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Beyond Afghanistan
*A Regional Security Strategy
for South and Central Asia*

By Lieutenant General David W. Barno, USA (Ret.), Andrew Exum
and Matthew Irvine



Center for a
New American
Security

About this report

“Beyond Afghanistan” is part of a broader Center for a New American Security (CNAS) project exploring long-term U.S. interests in Central and South Asia. The “Beyond Afghanistan” project is led by CNAS Senior Fellow and Senior Advisor Lieutenant General David W. Barno, U.S. Army (Ret.), and CNAS Fellow Andrew Exum. CNAS gratefully acknowledges financial support from the Smith Richardson Foundation, which makes this project possible.

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Cover Image

Roads in northern Afghanistan.

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BEYOND AFGHANISTAN: A REGIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY FOR SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA

By Lieutenant General David W. Barno, USA (Ret.), Andrew Exum and Matthew Irvine

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Beyond Afghanistan
A Regional Security Strategy for South and Central Asia



I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By Lieutenant General David W. Barno, USA (Ret.), Andrew Exum and Matthew Irvine

The United States is at a strategic inflection point in South and Central Asia. The death of Osama bin Laden, together with the projected transition to a smaller U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, presents a new opportunity for the United States to protect its enduring interests in the region. These interests include preventing the region's use as a base for terror groups to attack the United States; ensuring nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) do not fall into the hands of terrorists; and preventing a major interstate war on the subcontinent – particularly one that could escalate to a nuclear conflict.

Relationships with the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan are central to U.S. efforts in the region. To varying degrees, these governments are highly fractured and operate in societies rife with divisions. Thus, rather than treat these governments as unitary actors, this report recommends that U.S. policymakers take a differentiated approach to actors within each country. This approach is particularly relevant to Pakistan in light of the U.S. strike that killed bin Laden outside of Islamabad, and suspicions of complicity by elements of the Pakistani military or intelligence services. Nonetheless, this report recognizes the enduring need for partnership between the United States and Pakistan and advocates steps that strengthen cooperative elements of the Pakistani government, even if restrictive measures against other elements of the government become necessary.

This report culminates a year-long project examining the future of U.S. strategy in South and Central Asia given the pending drawdown of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. It is neither an exhaustive treatment of an extraordinarily complex and diverse region nor a comprehensive plan for policymakers. Rather, it identifies key priorities for the United States and the key components of a regional strategy offered in light of tumultuous current events. It draws from primary and secondary source

materials, a series of working groups comprised of regional experts and strategists, and our own research trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

To protect America's vital national interests in South and Central Asia, the U.S. government should take the following steps:

- Negotiate a strategic partnership agreement with the government of Afghanistan.
- Develop a long-term but differentiated approach to Pakistan that strengthens its economy, civilian government and anti-extremist elements while pressuring factions that support terrorists.
- Reshape foreign and security assistance to Pakistan.
- Broker confidence-building measures between India and Pakistan quietly and as opportunities arise.
- Sustain and deepen the U.S.-India partnership.
- Promote open trade and transit across South and Central Asia to catalyze economic growth and enhance stability.
- Develop a strategic public engagement plan for the region to mitigate the effects of the intense anti-Americanism that preclude greater cooperation with the United States.

II. INTRODUCTION

The U.S. government needs a comprehensive strategy for South and Central Asia. The importance of this geographic region – which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and their immediate neighbors – will only grow in the years to come. However, such a strategy must take into account the turbulent nature of rapidly shifting events without simply reacting to daily headlines. The United States must position itself as a nimble actor, prepared to both exploit opportunities and craft flexible policies that can adjust to changing realities.

Looking ahead, many nations have interests in this region, suggesting a renewal of the “Great Game” that once played out there and that in some ways continues unabated.¹ The 10-year war in Afghanistan has led the United States to focus on short-term needs in Afghanistan, and away from its other vital interests in this region – which will remain in the wake of a U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan. The growing threat posed by the twin risks of terrorism and instability linked with nuclear proliferation in Pakistan will command far greater U.S. attention in coming years. The threats posed by transnational terror groups – illustrated by the attacks on September 11, 2001 and the Mumbai attacks in 2008 – will remain dominant concerns for the United States. These groups remain both capable and deadly despite the death of al Qaeda's leader. In recent years, groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have demonstrated increasing global reach, even though they were once thought to be focused solely on regional adversaries.²

With bin Laden dead and the United States beginning its planned transition of forces out of Afghanistan,³ larger questions arise: What will be the new U.S. strategy in this region? Will bin Laden's killing deep inside Pakistan drive an irreconcilable wedge between Washington and Islamabad? What trajectory and result will the

The United States should recognize the importance of maintaining Pakistan as an unpalatable friend rather than an implacable adversary.

looming U.S. troop drawdown bring? And can it be done in a way that sustains rather than diminishes U.S. influence in the region? Could U.S. fiscal austerity combined with declining popular support for prolonging its 10-year engagement lead the United States to once again relegate the region to an ignored backwater as in the past, or is a different future in store? Given significant regional security and energy interests, how does the United States envision its presence and influence in the coming years? How does the United States plan to defend these interests in the wake of a much-reduced military presence in Afghanistan? And how can the United States mitigate risks from this region while addressing its global demands amidst greater resource constraints?

This much is clear: The region has changed dramatically since 2001, making any return to the *status quo antebellum* improbable. The U.S. military presence in Afghanistan has reshaped the balance of power in the region significantly. U.S. and international involvement in supporting a wholly new Afghan government, building large and capable Afghan security forces, and catalyzing a booming Afghan wartime economy have profoundly altered the economic and military norms across the region. Between now and the end of 2014, the economic impact of substantially reducing the U.S. military presence is likely to have major second-order effects, particularly for Afghanistan – the second-poorest and most corrupt nation in the world.⁴ Concurrently, the United

States is cultivating a growing economic, security and political partnership with India, one that links two of the world's largest democracies in pursuit of common objectives. It also has increasing interests in the energy markets of the Central Asian states, which are likely to grow in importance.

Stability in the region requires stability in Pakistan. The fallout of the May 1, 2011 U.S. raid that killed bin Laden less than 35 miles from Islamabad is already having profound effects on the U.S.–Pakistani relationship. The full consequences of this monumental embarrassment to Pakistani authorities and the degree to which it reshapes the United States' calculus regarding its fractious ally cannot yet be determined with certainty. Despite this affront, the United States should recognize the importance of maintaining Pakistan as an unpalatable friend rather than an implacable adversary, or worse, seeing it tumble toward becoming a failed state. Pakistan remains deeply conflicted internally and pervasively anti-American, and will continue to behave in ways that are sometimes contrary to U.S. interests. It is demonstrably not a unitary actor, and that recognition should heavily influence U.S. policy decisions. Thus, the United States should remain committed to the people and state of Pakistan for the long term – the most promising policy choice in a field littered with poor options.

A U.S. strategy must also recognize, however, that the United States inhabits a world no longer characterized by unipolar U.S. power.⁵ U.S. resources are also constrained, and the new reality of fiscal austerity will shape U.S. foreign policy in the region for years to come. Indeed, the future U.S. role in South and Central Asia may become one of the first tests of U.S. security policy in this new fiscal environment. As a pointed illustration, the United States currently spends nearly 10 billion dollars a month in Afghanistan alone – a figure that Senator John Kerry recently described as “unsustainable.”⁶

III. STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The death of bin Laden and the transition to a smaller international military footprint in Afghanistan by the end of 2014 will dramatically alter the Afghan war as well as the entire region.⁷ The death of al Qaeda's leader also opens the possibility of that drawdown accelerating in response to pressures from voters and politicians in the United States.⁸ The projected decline of the large U.S. military presence brings risks of diminished U.S. regional influence as well. New tensions between the United States and Pakistan only add to the uncertainty in the region.

Furthermore, the past decade of conflict has altered regional dynamics in ways that are only now being fully understood. These include the distortive effects of hundreds of billions of dollars in U.S. military spending in Afghanistan; India's growing relationship with the Afghan government and the pressure this places on Pakistan; the opening of Afghanistan to mining and other extractive industries; the growth of crime, narcotics and illicit trade; and the expansion, influence and increasing reach of militant networks outside al Qaeda – mostly based in Pakistan.⁹ This unfolding transition and what it means – particularly how it affects the complex relations among the United States, Pakistan and Afghanistan – may profoundly shape the future balance of regional power.¹⁰

Key Assumptions

We make the following strategic assumptions about general trends during the next 10 years:

PAKISTAN REMAINS A FRAUGHT U.S. ALLY

The United States will continue to have an uneasy relationship with Pakistan. Both countries need one another to a certain degree, but the divided nature of Pakistani state institutions and actors will continue to make U.S.-Pakistani cooperation difficult. Additionally, fallout from the intelligence

gathered at bin Laden's compound is likely to further strain this relationship, as President Obama has pledged to investigate the terror leader's support network inside of Pakistan.¹¹ The relationship will be severely stressed, but is unlikely to rupture.

U.S. DRAWDOWN IN AFGHANISTAN

The United States will implement a drawdown of its forces beginning in July 2011 and reduce its nearly 100,000 military personnel in theater to a smaller, enduring residual force.¹² The speed and scope of the reductions is now less clear in light of recent events. The size of the residual force will be between 25,000 and 35,000 – but could be dramatically reduced if either the Taliban insurgency is resolved or al Qaeda and its affiliates are fully defeated.

CONTINUED CONTRIBUTIONS FROM U.S. FRIENDS AND ALLIES

While the bulk of NATO and other U.S. allied combat forces are expected to draw down from current peak levels in Afghanistan by the end of 2014, limited numbers of allied trainers and some special forces will likely remain. They will continue to work with residual U.S. forces to support the Afghan security forces and sustain the enduring counterterrorism mission against al Qaeda and other terror groups. Despite the resource pressures faced by the allies, international financial support – albeit at a lesser level – can be expected to remain a key component of the multinational contribution to Afghan stability. NATO as an organization will continue to provide lesser but substantive military support to Afghan forces while helping sustain broader international legitimacy. U.S. partners will also continue to provide additional funding for security and economic development.

PERSISTENT TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM

Violent extremist organizations will continue to threaten the United States and its interests in South and Central Asia for the foreseeable future. Although al Qaeda will continue to be damaged

Defining the Region



Few hard geographic or ethno-linguistic boundaries define Central and South Asia, which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and the five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). The region has strong historic connections to its geographic north, east and west, given centuries of trade and regular campaigns of invading armies. This report focuses

primarily on Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, viewing the surrounding neighbors as influential but ultimately less vital actors.

For U.S. strategic purposes, it is helpful to think of South and Central Asia as a rough set of concentric circles, with the innermost circle including Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. These states represent the greatest risk for the

United States – and their stability and prosperity carry the greatest potential reward.

The second circle includes actors such as the Central Asian states to the north, Sri Lanka to the south and Bangladesh to the east. The outermost circle includes powers such as Russia, Iran and China that play varying roles in the region's politics, security and economy.

by strikes, as U.S. military forces exploit the trove of information captured at bin Laden's hideout, it will remain an adaptive enemy still committed to attacking the United States. Other regional terror groups now present a growing global threat: the TTP, LeT and other organizations are newly

intent on striking U.S. interests ranging from U.S. territory and deployed forces to the governments, militaries and peoples of Pakistan, India and NATO allies.¹³ To counter this threat, the United States will continue to conduct aggressive counterterrorism operations in the region. These may

include military operations in Afghanistan and a range of overt, covert and clandestine actions elsewhere in the region, including Pakistan.

AN ADVERSARIAL INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONSHIP

Although there are sporadic indications of positive movement in this enduring bilateral standoff, history suggests that the risks of failure remain high. The adversarial relationship between India and Pakistan, if unresolved, will remain the key destabilizing influence in South and Central Asia. This dangerous quarrel significantly affects the military establishments and security calculus of both countries. War between these two nuclear states could be provoked either by border disputes in Kashmir or, more likely, by further Pakistani-supported terror attacks in India. Open conflict could escalate into a nuclear exchange, triggering a catastrophic loss of life, as well as upending the global economy.¹⁴

A NEW GREAT GAME

China and India have emerged as major investors throughout the region. They seek access to raw materials, minerals and lines of transportation and transshipment to the Indian Ocean. Further, China has deep ties to Pakistan that allow Pakistan to hedge against both India and the United States. India will continue to balance its political and security ties to the United States, for instance by exploiting European sales as an alternative to reliance on U.S. defense products.¹⁵ All of Afghanistan's neighbors also have distinct ethnic and economic interests in the future of Afghanistan as allied military forces draw down, raising the specter of a proxy civil war if the tenuous ethnic and political comity breaks down.¹⁶ The United States, China, India, Russia, Turkey, Iran and other neighboring states will continue to compete for influence in the region – peacefully or otherwise.

ASIA'S RISING ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL POWER

The rapid growth of Asian markets has created what will likely be the global center of power in the

21st century. Thirty years of population growth, industrialization and economic development have laid the foundations for a long-term shift in world power away from the northern Atlantic powers to Asia. Although the so-called Asian Tiger economies of Asia have led this development, their achievements are now being overshadowed by China and India, which are matching their economic rise with foreign investment, military modernization and political clout. Such expansive growth fuels new regional dynamics. China and India both face looming resource scarcities in fuel, water and other materials that will force them to look outward and increasingly toward other more resource-rich South and Central Asian states.¹⁷

POPULATION GROWTH AND RESOURCE SCARCITY

Over the next three decades, South and Central Asia will experience a demographic boom. India's population is projected to swell from 1.1 to 1.4 billion by 2025, while Pakistan's is slated to grow from 187 million to 250 million.¹⁸ Additionally, by 2025, more than 60 percent of South and Central Asia's population will be younger than 30, and all regional economies will struggle to provide enough jobs. This expanding population will critically stretch available natural resources, including water, energy and farmland. With burgeoning demands for energy, China and India receive approximately 80 percent of their oil imports from the Middle East and Africa, much of which travels across the Indian Ocean.¹⁹ Sea-borne trade entering and exiting the Indian Ocean often transits the strategic chokepoints at Bab el-Mandeb and the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca, where piracy, terrorism, collisions, oil spills and undersea mines are a constant menace.²⁰

We also make the following two assumptions about U.S. domestic politics during the next 10 years.

INCREASING FISCAL AUSTERITY

The growing pressures of debt and deficit have created a political climate that demands austerity in a broad range of government programs.

Budgets for many federal departments and agencies face severely limited growth or reductions, including those of the Department of Defense, the Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The final negotiated outcome of the long-delayed 2011 U.S. federal budget contained cuts to international affairs programs, including the State Department and USAID, of 8.4 billion dollars – 17 percent of the total annual foreign affairs budget.²¹ Although funding for ongoing combat operations is unlikely to be immediately affected in budget discussions, the immense cost of maintaining current U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan is increasingly becoming part of the debate.²² In coming years, fiscal constraints will put downward pressure on nearly all U.S. government expenditures, including efforts involving South and Central Asia.

PRESSURE FOR LESS REGIONAL INVOLVEMENT

In the wake of bin Laden's death and after 10 years fighting in Afghanistan, many Americans are looking for a rapid end to the costly U.S. involvement in the region. The current fiscal crisis and the domestic debate about the U.S. debt ceiling and the size of government budgets in 2012 and beyond will only sharpen this debate. The Obama administration will face pressures to accelerate the pace of its planned drawdown in Afghanistan and to sharply reduce military and aid spending in the region.²³ The lack of any additional major terrorist attacks on the United States over the last decade, in concert with the demise of al Qaeda's top leader, has removed much of the publicly-stated rationale for the large deployment of U.S. military forces. As U.S. military forces draw down from Afghanistan, policymakers will face growing pressures from major segments of Congress and the public to both reduce forces and costs quickly, and to shun sustained regional commitments.²⁴

IV. U.S. INTERESTS IN THE REGION

The United States is at a strategic inflection point in South and Central Asia. In the face of looming fiscal austerity, the days of unconstrained economic and military power permitting expansive and largely unconstrained global U.S. deployments are now gone. An effective regional strategy for South and Central Asia must therefore focus primarily on securing U.S. vital interests at the lowest reasonable cost.

U.S. Vital Interests

Prevent the region's use as a base for terror groups to attack the United States and its allies.

The foremost U.S. security interest in the region remains preventing attacks on the United States from actors based in this corner of the world. While in 2001 that threat might have been limited to al Qaeda, today newly capable regional terrorist groups such as LeT and even the TTP have achieved some degree of global reach.²⁵ Al Qaeda, although badly damaged by the death of bin Laden and recurrent U.S. drone strikes, continues to plot attacks against the United States and has inspired a global franchise of terrorist actors with similar, if smaller-scale, aims. The United States retains a vital interest in continuing to degrade and disrupt al Qaeda and its confederates, eliminate their safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and work with regional partners to prevent these groups from expanding further throughout the region.

Ensure nuclear weapons or other WMD from the region do not fall into the hands of terrorists. South and Central Asia includes two nuclear-armed states, India and Pakistan, which together possess as many as 200 nuclear weapons.²⁶ Although proliferation from either nation would cause grave concern, the historical record suggests that Pakistan poses the greater risk. The discovery of the decades-long Pakistani nuclear proliferation network led by Abdul Qadeer Khan,²⁷ and the rising power of extremist groups in Pakistan, raise

serious concerns about the security of the Pakistani nuclear weapons program, both from internal and external threats.²⁸ Terrorist groups such as al Qaeda have long sought access to this capability.²⁹ A security breakdown at a nuclear weapons site or in transit, the infiltration of extremist sympathizers into the nuclear program or, in a less likely scenario, the toppling of the Pakistani government by extremist groups or popular radicalization all risk putting weapons or technology into the hands of highly dangerous actors. The risk that nuclear weapons technology could fall into the hands of al Qaeda, a group that has publicly vowed to employ such weapons, is particularly chilling.³⁰

Prevent a nuclear conflict on the subcontinent. Since partition in 1947, India and Pakistan have fought three bitter wars and have also engaged in a long-term unconventional conflict over the contested province of Kashmir. This sustained conflict has cost the lives of thousands and risks further escalation in light of regional instability, terrorism and the growing arms race between the countries. Both possess sizeable nuclear stockpiles, and Pakistan's arsenal is the fastest growing in the world.³¹ Both nations have committed publicly to policies of minimum nuclear deterrence, but the grim reality is that both have increased their fissile material production capabilities, modernized their nuclear delivery vehicles and maintained ambiguity in their first-use doctrines.³² In any full-scale war, the risks of a nuclear exchange are uncomfortably high. Averting a potential nuclear war on the subcontinent is a vital U.S. national interest and requires maintaining the balance of power in the region. A nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan could cost millions of lives, severely damage the global economy and seriously destabilize both countries if not all of South Asia. In Pakistan, the ensuing instability could directly threaten the coherence of the state and further erode control of its nuclear arsenal. The 2008 Mumbai attacks demonstrate the provocative dangers posed by

extremists in this tense environment and their potential to trigger wider wars.³³

These vital interests should drive future U.S. actions in this region, but a range of other interests also remain important. These are dominated by security concerns, an outlook unlikely to change in the foreseeable future given the region's abundant turbulence and risks. Economic interests in the region are also rising in importance, due to important concentrations of energy and critical minerals, and growing markets in China and India.

SECURITY INTERESTS

Contain al Qaeda-inspired violent extremism. Preventing a terrorist attack on the United States by al Qaeda or its offspring, and capitalizing on the demise of bin Laden, is crucial. Despite the violent death of its long-time leader, the al Qaeda network remains the most dangerous proximate threat to the United States and its interests in this region. Al Qaeda's amorphous presence across Pakistan, Afghanistan and adjoining states reflects the degree to which it has adapted and globally exported its ideology and apocalyptic vision since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Its influence is reflected in what were formerly regionally-focused terror groups such as the Pakistani-based LeT and the TTP, which now have made nearly-successful attempts to directly strike the United States.³⁴ Al Qaeda's remaining leadership has now been driven underground but can be expected to exert influence by mobilizing proxy actors to commit attacks and sustain its Internet-enabled campaign of global radicalization. The United States will (of necessity) continue to devote substantial counterterror resources to disrupt, dismantle and ultimately defeat this organization and its allies in the region.

Support stability in Pakistan. Pakistan is, in many ways, the most dangerous nation in the world.³⁵ Although designated a major non-NATO ally of the United States for security assistance purposes,³⁶

Pakistan hosts myriad insurgent groups, radical Islamist political parties and a large military establishment well armed with both nuclear and conventional weaponry. These disparate internal actors with highly divergent objectives illustrate the innate fissures and conflicts that characterize of this outwardly unitary state. As recent events have spectacularly revealed, Pakistan has, wittingly or unwittingly, also provided a hideout for the world's most wanted terrorist for years. Its populace has been cited as the most anti-American citizenry in the world.³⁷ The government's authority throughout the country is uneven, and militant groups operating inside Pakistan directly threaten the stability of the regime and challenge its monopoly on the use of force. These groups are deeply connected with much of the country's radical Islamic religious leadership, as illustrated by the 2006 Red Mosque standoff and battle in Islamabad.³⁸ State failure in Pakistan, triggered by extremism, popular uprising, or economic meltdown would have immensely dangerous repercussions for the United States and a host of regional actors.

Resolve the Afghan war. The impact of the death of bin Laden on the Taliban and its members' calculus regarding settlement of the war is not yet certain. Negotiating an end to the conflict with elements of the Taliban seems more likely now, although given historical norms, it could take years to achieve conclusive results.³⁹ In the meantime, the United States should continue building the Afghan security forces. Hamid Karzai's troubled nine-year rule has also dimmed prospects that the government of Afghanistan will eventually emerge as an exemplar of democracy, respect for human rights and resistance to resurgent extremism. Warlords and power brokers continue to pursue their own agendas, even when they occupy positions in the government. Yet in the midst of an ongoing war, Afghanistan remains one of the few nations in the region with a representative government, albeit nascent.

As the United States begins transitioning to a much smaller presence, it must shape an outcome that builds on this fragile beginning by crafting policies designed to avoid civil war, regional proxy conflict or a return of a Taliban-dominated state. The trajectory and speed of the U.S. transition in the face of mounting costs and limited public support must avoid these negative outcomes, which would be both bloody and potentially destabilizing and could engulf the entire region in a large-scale war. They would also encourage extremist actors catalyzed by their perceived success against the West, perhaps further destabilizing existing governments. The war in Afghanistan must be resolved in a way that protects U.S. vital interests without compromising other important goals such as democracy and human rights.

Prevent future regional conflicts. South and Central Asia have been embroiled in near-continuous wars since the late 1970s – mostly in or on the periphery of Afghanistan. Although the Afghan war has grown more lethal in recent years, it remains largely confined to the territory of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The pending drawdown, with its potential for diminished U.S. involvement, threatens to reduce or remove the constraints that have limited both the war's proxy involvement and its geographic scope. The United States has a strong interest in preventing the regional spread of this conflict or its descent into an even bloodier civil war that could include neighbors employing proxies to influence the outcome. An enlarged Afghan conflict that spills over into open warfare between India and Pakistan would be even more dangerous. The terrorist attacks on the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2008 and 2009 and on various civilian targets in Mumbai in 2008 nearly triggered war between the two nuclear-armed states. The potential for such a military confrontation has increased greatly since the Mumbai attacks, and an escalation of the Afghan war would make it even more

Drawing Down in Afghanistan: 2011 to 2014

In his 2009 speech at West Point, President Obama announced that the United States would start its initial drawdown from Afghanistan in the summer of 2011. The exact timeline of this drawdown was unclear until the 2010 NATO Conference in Lisbon, which set the full transition to Afghan security forces by the end of 2014. As the starting point of the departure timeline approaches, however, the pace of troop reductions remains unclear. Following the death of Osama bin Laden, many Congressional leaders have called for an accelerated drawdown.

The following factors, rather than domestic political considerations, should inform the pace and character of the reduction of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan.

AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY FORCES: SIZE AND STRENGTH

Both the number and quality of Afghanistan's army and national police are critical to the successful transition of security responsibilities from U.S. and NATO forces. The Afghan forces must be able to perform the duties currently performed by Western forces, to include defending the state from Taliban and other militant attacks, preserving basic security for the population and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for any terrorist group.

STATUS OF THE INSURGENCY

The security situation over the next three and a half years will be directly affected by any negotiated settlements or agreements made with insurgents. The United States and

the government of Afghanistan have expressed a willingness to politically accommodate Taliban elements who are willing to renounce any affiliation with al Qaeda and put down their arms.

REGIONAL COOPERATION

The willingness of Afghanistan's neighbors to cooperate with security measures, to include cracking down on militants, smuggling and illicit networks operating in the region, is a key indicator for determining the pace of departure for U.S. forces. Greater international collaboration would support faster reductions. Absent substantial cooperation from Pakistan, Iran and India, the United States and international forces will likely delay significant transitions until the last possible opportunity.

likely. Perhaps the most dangerous scenario would be another direct terrorist attack on India emanating from Pakistan, which could trigger a strong Indian military response. India's assessment of the unchecked U.S. strike deep inside Pakistan to kill bin Laden is unknown, but is unlikely to encourage restraint in future Indian military actions.

ECONOMIC INTERESTS

While security interests remain the foremost U.S. interests in Central and South Asia, economic interests and energy dependencies in this region are growing. Moreover, the prospect of long-term economic growth provides an opportunity to build lasting stability.

Facilitate access to natural resources. Natural resources – specifically fossil fuels and rare earth elements – are abundant in South and Central Asia. Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and other regional states also have sizable natural gas reserves.⁴⁰ The tremendous potential for these resources to reshape these economies and rebalance world energy markets creates immense promise for these nations. Unpredictable security conditions in South Asia – notably in Afghanistan and Pakistan – undermine support for the continued development and construction of long-distance oil and natural gas pipelines across the region to the Indian Ocean and subcontinent to international markets. Instead, current resources flow toward Europe, Russia and Turkey along alternate routes that largely avoid South Asia.

In Afghanistan, enormous mineral reserves, including scattered deposits of iron, copper, lithium and other minerals, have the potential to make the country a major exporter of extracted resources.⁴¹ Due to the ongoing conflict and the lack of developed infrastructure to support such mining operations, the potential benefits (and pitfalls) of an expanded extractive industry have not yet been realized. Nevertheless, iron, copper and lithium reserves make Afghanistan an immensely attractive investment location for Chinese and other global producers. Preliminary analysis suggests that Afghanistan may have the largest reserves of lithium in the world.⁴² In 2009, a Chinese firm leased the rights to the Aynak copper deposit for 3.5 billion dollars – the single-largest foreign mining investment in Afghanistan as of this writing.⁴³ These resources may enable Afghanistan to build a more sustainable economy in the coming decades, though numerous problems could arise.

in goods manufactured locally and abroad, resources, and energy are the essential foundation of any successful economic policy for Afghanistan and the region.⁴⁴ Moreover, trade and transportation promote economic interdependence, a key ingredient for long-term prosperity and regional stability. For example, China and India have deepened their trade ties significantly, increasing trade flows from 350 million dollars in 1993 to 30 billion dollars in 2007. Total trade could reach more than 100 billion dollars by 2015, and current joint ventures linking the two nations include power generation, consumer goods, steel, chemicals, minerals, mining and telecommunications.⁴⁵ From a military standpoint, an improved network of trade and transport throughout Central Asia would provide the United States and NATO robust options for supplies beyond overland routes through the to Torkham Gate and the port of Karachi, removing one more point of Pakistani leverage over the allied effort in Afghanistan.

India's assessment of the unchecked U.S. strike deep inside Pakistan to kill bin Laden is unknown, but is unlikely to encourage restraint in future Indian military actions.

Expand trade and transport. Increased trade and transport have great potential to improve economic conditions in South and Central Asia. The region sits on the seam between Europe and Asia, and transit and trade routes to the north, south, east and west have existed for centuries. As Frederick Starr argues, “transport and trade

Interests of Regional Actors in South and Central Asia

By J. Dana Stuster
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CHINA

China is deeply involved in the economic development of South and Central Asia. It is the leading investor in mineral resources in Afghanistan, including the Aynak copper deposit in Logar Province.⁴⁶ More significantly, China and Pakistan are close economic partners, and China is deeply involved in economic infrastructure development, trade and military sales there. The China-Pakistan relationship is an important bellwether for Chinese relations with the Muslim world, as well as a Chinese hedge against the growing influence of India and Russia.⁴⁷ China was one of the few states that spoke out in support of Islamabad following the U.S. strike that killed Osama bin Laden. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao publicly reassured Pakistan that “no matter what changes might take place in the international landscape, China and Pakistan will remain for ever good neighbours, good friends, good partners, and good brothers.”⁴⁸ China is also making trade and transport arrangements in the Central Asian states, notably Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to support expanded export markets for Chinese goods and access to natural resources.⁴⁹

INDIA

India is the largest and most dominant power in South Asia. The world’s largest democracy continues to increase its diplomatic, economic and military influence throughout the region. Looking outward, India seeks to maintain its regional power

while expanding its influence and control in the Indian Ocean.⁵⁰ To support this vision, India plays an active role in Afghanistan, expanding its diplomatic and economic influence beyond its borders and into Central Asia while continuing its military and arms competition with its hostile neighbor, Pakistan.⁵¹

IRAN

Iran exerts limited influence in South and Central Asia, but it is actively involved in the region’s natural resource industry and trade and transport networks, controlling key access routes and other infrastructure. Iran is a key supplier of fossil fuels and other goods to India and serves as a hub for Central Asian products.⁵² Iran has made itself an essential part of western Afghanistan, contributing significantly to the economy and energy sector in Herat and Nimruz provinces.⁵³ However, Iran also fosters instability by providing resources and training for the insurgency in western and southern Afghanistan, specifically in Pashtun areas.⁵⁴ Such support is designed to expand Iranian influence in Afghanistan, counter the U.S. presence in the country and preserve Iranian access to resources and trade routes.⁵⁵

RUSSIA

Russia has a range of economic, security and political interests in South and Central Asia. It seeks to remain the primary conduit for fossil fuels from Central Asia to the European and Western markets and to preserve its geopolitical dominance over the Central Asian states. Russia views the decade-long

NATO presence in Afghanistan with wariness, but it still supports the current Kabul government through political engagement, military and logistics support, and economic cooperation.⁵⁶ The proposed strategic framework agreement between the United States and Afghanistan has caused some Russian officials to criticize the potential long-term U.S. presence and basing in the region.⁵⁷

CENTRAL ASIAN STATES

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have used their natural resources and geographic location to leverage major powers and can be expected to continue doing so.⁵⁸ In 2009, for example, Russian pressure led Kyrgyzstan to revoke U.S. rights to Manas Air Base, which had been a key conduit of supplies to Afghanistan since 2001 (although these rights were later reinstated for a much steeper lease).⁵⁹ The Northern Distribution Network – the second-largest supply line for U.S. forces in Afghanistan – is particularly vulnerable to similar political maneuvering, but has provided an increasingly important alternative to dependency on Pakistani ports and land lines of supply. This importance will grow if relations with Pakistan further erode, and could potentially supply all residual U.S. forces in Afghanistan once troop levels decline substantially. Islamist militant groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union, are active in Afghanistan and also threaten the Central Asian states.⁶⁰ In addition, illicit materials, including opium from Afghanistan, transit through Central Asia, particularly Tajikistan.⁶¹

V. A REGIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

The United States needs a comprehensive regional strategy to protect and advance its interests. Although the United States has tended to manage its foreign policy bilaterally and address individual challenges as they arise, its interests span the entire region. As the United States balances these regional interests with its global priorities, the changing dynamics in the aftermath of bin Laden's death, combined with the coming transition in Afghanistan, provide the opportunity to design a strategy that promotes these interests well into the future.

Goals

Contain and defeat al Qaeda and its associates.

The potential of an al Qaeda-inspired attack on the United States or its allies remains serious and ever-present. The long-term effects of bin Laden's death will take months if not years to fully develop, but it certainly has not destroyed al Qaeda's ability to launch global strikes. U.S. operations against remaining senior al Qaeda figures are unlikely to decisively change that calculus in the near term.

Despite recurring tensions, U.S. military and intelligence operations still rely on a close partnership with institutions and individuals within the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Even before the U.S. raid on bin Laden, relations with the Pakistani military and intelligence services were severely strained. Perversely, these relationships will only grow more important as the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan declines, since they are vital for effective U.S. counterterrorism operations. Partnerships and networks on both sides of the border will remain essential to future efforts to disrupt al Qaeda and its affiliated operations and prevent terrorist attacks on the United States.

The United States will also need deeper intelligence and security relationships with the states of Central Asia to contain and defeat al Qaeda and its allies,

as these terrorist groups seek new locales that offer respite from the intense pressure they now face in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, deepening these relationships creates a conundrum for the United States, since autocrats rule these countries and democratic movements are often suppressed. The United States must continue to advocate for democratic reforms while engaging in these counterterrorism partnerships. In the best case, military-to-military and other security relationships may help establish a standard of democratic civil-military values in the region. This is an important and consistent component of any U.S. military assistance efforts.

Despite recurring tensions, U.S. military and intelligence operations still rely on a close partnership with institutions and individuals within the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Ultimately, attacking the roots of extremism is the most promising way to constrict al Qaeda's operating space. Yet in many ways, it remains the most difficult. Extremist ideologies and religious movements are undermining secular elected governments across the region, especially in Pakistan.⁶² While growing anti-Western and anti-American sentiment does not directly threaten U.S. interests, it does constrain otherwise supportive governments from greater cooperation with U.S. counterterrorism efforts. All highlight the need for dramatically better U.S. public diplomacy and information operations and for a far deeper

analysis of the levers available to sway populations in the region away from extremist influences. The United States lags in this area relative to its application of military power, and it must be redressed.

Finally, economic growth can gradually limit the recruiting base for extremist groups and strengthen more politically moderate actors. As the number of young people continues to outpace the number of jobs, internal pressures on regional governments will increase. Disaffected youth may be particularly attracted to movements that speak to their frustrations, give them a sense of belonging and promise rapid, revolutionary change. By providing a more solid economic footing – enabled by improved regional stability – the United States can mitigate this looming risk.

Complete a successful transition in Afghanistan.

As noted previously, this report assumes that the United States will maintain a long-term military presence in Afghanistan. This force, which could number as many as 25,000 to 35,000 troops if required, will be devoted to continuing to disrupt al Qaeda and its associates and advising and enabling Afghan security forces battling the Taliban. A substantive decline in terrorist capabilities or a resolution of the conflict with the Taliban could dramatically reduce these numbers. However, in the fight against al Qaeda and its partners, limited U.S. military forces remain vital to provide the security and support networks needed to sustain the robust intelligence networks that straddle the border. Moreover, the long-term reassurance provided by a limited presence of U.S. troops will enhance stability and may deter the outbreak of civil war or proxy fighting. To that end, during the next 18 months the United States should work to secure a strategic partnership agreement with the government of Afghanistan that authorizes this residual force and its temporary but robust basing.⁶³

Such an agreement would enable an extended U.S. troop commitment that would support the

Ensuring the survival of the state of Pakistan, and preventing its control by extremists, trumps every other immediate or medium-term U.S. strategic goal.

continuing development of the Afghan security forces. These combined army and police forces are projected to reach as many as 378,000 men and women in uniform, a truly substantial force compared to others in this region.⁶⁴ A continuing commitment to Afghan security forces would fatally undermine the Taliban’s “long war” survival strategy of waiting out the international military effort, and it would greatly increase the U.S. leverage in promoting a negotiated end to the war.

Though the governments of Afghanistan and the United States both recognize the value and necessity of a long-term U.S. commitment to Afghanistan, officials and constituencies in Pakistan are likely to take a different view. Not only are many Pakistanis uncertain of the value of a long-term U.S. presence, but they are highly suspicious of the increasingly large Afghan standing army. In effect, the United States has committed to train, organize and equip a significant military force of unknown future intentions on Pakistan’s western border. For a nation that has historically been highly sensitive about its vulnerability to its west and perceived lack of “strategic depth,” such military expansion creates fears of an Indian threat. At a minimum, a large and capable Afghan military causes Pakistan to be highly apprehensive of the political alignment of any government in Kabul – it cannot afford a western neighbor capable of threatening

its security from a new direction. Thus, a long-term commitment by the United States would affect Pakistan's strategic calculus. Even in the wake of the humiliation suffered over the bin Laden raid, elements within Pakistan's military and security services will likely continue to seek ways to hedge their bets by investing in proxies. Quietly supporting insurgent extremist groups in Afghanistan as a fallback plan in the event of a precipitate U.S. departure closely fits a Pakistani security calculus premised on fears of abandonment – an event with historical precedent.

Elements within Pakistan could play a key role in any conflict mediation or reintegration of militants into the Afghan political process. With its increased leverage after the bin Laden raid, the United States should insist upon this support. There remains little question that several militant groups – including the Afghan Taliban's Quetta Shura, the Haqqani Network and LeT – receive varying degrees of support from factions of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI).⁶⁵ This support must end now. Pakistan's continued hedging is unacceptable and will block closer U.S.-Pakistani relations. Pakistani support for these militant groups should represent a "red line" in the relationship – one that the United States should not hesitate to assert.

Finally, successfully concluding the Afghan war would reward the resolve of NATO and its international partners in the struggle against violent Islamist extremism while denying a long-sought psychological and material victory to those dangerous foes. It would reduce pressure on U.S. and allied military budgets. A positive resolution of the conflict would also dramatically decrease the risks for regional and global investors, potentially leading to improved conditions for indigenous economic growth and a sizable opening of trade and transit across South and Central Asia – all of which could enhance economic prosperity and stability.

Promote stability in the region. Ensuring the survival of the state of Pakistan, and preventing its control by extremists, trumps every other immediate or medium-term U.S. strategic goal. Without question, Pakistan remains a vexing and at times infuriating partner. It often behaves in ways that are contrary to U.S. interests and is wracked with internal contradictions and rising extremism that threaten its more moderate voices. Yet strengthening stability in Pakistan remains the only feasible, if fraught, way ahead. Pakistan, in many ways, remains a state in conflict with itself. The United States must therefore target its efforts in Pakistan to identify, strengthen and support moderate actors while marginalizing and weakening those who are operating in clear contravention of U.S. goals.

Though the full consequences of the raid that killed bin Laden will not be fully apparent for months to come, it marks a decisive turning point in the U.S.-Pakistani relationship. Whereas the January 2011 crisis triggered by the killing of three Pakistanis by CIA contractors in Lahore put the United States in a defensive position with Pakistan's security services, the current imbroglio reverses that situation. Given either Pakistani complicity or fecklessness regarding bin Laden's location, U.S. leverage with Pakistan now is at its highest point since the days following the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The United States must capitalize on this turn of events to help Pakistanis overcome their internal divisions and lay the foundations for a sustained and mutually supportive partnership. Doing so is as demonstrably in Pakistan's best interests as it is in the United States' – a fact that should be carefully outlined to the Pakistani civilian and military leadership. The price of further deceptive or duplicitous Pakistani behaviors must be unambiguously clear. The Pakistani military and security services must understand the degree to which the American people (and many of their representatives in the U.S. Congress) are eager to end all aid

to the state that seemingly harbored bin Laden. Indeed, as this report goes to print, a fierce debate is unfolding in Congress about the value of spending billions of U.S. aid and security assistance dollars on the government and security services of Pakistan. Recognizing the extraordinary fiscal stress facing the nation, many Americans are quite understandably calling for a suspension or outright elimination of aid. While the outcome of this debate is not yet known, it clearly reflects outrage about bin Laden's longstanding Pakistani safe haven. The U.S. government needs to channel reactions away from such cuts, and instead ensure continuing support for Pakistani counterterrorism and counterinsurgency capabilities while assisting Pakistan with its economic challenges.⁶⁶ It should clarify to the Pakistani government that additional conditions and transparency for certain programs will now be a prerequisite for continued support.

In order to build a deeper relationship with the United States, Pakistan must recognize the vital U.S. interests at stake in the region. Protecting those interests and helping underwrite regional stability will likely entail an enduring, albeit modest, U.S. military presence, probably based primarily in Afghanistan. Acknowledgment and support by the government and security services of Afghanistan and Pakistan for these U.S. interests, and the means by which they will be defended, is important. This recognition could also help reshape Pakistan's security calculus so that it recognizes long-term U.S. influence, and commitment to partnership with both Pakistan and Afghanistan, as a fact. Deepening intelligence and security assistance links, including limited numbers of U.S. advisors and trainers, should naturally evolve in these newfound mutual partnerships.

The public embarrassment to Pakistan's security services resulting from the bin Laden raid presents Pakistan's civilian leaders another opportunity to exert greater control over the country's military – one which the United States needs to actively

support. However, the civilian political leadership's failure to assert itself over the military is a consistent trend. In 2009, the civilian government failed to remove the ISI from the military command structure, just as it failed to assert true control and accountability over its intelligence services in the aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks.⁶⁷ To date, its feeble actions to effectively investigate bin Laden's long presence in Pakistan and establish accountability seem unlikely to reverse this trend.

As the United States moves toward a more constrained and differentiated short-term approach to Pakistan, policymakers must keep in mind longer-term U.S. objectives: a stable, more moderate Pakistan linked in a strategic partnership with the United States. Despite a hedging strategy that, to date, has led to continued support for insurgent groups, Pakistan nonetheless will continue to seek a long-term partnership with the United States. It particularly covets U.S. financial support, especially as it guardedly observes the rapidly growing U.S.-Indian relationship.⁶⁸

Yet building toward a long-term U.S.-Pakistani partnership in the current environment will require a careful re-examination of the relationship by the United States – and tough choices by leaders in Pakistan. Pakistan's course could lead it to a wide range of possible destinations. At one extreme it could slowly evolve toward a large, influential state akin to Turkey, broadly Islamist but relatively moderate, economically prosperous and engaged with the West; at the other, it could shift toward a dangerous radical state resembling Iran, hostile to the United States and the international community, extremist in outlook and ideology, diplomatically and economically isolated – but also armed with more than 100 nuclear weapons. The choices that both Pakistan and the United States make over the next several years will dramatically influence the trajectory Pakistan ultimately follows. Neither nation can afford to make poor choices.

A stable region ultimately requires normalizing relations between India and Pakistan, however far-off that goal seems today. The roots of the conflict date back to independence from Britain in 1947, but are growing increasingly irrelevant. The United States must take an active, if behind the scenes, role in advancing this normalization. Success in this difficult task is essential – both to enable India to reach its full potential as well as to unshackle Pakistan from the debilitating loss of productive resources diverted into military spending unrelated to its current internal threats.

Normalizing this relationship will also reduce the probability of a nuclear confrontation. Confidence-building measures, such as opening military-to-military relationships brokered by the United States, could be an important first step in this process. The United States will also continue to develop distinct strategic partnerships with each country, but these bilateral relationships will operate on different courses and at different speeds. This pragmatic approach recognizes the differing positions of each country vis-à-vis the United States even as they gradually build closer ties with each other. Steadily and quietly promoting normalized relations between India and Pakistan should be a top U.S. diplomatic priority for this region until it is accomplished.

Finally, long-term regional stability involves the evolution and expansion of functioning democratic states. The underlying promise of democracy continues to be a global aspiration – as the revolutionary events across North Africa and the Middle East in early 2011 have shown. The United States must quietly promote the growth and sustainment of democracy in South and Central Asia by strengthening the current fragile democracies of Afghanistan and Pakistan and seeking to promote reforms in the Central Asian states. Again, the U.S. role should be subtle but persistent, operating both in public and quietly behind the scenes with consistency of purpose.

Support the U.S.-Indian partnership and encourage the peaceful rise of China. Indian and Chinese influence in the region is growing rapidly. Both share borders and deep economic interests – including trade and transport, raw materials and energy – with several key states. In addition, China and India share a competitive and sometimes tense relationship with each other, particularly because of their common border and China’s deep relationship with Pakistan.

Today, India is a growing U.S. partner in the region. Deepening this nascent partnership is thus critical, given that India offers the most potential as a nexus of U.S. economic, political and security interests in South and Central Asia. Its importance is tied primarily to *positive* factors – especially its deepening economic interdependence with the United States – rather than security threats. Its synergistic economic relationship and political alignment with the United States will only grow given its unique role as the world’s most populous democracy. President Barack Obama has stated that the United States “sees Asia – and especially India – as a market of the future” and has lauded the “opportunity to sell our exports in one of the fastest-growing markets in the world.”⁶⁹ The president’s November 2010 trip to India coincided with the signing of more than 20 major business deals between American businesses and India, amounting to 10 billion dollars in trade.⁷⁰ However, the U.S.-India partnership does have limits. India recently stunned the U.S. defense industry by rejecting the two U.S. aircraft manufacturers in its four-company international competition to build its next generation fighter.⁷¹

Since 2001, both countries have formed increasingly close military-to-military relationships as part of a broader defense framework. This framework is based on close counterterrorism cooperation and intelligence sharing, maritime security and counter proliferation efforts.⁷² The formal relationship between the two states is

codified in the 2005 U.S.-Indian defense pact, establishing the two states as “global partners.”⁷³ Critical to this relationship is the growth of bilateral military exercises and training, as well as law enforcement and intelligence cooperation. This collaboration significantly increased in the aftermath of the Mumbai 2008 attacks and the case of U.S. citizen David Headley, a senior LeT and al Qaeda operative.⁷⁴ Examples of the emerging partnership include the creation of the Indian National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) modeled on the American NCTC, and a joint U.S.-Indian cybersecurity initiative.⁷⁵

The U.S.-Indian joint civilian nuclear partnership agreement that was announced in 2005 and approved in 2008 represents a substantial evolution of U.S. nuclear nonproliferation policy, especially following the tensions that arose from India’s and Pakistan’s 1998 nuclear tests. It clearly recognizes India’s geopolitical prominence and mutual U.S.-Indian interests.⁷⁶ The agreement enables U.S. companies to work with Indian firms and the government to construct civilian nuclear infrastructure.⁷⁷ U.S. support for Indian access to the international Nuclear Suppliers Group and India’s acceptance of International Atomic Energy Agency inspections at the proposed civilian facilities have both been critical to the success of the agreement.⁷⁸

China’s current and future relationship with both the United States and other regional actors remains largely uncertain, especially given the evolving military transition in Afghanistan. Although China will undoubtedly view any sustained U.S. military presence in Afghanistan unfavorably, it should also recognize the steady value that presence could bring. China and the United States share the goal of regional stability because China needs to ensure unfettered access to the Pakistani ports on which it relies and to its mineral and energy interests across the region. China is also investing large amounts of

money, resources and attention in the economic infrastructure of South and Central Asia. Some pundits have already noted the irony that the U.S. military in effect guards Chinese mineral extraction at the Aynak copper mine in Afghanistan.⁷⁹ But China will also be wary of a long-term U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan because those troops would be based on China’s western approaches. The Chinese may be willing to pay this price in the near term, but only as long as the bases remain modest and are not permanent.

The Dilemma of Pakistan: U.S. Policy Options

The complex linkage between the United States and Pakistan is arguably the most perplexing and yet important bilateral relationship in the world. Few would dispute that elements of the Pakistani state have covertly supported elements of the Taliban for years during the insurgents' ongoing fight against U.S., NATO, and Afghan national security forces. At the same time, Pakistan has arrested scores of al Qaeda operatives and provided grudging but essential support for U.S. drone strikes on Pakistani territory. This dichotomy seems wholly paradoxical and inexplicable to many Western observers.⁸⁰ Indications that segments of Pakistan's security establishment may have provided tacit support to al Qaeda operatives appear even more confounding.

Yet in truth, these policies reflect the dogged commitment of key Pakistani leaders, most of all in the military and the ISI, to advancing the national security agenda of Pakistan as they understand it – balancing against encirclement by India while holding nuclear weapons and ties to “irregular forces” in reserve to offset Indian conventional superiority. These behaviors and attitudes will be immensely difficult to change, much less eliminate. But to address vital U.S. security interests in this part of the world, the United States must deal with Pakistan as it is – not as the United States might like it to be.

Current U.S.-Pakistani relations are transactional. They rely heavily on immediate security concerns

and mutual interest in short- and medium-term cooperation, primarily in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. Cooperation is facilitated by the large amounts of money that the United States gives Pakistan annually through Counterinsurgency Support Funds, which reimburse the Pakistani military for its combat operations in the tribal areas; traditional security assistance dollars aimed at procurement of materiel; and civilian aid such as the Kerry-Lugar-Berman legislation aimed at civil society and development.⁸¹

However, the recent crises, starting with CIA contractors killing three Pakistanis in January 2011 in Lahore and coupled with the still unfolding effects of the May 2011 U.S. strike that killed Osama bin Laden, demonstrate both the fragility and turbulence of the relationship. Widespread popular outrage in Pakistan over the former and profound Pakistani embarrassment over the latter highlight the intractable tensions that make clear the extraordinarily difficult policy options confronting the United States.

The strategic choices facing the United States in Pakistan are difficult and often unclear given competing short-, medium- and long-term goals and interests. The enduring U.S. goal in Pakistan is to support a stable, secure and moderate government capable of securing its nuclear weapons, governing and providing services to its people, preventing violent extremist orga-

nizations from operating in or from its territory and maintaining peace with its neighbors.⁸² To achieve this goal, the United States has several potential policy options, each of which varies in its political feasibility and likelihood of success.

CONTAINMENT

Based on the deep mistrust between the countries, there is growing interest among some in both the United States and Pakistan to disengage. If the two powers were to grow apart, the United States could choose to shift to a minimalist security approach. Such a U.S. policy could designate Pakistan as an adversary, best dealt with by “walling off” its problematic influence in the region. The United States might move in this direction as it draws down to a smaller presence in the region and arraying assets around the periphery of Pakistan – in Afghanistan, the Central Asian states and potentially India. Containment could also involve punitive diplomatic and economic measures, as well as shutting down most, if not all, U.S. security assistance and development funding. Pakistan's military would likely perceive this policy choice as a *de facto* U.S.-Indian alliance, further decreasing its willingness to cooperate with the United States. This policy would leave Pakistan to its own devices, and over time, worsening security, economic and ideological problems could threaten the state itself. Of greatest concern, a U.S. policy of containment could accelerate prospects for state collapse, potentially driven by deep-

ening internal unrest. Containment should be an option of last resort for U.S. policymakers, when all other options are either exhausted or untenable – but it should remain on the table.

CONDITIONAL SUPPORT

The United States could continue transactional counterterrorism and counterinsurgency cooperation with Pakistan in the near term, focusing on dismantling al Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban and other militant groups that threaten U.S. interests and target the Pakistani state. In light of the circumstances surrounding the death of bin Laden, the United States could both threaten more conditionality for U.S. aid and refuse to accept Pakistani excuses for half-hearted support in pursuing insurgent and terrorist groups residing inside Pakistan. Suspending the current reimbursement arrangement for underwriting Pakistani counterinsurgency operations might be a first step in this tougher relationship. In the short term, conditional support could help build U.S. leverage over Pakistan, structuring key concessions now as a prerequisite to increasing U.S. confidence in prospects for a partnership in years to come.⁸³ However, in the long term, such an approach risks being perceived by Pakistan as a vote of no confidence, further encouraging the hedging behaviors that deeply undermine U.S. confidence in Pakistan.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

The United States could make a long-term commitment to cooperate with Pakistan closely on a series of critical issues, including security and trade. This could involve maintaining a U.S. residual force in Afghanistan and an increased security partnership with Pakistan. The United States could use the leverage it gained after bin Laden's death to shape greater Pakistani counterterrorism support and demand direct efforts to undermine sanctuaries and support for Taliban fighting U.S. troops in Afghanistan. In exchange, the United States would make an enduring commitment to Pakistan's security, so that key Pakistani actors feel confident enough to begin talking seriously with India and simultaneously discontinuing their support for Taliban militants. This policy would include counterterrorism and counterinsurgency support, but it would not include locating U.S. combat or stabilization troops in Pakistan; it is foremost a strategy of conflict prevention based on careful and reciprocal actions between the U.S. and Pakistani government and its people. A policy of U.S. strategic partnership with Pakistan to promote regional security and stability arguably holds the greatest promise of lasting success for both nations over the long term.

However, the United States must adopt a *differentiated* strategy in lieu of one that treats the state as a unitary actor – which it manifestly is not. Pakistan, in many ways, remains a state in conflict with itself. In the near term, the U.S. goals for Pakistan

should be to *discontinue its support* for terrorist and insurgent groups, *improve its control* over its territory and *remain in control* of its nuclear weapons. As U.S. Speaker of the House John Boehner, R-Ohio, said on May 4, 2011: "We both benefit from having a strong bilateral relationship. This is not a time to back away from Pakistan. We need more engagement, not less."⁸⁴ The trauma to the relationship of recent events should be both a warning and an opportunity for both parties – change is necessary and the time is ripe.

VI. IMPLEMENTING A REGIONAL STRATEGY: RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESOURCES

An effective U.S. regional strategy must focus on the core goals identified previously: containing and defeating al Qaeda and its associates, bolstering the stability of the region, resolving the Afghan conflict, continuing the growing partnership with India and balancing the increasing influence of China. Today, U.S. policy must focus on pressing security concerns in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including the insurgency and threat of transnational terrorism, but over the long term, U.S. interests will shift toward India. The U.S. government has the military, civilian and economic resources needed to achieve these goals, even in an era of shrinking resources. The resources required for this strategy will be fewer than those consumed today, given the immense cost in dollars and human lives of the ongoing war in Afghanistan.

Recommendations

Negotiate a strategic partnership agreement with the government of Afghanistan. A significant U.S. objective in the next 18 months is to negotiate the terms of U.S. diplomatic and military engagement after the Afghan government assumes full responsibility for security operations, which is currently planned for December 2014. The uncertainty about a longer-term U.S. military role in Iraq offers a cautionary tale about the unintended consequences such agreements may have, but unlike the Iraqi government, Afghanistan's leadership seeks a sustained U.S. military presence. Such an agreement must contain the broad outlines of continued U.S. defense, diplomatic and development commitments to Afghanistan, and should include a status of forces agreement and a limited security guarantee.⁸⁵ Depending on the conditions outlined earlier, a U.S. residual force of up to 25,000 to 35,000 troops posted at several nonpermanent bases in Afghanistan could be necessary to advise and assist the Afghan security

forces in their continuing counterinsurgency battle against the Taliban and provide counterterrorism forces to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda.⁸⁶ Significant changes in either al Qaeda's posture or the Taliban insurgency could dramatically alter those numbers, but not the importance of a continued American presence. Such a residual force, even of modest size, would help stabilize the region by providing tangible reassurance to friends and allies of U.S. commitment and staying power.

President Karzai has reacted to the death of bin Laden by further distancing himself and his government from Pakistan.⁸⁷ Yet he also fears the calls for rapid U.S. disengagement and withdrawal that are emanating from certain corners of the U.S. Congress and body politic.⁸⁸ In addition, local power brokers are beginning to plan for a precipitous U.S. withdrawal, most noticeably in Afghanistan's northern provinces, by forging their own alliances and bases of support. The United States should leverage these developments to cement a cost-effective but comprehensive agreement that assures basing for U.S. counterterrorism forces while planning to gradually decrease economic support for Afghan security forces after the Taliban insurgency has been resolved. A long-term presence of limited U.S. military forces demonstrates the depth of the U.S. commitment to the region – a stabilizing presence anxiously sought by neutral countries and friends of the United States alike. Military presence and power show a depth of engagement that cannot be matched by diplomatic or development efforts. In order to adequately defend U.S. vital interests in this part of the world, a sustained, if smaller, military presence is essential to buttress allies and sustain U.S. influence.

Develop a long-term but differentiated approach to Pakistan. Though both countries must recognize the need to work together in order to achieve their essential objectives, the United States should outline a more nuanced approach to Pakistan that recognizes that state's diverse actors and their

conflicting interests and activities. A more carefully targeted U.S. approach would empower and bolster actors within the state who support U.S. objectives, while marginalizing and penalizing those who pursue opposing objectives and are unwilling to change their behavior.

In the near term, candor will require the United States to inform Pakistan that U.S. aid will be conditioned on both transparency and performance. Continued covert Pakistani support for terrorist groups of any dispensation should be a U.S. “red line,” triggering suspension of military and intelligence funding. At a minimum, the United States would expect more access to intelligence on al Qaeda, LeT and other deadly transnational terror groups as well as the Taliban; continued support for drone strikes; and sustainment of the logistics pipeline that fuels NATO forces in Afghanistan. This frank dialogue with unmistakable expectations is essential to clarify the outlooks and goals of each actor if today’s fragile relationship is to survive uncertainties and shocks in an unpredictable future. Both states will adopt policies that reflect their own interests, and many of those interests may diverge or even conflict with each other. Adopting such a candid (if private) approach today helps set the stage for the growth of a long-term strategic partnership tomorrow. But such a future is simply unthinkable if today’s mutual distrust continues.

Reshape foreign and security assistance to Pakistan. Since 2001, the United States has provided more than 20 billion dollars in security and economic assistance to Pakistan – which is more than any state other than Afghanistan and Iraq (including Israel).⁸⁹ In the aftermath of the raid on bin Laden outside Islamabad, though, critics are increasingly calling for cuts in U.S. assistance to Pakistan, starting with the assistance package in the Kerry-Lugar-Berman legislation. Cutting this particular funding, though, would be a mistake, and those who suggest the United States should

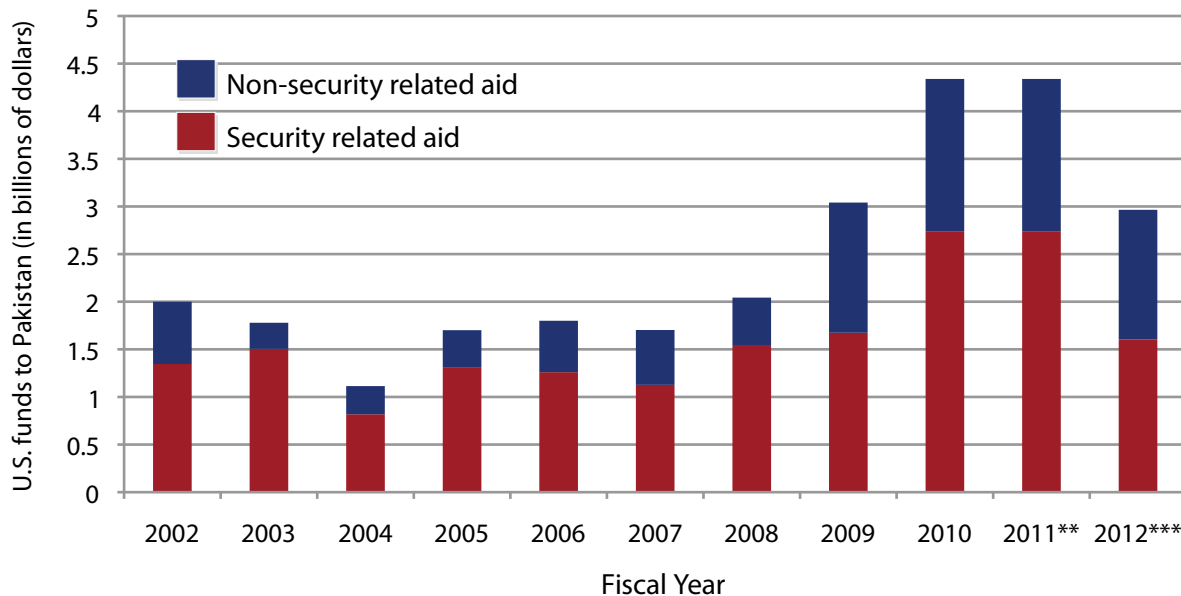
cut economic aid while continuing military aid have it exactly wrong.⁹⁰ If the United States does cut funding, those cuts should come out of some of the more unaccountable assistance given to Pakistan’s military and security services instead of the carefully conditioned aid given to the rest of the Pakistani state.

To maximize U.S. leverage over Pakistan, the United States should use a differentiated economic and security assistance approach to bolster Pakistan’s civilian government vis-à-vis the Pakistani military-intelligence establishment.⁹¹ The United States should require more accountability in counterinsurgency support funding and other military assistance to Pakistan, including greater transparency on how funds are used. In addition, the United States should seek to block Pakistani efforts to divert U.S. counterinsurgency and counterterrorism assistance toward its long-standing arms race with India. Lastly, the U.S. Congress should increasingly seek to bolster civilian institutions such as the Pakistani Ministry of Interior. The long-term stability of Pakistan as a sovereign and moderate state requires stable and effective civilian leadership.⁹²

As part of a differentiated approach toward Pakistan, the United States should explore using targeted financial pressure against individuals and organizations in Pakistan with links to transnational terrorism and insurgency in the region. This step would complement more nuanced assistance programs. This would support Pakistan’s civilian government and would facilitate highly targeted pressure.

Broker confidence-building measures between India and Pakistan. As the fallout from the bin Laden strike dissipates, the United States must seek opportunities to assist India and Pakistan in quietly reaching out to each other. Initiating a series of track-two dialogues between their militaries, foreign and interior ministries and

TABLE 1: U.S. FOREIGN ASSISTANCE TO PAKISTAN, 2002-2012*



*Does not include classified foreign assistance and funding through intelligence agencies.

***FY2012 Budget Request

**FY2011 Congressional Research information is estimated based on actual FY2010 data.

Sources: Congressional Research Service

business communities could pay high dividends in future times of tension. Moreover, U.S. military involvement in educating both militaries and defense ministries in the hard-learned Cold War lessons of nuclear deterrence, transparency, communication and common vocabulary before a crisis erupts could help avoid tragic miscalculations during heightened tensions. India and Pakistan remain the only two nuclear-armed nations in the world that share a disputed border, and they have a history of deadly mutual hostilities and conflicts. Preventing war between the two demands a stronger, if nuanced and indirect, U.S. role.

Sustain and deepen the U.S.-Indian partnership. Since 2001, the United States and India have benefited greatly from their rapprochement. The United States should support greater

collaboration and partnership in order to further strengthen this important bilateral relationship. On November 8, 2010, President Obama told the Indian Parliament that, “with India assuming its rightful place in the world, we have an historic opportunity to make the relationship between our two countries a defining partnership of the century ahead.”⁹³ To capitalize on this opportunity, U.S. policy should promote continued economic integration, expanded political and diplomatic relations between the world’s two largest democracies, and enhanced military and intelligence cooperation to manage mutual security interests throughout the region. Both countries should seek to facilitate greater trade by working to resolve outstanding intellectual property issues, enable greater multinational investment in India and encourage bilateral trade. In the security realm, the United States

should build on its security partnership and nuclear deal with India and develop a broader joint security framework to include regional security interests, counterterrorism and intelligence sharing, and maritime cooperation.

Open trade and transit across South and Central Asia to catalyze economic growth and enhance stability. Further economic development in South and Central Asia could positively change the lives of millions across the region. This region has been held back by pervasive insecurity and outright conflict for nearly four decades. Today, its potential wealth from energy, minerals and a host of other natural resources is constrained by the inability to transit war-torn Afghanistan, as well as the lack of infrastructure and unfavorable trade policies across the region. The United States should reduce these constraints by:

- Continuing efforts to resolve the Afghan conflict while redirecting U.S. financial assistance in Afghanistan toward major infrastructure projects such as roads, power and (if possible) pipelines.
- Encouraging regional negotiations for more open trade policies that yield far greater free trade of goods and services across the region. These efforts, some of which are underway, could dramatically improve the long-term economic potential, and thus stability, of the entire region.

Develop a strategic public engagement plan for the region.⁹⁴ For these recommendations to be successful, the U.S. government must develop a comprehensive plan to engage, inform and influence audiences in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and the Central Asian states. Such an engagement plan should work to mitigate a growing tide of anti-American sentiment in parts of the region, which constrains cooperation with the United States. Further, such efforts should present positive alternatives to extremism, working with regional states to promote values rooted in

tolerance, economic opportunity and the rule of law. Most important, such an engagement plan needs to be consistent with U.S. actions. No amount of relationship-building or “messaging” will be able to overcome the skepticism that will develop if words and deeds diverge.

The public engagement plan should include three elements. First, recognizing the diverse and divided nature of societies in the region and the need for long-term engagement, the United States should use visitor and exchange programs to build relationships with rising leaders in the governments, militaries and civil societies of key countries. Multilateral programs will build relationships among these leaders as well as with Americans. Today, the United States has few efforts aimed at the region as a whole, with only unconnected initiatives underway in many of the separate countries.⁹⁵ Second, the plan should seek to undermine and marginalize extremist narratives. There is an ideological competition underway in the region and, with some audiences, the United States and likeminded parties are losing to an extremist narrative.⁹⁶ Using both traditional and “new” media, the United States should support and empower regional voices that are the most credible counterpoints to extremist views. Third, the United States needs to develop a new, long-term program based on careful research to address pervasive anti-Americanism in Pakistan. Any U.S. strategic partnership with the Pakistani state will simply founder if the Pakistani people continue to view the United States with deep-seated mistrust and suspicion.

In recent years, the United States has sent mixed messages about its long-term commitment to the region. For example, in December 2009 President Obama declared that he would send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, but that U.S. troops would begin to come home in July 2011. In the same speech, the president made an impassioned commitment to partnering with Pakistan.⁹⁷ This message, however, was widely heard by

governments and people across the region as, “*the Americans are leaving in the summer of 2011.*”⁹⁸

Better strategic engagement helps policymakers identify and mitigate potential pitfalls in trying to communicate to multiple audiences. In countries such as Pakistan, where certain constituencies will resist any cuts in or conditions for U.S. aid through their allies in the media, the United States must communicate what it is doing and why far more effectively.

Resources

The total cost to the United States in lives and dollars will decline dramatically from recent years, as it withdraws tens of thousands of troops from Afghanistan. As noted in the previously released CNAS report, “Responsible Transition,” the projected annual costs of sustaining 25,000 to 35,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan (if needed) along with associated development and engagement efforts would be about 30 billion dollars – a significant drop from today’s expenditure, which will exceed 120 billion dollars for Fiscal Year (FY) 2011. The 30-billion-dollar figure would decline further with a resolution of the Taliban insurgency – not an improbable eventuality in coming years given prospects for reconciliation and negotiations.

U.S. costs across the remainder of the region will largely mirror today’s expenditures in foreign aid, security assistance and diplomatic presence, which totaled approximately 7.6 billion dollars in the president’s FY2011 budget request.⁹⁹ Additional resources may well be needed to continue strengthening Pakistan after the effective disbursement of current Kerry-Lugar-Berman assistance, given Pakistan’s importance and fragility, but this commitment would remain far less than current U.S. military expenditures in Afghanistan. Future funding should build on the most successful aspects of Kerry-Lugar-Berman, and should be aimed at education, infrastructure and developing human capital to improve institutional and economic potential.

VII. CONCLUSION

Americans are understandably weary after a decade of war in South and Central Asia. The killing of bin Laden in Pakistan has led many to call for a race to the exits from the region, led by a rapid U.S. military drawdown and a substantial decline of U.S. security assistance.¹⁰⁰ Opinion polls in the United States show that as many as two-thirds of those surveyed disapprove of continuing U.S. participation in the conflict.¹⁰¹ Many Americans likely expect a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from the region in 2014, accompanied by a dramatic curtailment of all U.S. expenditures, including development aid – in effect, a major disengagement. But as this report demonstrates, the United States has vital national interests in South and Central Asia that will endure far beyond 2014. It therefore offers a blueprint for how a U.S. regional security strategy might look in light of the assumptions stated at the beginning of this report and an environment in which both military and foreign assistance resources will be restricted.

The 21st century has been called “the Asian century” – a time in which global power is shifting away from the Atlantic Ocean toward the Pacific and Indian Oceans.¹⁰² While that trend line is unmistakable, it would be a profound strategic mistake for the United States to focus on East Asia at the expense of South and Central Asia. Defending U.S. vital interests in South and Central Asia is *not* a distraction from the rise of the Pacific Rim – it is a prerequisite for success. The dangers present in South and Central Asia cannot be wished away and only by taking steps to advance their resolution, no matter how slowly, will the United States be able to protect its broader interests across the rest of Asia.

The United States has other interests in the region beyond protecting the growth of prosperity and maintaining security along the Pacific

*Defending U.S. vital interests
in South and Central Asia
is not a distraction from the
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prerequisite for success.*

Rim. Precluding further terror attacks, preventing nuclear proliferation into extremist hands and averting a nuclear war between India and Pakistan on the subcontinent all demand that the United States remain engaged. Failure to counter any of these dark outcomes could potentially shatter the global economic recovery and demand an immense commitment of increasingly scarce fiscal resources to reverse a potentially preventable disaster. Taking the long view, the United States is better served by actively promoting security across South and Central Asia than by having to respond to crises spawned by inattention and neglect.

We urge U.S. decision-makers in the executive and legislative branches not to forget the peoples of South Asia and Central Asia as they did following the end of the Cold War. As we learned following the September 11 attacks, responding to contingencies in the region requires having partners ready and willing to work with the United States. In an era of globalization, the problems of one region rarely remain confined there.

ENDNOTES

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94. Kristin Lord and Marc Lynch define strategic public engagement as "efforts to engage, inform and persuade foreign publics to advance U.S. national interest." See "America's Extended Hand: Assessing the Obama Administration's Global Engagement Strategy," Center for a New American Security (June 2010):3, <http://www.cnas.org/node/4485>.

95. A notable exception to this is the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan whose position, in principle, includes regional diplomacy and messaging. In practice, though, the position was never given a clear definition; it is not yet clear if this will change with the appointment of Marc Grossman to the position.

96. Al Qaeda maintains a robust media capability for an insurgent organization. The al Sahab media organization publishes syndicated videos and audio recordings on the Internet and widely circulates propaganda materials throughout Internet forums and jihadist websites. See Jarret M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 107.

97. President Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (1 December 2009).

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