakis-tan's military, intelligence, and civilian institutions and to empower these partners to undertake the daunting task of fighting terrorism and militancy. A policy of inducement—through financial, technical, and diplomatic assistance—is the best means to shift the strategic calculations of influential Pakistanis and bolster moderates who share basic U.S. interests. Fortunately, although Pakistan's extremists are all-too-numerous and vocal, the overwhelming majority of the country's population abhors terrorist tactics and has no desire to live in a Taliban-like state.

Still, winning influential partners will not be easy. Pakistan's army and intelligence services have been frustrating and internally conflicted allies since 9/11. Many within their ranks doubt that close partnership with Washington will serve Pakistan's security interests; they prefer to hedge their bets by retaining ties to militant groups with violent anti-Indian and anti-Western agendas. But these security institutions are complicated, many-layered bureaucracies, not unitary actors. Washington should work to influence internal debates and transform mindsets among the rising classes of Pakistani officers.

As President Obama has stated, Washington should not be in the business of writing blank checks to Islamabad, whether for civilian or military purposes. That said, the United States should also resist the temptation to impose inflexible conditions on its military assistance as a means of ensuring Pakis-tan's cooperation. U.S. threats of this sort may be cathartic, but they are also counterproductive; they offer easy ammunition to America's sceptics in Pakistan while discouraging real and potential allies. Instead, Washington should maintain a baseline of generous defence assistance while seeking every opportunity to enhance COIN and CT training, bilateral engagement, and joint operations with Pakistani security and intelligence forces.

To help stem the tide of extremism and militancy within Pakistani civil society, the United States should implement vastly expanded assistance programs to improve state governance capacity (especially law and order), meet basic humanitarian needs, influence public opinion, and promote long-term development. The United States should set clear measures of success. But initial failures to achieve these benchmarks should prompt new implementation strategies, not threats to reduce or revoke resources.

In order to have any chance of effectively formulating, implementing, and monitoring these new and improved assistance programs, Washington must also invest in its own institutions. USAID and the Department of State will need expanded personnel and security to operate throughout Pakistan and to enable improved cooperation with public and private organizations.

The United States should also coordinate with regional and global partners in its effort to build and transform Pakistani institutions and to deal effectively with the full spectrum of Pakistan's political leaders and parties. China and Saudi Arabia have particular influence over Pakistan's military and political leaders, and other major donors including Japan and the UK offer valuable resources, leverage, and experience.

A comprehensive approach to countering extremism in Pakistan will demand expensive and in-tense U.S. engagement over at least a decade, possibly much longer. But because smart, sustained investments ultimately represent the most cost-effective way for the United States to avoid a far more dangerous future, the Obama administration would be well advised not to narrow its ambitions from the outset or to understate the enormity of the challenge.