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# Untying the Afghan Knot

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## THE RISING STORM

American policy has not kept pace with the growing challenges to multiple U.S. interests posed by the international Muslim extremist network now rooted in Afghanistan. The next U.S. administration should adopt an approach that will more effectively realize these interests. They range from the positive—revival of the natural, ancient trade routes connecting Central Asia, South Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Middle East through a stable Afghanistan—to the negative—reversing the dangerous trends of Islamic extremism, terrorism, opium production, arms trafficking, and human and gender rights violations sourced to Afghanistan that are now menacing every world region.

The international Muslim extremist network in Afghanistan was created by Pakistan and Osama bin Laden during the Soviet-Afghan war. Western, including U.S., disengagement from Afghanistan in the 1990s after the fall of the Afghan communist regime permitted Pakistan, bin Laden, and their radical Muslim allies to establish the Taliban in Kabul. The extremist network's secretive tentacles have since consolidated their international reach, most recently demonstrated by the terrorist attack on the USS Cole. The network has subjected Afghanistan itself to another form of tyranny every bit as pernicious as the bloody string of Soviet-supported communist rulers during the 1980s.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), under the direction of Pakistan's military rulers, coordinates the Islamist network's political and military operations inside Afghanistan. This is accomplished through hundreds of ISI intelligence officers deployed to Kabul, other Afghan population centers, and to Taliban, Pakistani, and Arab extremist military units. ISI coordinates with bin Laden and radical Pakistani political parties in operating the network's military training camps inside Afghanistan. It also plans and orchestrates military offensives by the network against Afghan groups resisting Taliban rule.

A reverse tide of "Talibanization" is now spreading back into Pakistan, spearheaded by the thousands of Arab-funded, extremist Wahabbi *madrassas* (religious

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schools) that have displaced Pakistan's resource-starved secular education structure. Tens of thousands of young Pakistanis are cycled into the ISI-bin Laden military training camps inside Afghanistan after leaving the *madrassas*. They are then deployed to join the Taliban and radical Arab forces fighting Afghan commander Ahmed Shah Masood in northern Afghanistan, or to Kashmir to participate in the insurgency there against Indian rule. *Jane's Defense Weekly* cited Western military sources as estimating that combined Pakistani army regular troops, Pakistani religious students, bin Laden's "Arab Brigade," and a medley of other foreign radicals comprised over 30 percent of the 20,000-man force that overran Masood's northern base at Taloqan in September 2000.<sup>1</sup>

The Pakistani and international Muslim extremist network's military operations in Afghanistan continue to take their toll on the Afghan population. Last fall's Taliban-Masood fighting generated additional waves of Afghan refugees toward Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Those fleeing found all three borders closed as the cold winter descended. The ebb and flow of fighting in Afghanistan was accompanied by a destructive drought which dried wells, devastated the autumn harvest, and forced the premature slaughter of livestock. Criminal activity and banditry in urban and rural areas is on the rise as the Taliban grip weakens in Afghanistan. Colombian-style murderous narco-terrorist syndicates are emerging. Elements in the ISI and the international Islamist network inside Afghanistan coordinate with Russian and Central Asian criminal organizations to smuggle Afghan-grown opium into Russia and Western Europe. Afghanistan is now the world's largest producer of opium.

Afghans, desperate for peace, hope that their long nightmare will end. Modern history records examples of how proud, small nations, particularly those with their own history, culture, and religion, successfully resist subjugation. Afghans see their history as a united nation going back to the mid-eighteenth century. As practiced, the Afghan national identity is a unique, holistic blend of Islam, tribal codes of conduct, and Afghan nationalism. Afghanistan's moderate Islam rejects the Taliban-style radicalism that has evolved from Deobandi, Wahabbi, and Ikhwani influences imported from Pakistan, the Persian Gulf, and the Middle East following the 1979 Soviet invasion. As the French scholar Oliver Roy has observed, "The rooting of the Islamist movement in the countryside is not genuine: it is a consequence of the Soviet invasion, which helped the Islamists succeed in mobilizing the peasantry."<sup>2</sup> Unlike in the Balkans, no Afghan ethnic group inside Afghanistan has separatist aspirations. Pashtuns do not want to join Pakistan, having drifted apart from tribal kinsmen in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province during the British colonial and post-colonial period. Likewise, Tajiks prefer their Afghan moorings to union with Tajikistan. Afghanistan's Shia population has shown no inclination to seek association with Iran.

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Taliban popularity in Afghanistan plummeted during 2000. For the first time since the 1992 fall of the communist regime, a window is gradually opening for an Afghan political settlement. The international community, including Pakistan and Afghanistan's other neighbors, should assist the Afghans to fill the vacuum left by the Taliban's decline. Continued futile pursuit of geo-political position in Afghanistan by her neighbors will only plunge Afghanistan into another round of inconclusive warfare.

#### AMERICAN INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN

The next American administration should recognize that Pakistan's post-Soviet occupation attempt to establish its own hegemony in Afghanistan is counterproductive to U.S. interests and cannot, in any case, succeed. The international extremist network inside Afghanistan, which Pakistan has spawned and nurtures, damages critical American interests. Pakistan's own stability is gradually being undermined by its costly intervention in Afghanistan.

A more effective American policy on Afghanistan must have a broad regional cast. The current single-minded emphasis on apprehending bin Laden is too narrow an emphasis. While this objective must be a priority, such a police approach to dealing with the complicated Afghan issue is inadequate to addressing the broad range of U.S. interests now at stake in Afghanistan. The excessive American concentration on this tactical objective must give way to a strategic design incorporating bin Laden's apprehension inside a much more comprehensive policy framework geared to achieve the range of U.S. interests in Afghanistan and the region.

The overarching American strategic goal should be restoration of stability at the center of the Eurasia land mass. This result can most effectively be obtained through international support for an internal Afghan dialogue leading to an Afghan regime in Kabul chosen through an Afghan consensus process and not imposed from the outside. Ultimately, the multiple U.S. interests at stake in Afghanistan can only be accomplished when the majority of Afghans believe their leaders in Kabul have been chosen by Afghans and not from abroad.

A stable Afghanistan, offering a crossroads for regional and global commerce along a sweeping north-south and east-west axis, could prove an economic boon to each of Afghanistan's neighbors in the region, as well as to Afghanistan itself. Islamabad would benefit the most from an end to the Afghan conflict. Pakistan cannot transit Afghanistan to market its products in Central Asia, the Caspian Basin, and China while instability persists in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has interests regarding Afghanistan which need to be recognized. These interests, however, do not extend to selecting those who rule in Kabul. Islamabad's increasing involvement in buttressing the Taliban and the Muslim

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extremist network in Afghanistan is, in fact, inspiring the growing internal Afghan resistance to the Taliban, deepening Islamabad's international isolation, and fueling the crippling economic and social decay underway within Pakistan.

#### AFGHAN VIEWS OF OUTSIDE INTERFERENCE

Neither Pakistani nor Iranian attempts to mediate the Afghan dispute can succeed. The period since the Soviet pullout is littered with the carcasses of Islamabad initiated "peace" initiatives for Afghanistan. These include the Afghan Interim Government in 1988 and the 1992 Islamabad accord, followed by the emergence of the Taliban in 1994. Pakistan, in these initiatives, has consistently sought to put Afghan Muslim extremists in Kabul, much like the Soviets attempted to place their own asset, the Afghan communists, in Kabul.

Afghans are now thoroughly suspicious of any outside mediation, most notably from Islamabad and Tehran. Their cynicism extends also to Moscow and Riyadh. Many Afghans worry that Russian leaders may emulate the Soviet era tendency to reach for military and intelligence levers in dealing with the complex Afghan issue. In 1979, the Soviet Politburo took that path, disregarding the advice of many in Soviet foreign policymaking circles who were knowledgeable about Afghanistan. Today, powerful elements in the Russian military and intelligence establishment may play a spoiler role by arguing against an internationally assisted Afghanistan settlement process, favoring instead a climate of confrontation along the Amu Darya river to portray Moscow as protector of the Central Asian states against the Muslim extremist threat from Afghanistan. Russian stoking of conflict in Moldova and the southern Caucasus has had a similar objective of drawing other former Soviet republics back under Russia's control.

Conversely, Moscow's cooperation in an internationally assisted Afghanistan settlement could become an important precedent for further Russian-Western collaboration to resolve other conflicts smoldering across Eurasia. A political resolution of the Afghan conflict would open up Russian trade routes into South Asia and the Persian Gulf. An Afghan settlement would also blunt the increasing flow of violence, arms, and drug smuggling seeping into Russia's southern flank as well as into the northern Caucasus.

Afghans over the past decade have become disillusioned with American disengagement from Afghanistan. They grew suspicious of U.S. intentions when Washington sourced out its policy to others, in particular to Pakistan, during and after the Soviet occupation. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Islamabad actually utilized American material support for the Afghan Mujahideen to foster the international Muslim extremist network inside Afghanistan with the objective of building "Islamic depth" against India and feeding the Kashmir insurgency. In the first half of 2000, the State Department publicly repeated U.S. backing for freshly repack-

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aged Pakistani and Iranian settlement initiatives on Afghanistan. These initiatives had no chance of succeeding. They were rejected by Afghans as further destructive Iranian and Pakistani attempts to champion their favored extremist elements in Afghan internal affairs. Ongoing Iranian and Pakistani strategic competition in Afghanistan also dooms these outside interventions to failure.

Washington's more recent activism on Afghanistan in the closing weeks of the Clinton Administration, including pressing for the December 2000 U.N. Security Council (UNSC) sanctions resolution against the Taliban, indicates that American policy is finally moving toward a more realistic mooring—one which correctly, if belatedly, concludes that Pakistan's goal of a radical Islamist Afghanistan after the Soviet pullout has diverged dramatically from the U.S. goal of an Afghanistan which returns to the Afghan democracy-building period of the 1960s and early 1970s. That era featured two parliamentary elections and impressive Afghan strides in constructing a civil society.

Russia and the U.S. worked in tandem to gather UNSC support for the recent UNSC sanctions against the Taliban and indirectly against Pakistan's support for the Taliban. India was a cheerleader on the sidelines. The sanctions are a valuable step toward ending the exploitation of Afghan territory by the Islamabad-backed international Muslim extremist network. American diplomacy to resolve the Afghan war must, however, proceed on the basis that there may not be a complete overlap of strategic goals with Russia or India. India, for example, could attempt to prolong the Afghan conflict in a way that further isolates and weakens Pakistan, even if this involves sending Afghanistan into a new phase of fighting after the Taliban depart.

#### FORMULATING AN EFFECTIVE AMERICAN POLICY

A more vigorous as well as realistic U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and the region will be important to the success of an Afghan peace process. The principal problem is that there has not been a comprehensive and effective American policy toward Afghanistan since the 1992 collapse of the communist regime in Kabul. The cost of U.S. disengagement, already high, will only increase should the U.S. continue naively to defer to others on Afghanistan, whether the partner of the moment be Pakistan, Russia, Iran, or India. The United States should instead give a much higher priority to resolving the Afghan conflict by making effective use of its great diplomatic weight in league with others, and eventually by sharing in the cost of reconstruction following an Afghan political settlement.

For the next administration, an effective American policy on Afghanistan will need to fit into a broader regional policy framework: helping Pakistan out of its present mess; defusing Indo-Pakistani tensions; pursuing U.S. rapprochement with Iran; strengthening the democratic and economic transition process in Russia and Central Asia; combating the threat to regional and global stability

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posed by Afghanistan-sourced drugs and terrorism; unleashing the regional economic benefits that peace in Afghanistan would bring to South Asia, Iran, Russia, China, and the new Central Asian Republics; and creating an area for fruitful U.S. cooperation with Japan and China.

#### INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

A U.S. diplomatic push on Afghanistan would work best through the UNSC, which has the legitimate mandate under the U.N. Charter to prevent threats to peace and security. The U.S. and its UNSC partners over the upcoming months should follow up on the December 2000 UNSC sanctions and continue international pressure on Pakistan, the Taliban, and the Muslim extremist network operating from Afghanistan. As the Islamist coalition's grip inside Afghanistan weakens, the U.S. could be the sparkplug for a UNSC initiative to convene a major international conference to focus exclusively on Afghanistan. The main goals of the conference should include a formal treaty recognizing Afghanistan's independence and sovereignty, such as was done for Austria in the 1955 Austrian State Treaty. The conference and its attendant documents could further bind outside governments and entities not to provide any of the Afghan belligerents with weapons or other war-making material in the wake of the Taliban's decline. The conference could make clear that governments or entities which persist in supplying the Afghan warring factions with war-making potential would be sanctioned. The conference could also register pledges of support for Afghanistan's reconstruction to be conducted through the U.N.; designate the U.N. Secretary General's Special Envoy on Afghanistan as the only outside mediator to assist the internal Afghan search for consensus; and prohibit direct lobbying by foreign governments or regional organizations with the separate Afghan factions. Foreign governments would instead provide their views and suggestions directly to the U.N. mediation initiative.

Active support for the Security Council initiative regarding an international conference on Afghanistan by Afghanistan's neighbors, especially Pakistan, would be essential to its success. Positive incentives for Pakistan's cooperation will be necessary to counter internal Pakistani opposition to a broad based, genuinely Afghan political settlement process. Incentives for a constructive Pakistani approach would include Pakistan's desperately needed access to Eurasian markets and trade routes through a peaceful Afghanistan. As its position in Afghanistan further deteriorates, Pakistan may also welcome the "cover" an international conference would provide to extricate itself from the Afghan quagmire, much as the Soviets used the 1988 Geneva accords on Afghanistan and the French used the 1954 international conference on Indo-China.

The international conference could offer Pakistan a share of the international assistance tied to an Afghan settlement. Pakistan's reasonable strategic concern

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about Pashtunistan and the revival of the two-front security challenge it experienced for most of its post-independence period must also be addressed in the international conference.

In this regard, an international conference on Afghanistan could include a declaration, patterned on the 1975 Helsinki Accords, formally recognizing the sanctity of Afghanistan's pre-Soviet invasion frontiers, including the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas. The conference might urge that the legitimate regime in Kabul emerging from a settlement process work with Pakistan to conclude a bilateral border agreement, thereby setting aside the century-old controversy over the 1893 Durand Line. The conference could propose that U.N. or International Court of Justice mediation be made available to assist Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral border negotiations. An international conference could be the vehicle to commit India, Russia, and Iran, as well as Pakistan, to an authoritative declaration of mutual restraint from interference in Afghanistan. An international understanding respecting Afghanistan's independence, sovereignty, neutrality, and frontiers would be a form of international collective security geared to underpin stability in Afghanistan and the region. No single major power would achieve one hundred percent of its goals, as the West and Soviet Union accepted when they removed their occupation forces from Austria in 1955 and formally recognized Austrian independence and sovereignty. All would benefit from abandoning the zero-sum geo-political competition by outside powers in Afghanistan that has led to the bloody Afghan stalemate. On the other hand, in the absence of a peace settlement in Afghanistan, all would continue to suffer from the death, destruction, drug smuggling, terrorism, and chaos on their borders.

In sum, a forceful American and U.N. Security Council initiative from outside the region could break the current impasse in Afghanistan as the Pakistani-Taliban-Muslim extremist network's grip weakens under international pressure. American re-engagement on Afghanistan will, however, be indispensable to untying the Afghan knot. As the noted Pakistani specialist on Afghanistan, journalist Ahmed Rashid, has aptly written: "Until the United States demonstrates that it has the determination to mobilize an international effort for ending outside interference, Afghanistan's chaos will only spread."<sup>3</sup> ■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Jane's Defense Weekly*, "Struggle for Recognition," October 4, 2000, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Roy, "Has Islam a Future in Afghanistan?" in William Maley, *Fundamentalism Reborn* (New York University Press, 1998), 205.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "Radical Islam's New Frontiers," *Foreign Affairs* (November-December, 1999): 35.

