

COMMENTARY

**Getting it Right in Pakistan and Afghanistan**

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America may not be losing the war in Afghanistan, but it is also not winning. Neither is the U.S. approach in neighboring Pakistan making friends or preventing new recruits from crossing the border to kill U.S. and other NATO troops. What then is the best way to promote peace and security in the greater South Asia region, home to nearly half the world's population and several nuclear-armed states?

The challenges involved in confronting this threat—which means fighting extremism in both countries, rebuilding governance in Afghanistan, and supporting a weak democratic government in Pakistan—dwarf the past two decades of global state-building activities combined and are too big to be done alone.

For the past few months, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen and U.S. CENTCOM commander General David Petraeus have been leading U.S. government-wide efforts to develop a “comprehensive strategy” to deal with this pressing issue, while President Obama has appointed Ambassador Richard Holbrooke to address the multiple challenges of the region. To succeed, a strategy must have four elements: the innovative use of all the tools of U.S. foreign policy, including development, diplomatic, and military activities; the genuine inclusion of America's key allies; the coherent engagement of regional powers, including India, Iran, China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia; and most importantly, ownership of the new approach by the people and the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

First, the U.S. government needs to get its own house in order. It needs a unifying and integrated strategy, what the British government calls a “whole-of-government” approach. We have found in dozens of interviews with senior U.S. officials in Washington, Afghanistan, and Pakistan that there has been no clarity as to how much U.S. assistance has been directed at each country, what the overall strategy for each country is, nor what it is for the region as a whole.

A counterinsurgency campaign should incorporate development, security, and governance activities, yet here too the U.S. government lacks a truly integrated plan, one that is understood by civilians and soldiers alike (beyond the mantra, “shape, clear, hold, build”). In our own outreach activities, we also discovered that U.S. personnel are not familiar enough with the other offices and officials working on the same issues within government, thus inhibiting coordination and the development of an integrated approach. Diplomatic personnel are rotated frequently, with deployments usually lasting only a year, if that, while four U.S. combatant commands have responsibility for U.S. military operations and activities in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The “interagency” rarely includes the wider U.S. government community that should be involved in policy and implementation, particularly the Congress. A unified approach requires a common understanding across the entire U.S. team.

Second, the United States needs to reengage with its allies—bilateral and multilateral (notably NATO member states as well as NATO and the United Nations). All need to be involved in the development and implementation of a new regional approach, one that will also include the wider neighborhood (see number three). Gone are the days when U.S. officials can send other countries marching orders and expect them to sacrifice warriors and treasure without significant input. The U.S. government needs to return to a policy of working with, listening to, and even learning from allies, as transpired in Kosovo, despite all the kicking and screaming that often accompanies group decisionmaking. Maybe then America will get the much needed military and financial support in the crucial fight against the Taliban.

Third, the U.S. administration and the aforementioned allies together should develop a coherent strategy for engaging and working with the regional players in an expanded contact group. This would include China, India, Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. Such a group could play a fundamental role in “draining the swamp” of extremist militants from the region and help prevent further horrific terrorist attacks, as recently occurred in Mumbai. The contact group could also promote regional trade agreements and encourage cross-border commerce, critical for stability and development in this impoverished region. Even Iran has played a fairly positive role in Afghanistan, not only during the Bonn process, but also in terms of reconstruction activities. Yet there is no agreed on framework for involving these actors in a constructive manner, while there are ample opportunities for any of them to become spoilers.

Finally, and critically, the people and governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan need to become full partners in this policy and approach. Too many decisions are being made on their behalf, without their involvement or buy in. The ultimate goal is to empower national governments to strengthen governance and fight extremism and corruption on their own terms. Both countries are too big and too complex to allow their development and security to be “offshored.” Pakistanis and Afghans need to be fully in the lead, with international partners in an integrated, supporting role. Only then will joint efforts translate into peace and security.

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