



Commentary: From AFPAK to PAKAF

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Barely born, AFPAK, the acronym for Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single theater of operations, has already been displaced. Pakistan is now the most dangerous of the two theaters, or PAKAF.

The heart of Islamic extremism lies in Pakistan. Almost all terrorist trails in Britain track back to Pakistan.

From independence in 1947 to the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan in 1989, Pakistan and the United States were close allies. Throughout the 1990s, Washington, convinced Islamabad was lying about its secret nuclear weapons program, inflicted draconian economic and military sanctions against its former ally. On May 11 and 13, 1998, India conducted five nuclear tests. Two weeks later, Pakistan responded with five nuclear explosions, triggering worldwide condemnation led by the United States.

Pakistanis deeply resent the double standard. India first flexed its nuclear muscles in a 1974 test, when it was still a close friend of the Soviet Union. Washington's rebuke was mild. What is widely viewed by Pakistanis as a double standard, reinforced most recently by the U.S.-India nuclear agreement, spawned an anti-American culture that destroyed any remnants of trust at the highest levels of government.

The latest deal with India lifts a three-decade U.S. moratorium on nuclear trade and expands cooperation in energy and satellite technology, fundamentally undermining, its critics say, half a century of non-proliferation efforts, as well as attempts to prevent Iran and North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Washington's sanctions against Pakistan for its secret nuclear program convinced A.Q. Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, that America was now the enemy. And the nuclear weapons assistance he secretly gave America's enemies -- Iran, North Korea and Libya -- was done with the full knowledge of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence agency. Libya's ebullient Col. Moammar Gadhafi subsequently confessed he had erred and turned over all his nuclear plans and materials to the CIA and Britain's MI6. Iran is on the verge of nuclear success -- thanks to A.Q. Khan.

"Dr. Strangelove" Khan and his close friend, former ISI chief Hamid Gul, were as one after Sept. 11, 2001. The attacks on Manhattan's twin towers and the Pentagon outside Washington were the work of the CIA and Mossad in order to justify a crusade against Islam. Gul even told this reporter, three weeks after Sept. 11, that the U.S. Air Force was involved; otherwise how would one explain why U.S. jets weren't scrambled immediately after confirmation airliners had been diverted from assigned routes. Today, millions of Pakistanis, including most Pakistani journalists, believe Gul's conspiracy story. And the army's chiefly Punjabi soldiers believe Taliban propaganda that claims it is the United States that orders attacks against their fellow citizens.

Hardly surprising that the recent visit of President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan and Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai produced no hits, no runs, no errors, as one veteran player on the PAKAF team put it. It was a non-meeting with various shades of the truth spoken by both sides. One of the participants, who asked not to be named, said, "Zardari came across as an oriental rug merchant, asking high, settling low, as he knows Congress will approve economic and military assistance way below their immediate needs."

Zardari also brought along his 21-year-old son, Bilawal Bhutto, the Oxford student appointed in the will of his assassinated mother, Benazir Bhutto, to succeed her. Zardari appropriated the job of president of the Pakistan Peoples Party as a caretaker pending Bilawal's ability to assume power and got himself elected president of the second-largest Muslim country in the world after Indonesia.

Zardari's American interlocutors see him as ineffectual, despised by army generals, and ignored by his prime minister and Cabinet ministers. According to one of the participants, not for attribution, the interior minister, who accompanied Zardari, shaded the truth to the point of "outright lies about security now established in every district in the country." Every major Pakistani city has been hit at least once by suicide bombers. More than 9,000 police and civilians have been killed by terrorist attacks since Zardari became president. And that doesn't include the 1,000 Taliban fighters the army says it has killed in its drive to recover control of Buner, 60 miles from Islamabad, and the Swat Valley. Some 5,000 insurgents are still holding several smaller towns in fighting that has driven almost 1 million refugees to hastily erect tent-city camps.

By creating that many refugees in a few days, the Pakistani army is clearly unprepared for counterinsurgency warfare. Two years ago, in the nearby Federally Administered Tribal Areas, the army sustained 1,400 killed and some 4,000 injured in operations against the Taliban. But the Taliban is still there, in safe havens in the mountains along the Afghan border. Charged with hunting them down is a Frontier Corps made up of local Pashtun volunteers and a small number of U.S. trainers.

The Pakistani military urgently requested additional helicopter gunships. Following Zardari's visit, they got a pledge for four. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have left little spare chopper capability. The United States lost 5,000 aircraft over 10 years during the Vietnam War, including 2,000 helicopters.

Special envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke is the latest American voice to call for the incorporation of FATA into Pakistan proper, in the North-West Frontier province. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry, D-Mass., while endorsing the suggestion, doesn't think Pakistan is ready to agree to something it has resisted for 62 years since independence.

Pakistan's intelligentsia are baffled by a slew of think tank suggestions flying out of Washington that tend to ignore history. Alexander the Great and the British and Soviet empires all lost tens of thousands trying to tame warrior tribes.

Ahmed Rashid, the Pakistani author of "Descent into Chaos," no longer writes about "creeping Talibanization;" "it's galloping," he says. Across the border in Afghanistan, Taliban guerrillas are now attacking NATO countries' garrisons whose national caveats preclude offensive operations. Some 2,000 Spanish soldiers based in Herat close to the Iranian border are now frequently under attack. They return fire in self-defense. Hard-pressed one recent day, they radioed nearby Italians for helicopter gunship intervention -- a first for two NATO countries hidebound by national restrictions on their fighting capabilities.

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