

## US/SOUTH ASIA: Regional security strategy may falter

Tuesday, January 13 2009

**EVENT:** Vice-President-elect Joseph Biden on January 11 visited Afghanistan, following earlier talks with Pakistani leaders.

**SIGNIFICANCE:** The Departments of Defense and State are in the process of reviewing their strategies towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, in order to recommend alternative approaches to President-elect Barack Obama. The incoming administration favours a broader, regional strategy, emphasising political reconciliation between warring parties and states, as a means of facilitating the faltering NATO counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan. [Go to conclusion](#)

**ANALYSIS:** The incoming administration of President-elect Barack Obama is undertaking a wholesale reassessment of US foreign policy and counter-terrorism strategy in South Asia. At the heart of the problem are the scarcity and misallocation of US diplomatic, military and aid resources in Afghanistan and Pakistan. There will soon be a significant influx of US troops and materiel in Afghanistan, thanks to the improving security situation in Iraq. However, this increase in fighting power is insufficient to defeat the Taliban, absent a concurrent change in Washington's approach to diplomacy and aid in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

**Complex militant tapestry.** The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan is partially interwoven with Taliban and other militant groups in Pakistan -- including the small core leadership group of the al-Qaida terrorist organisation ('al-Qaida central') -- in a complex tapestry of violent extremism:

- Some of these groups are directly engaged in, or supporting, the insurgency against US, NATO and Afghan government forces in Afghanistan (ie the ethnically Pashtun-dominated Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan).
- Others are primarily focused on fighting Indian government forces in the portion of Kashmir controlled by New Delhi, although they have also conducted terrorist attacks elsewhere in India, possibly including the recent attack in Mumbai (eg Lashkar-e-Toiba or LeT).
- Other groups are, due to various grievances against the state -- including both local tribal issues and resentment of the civilian government's support of US objectives -- the perpetrators of attacks on targets associated with Islamabad.
- Finally, there is al-Qaida -- thought by US intelligence to be sheltering and rebuilding in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) -- which is receiving support from some Taliban and tribal elements.

Further complicating this tangled web, some militants are ferociously hostile to Islamabad, while others have been (and may still be) used by elements within the Pakistani Army (such as the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, or ISI) to increase Pakistan's 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan and Kashmir ([see US/PAKISTAN: US frowns on ISI counter-terror strategy - October 28, 2008](#)).

**US policy objectives.** The incoming Obama administration hopes to address this cat's cradle of militancy through a network of regional partners, using various inducements and deterrents to break the nexus between extremists and local populations. Such efforts may include:

- directly interdicting al-Qaida and Taliban-linked groups in Afghanistan's southern and eastern provinces, and Pakistan's FATA;

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- improving governance and law enforcement inside and outside Kabul by bolstering Afghan security forces and improving the government's ability to provide social services;
- supporting Pakistan's shaky civilian government, and working to convince its people that cracking down on militancy is in their best interests;
- encouraging intelligence reform in Pakistan, and promoting the political and economic reform necessary to stabilise the Afghan-Pakistan border; and
- defusing Indian-Pakistani tensions, which distract Islamabad from the focus on curbing militants in FATA and Afghanistan.

However, the deteriorating political and security environment in Afghanistan and Pakistan has made achieving these objectives extremely difficult.

**Afghanistan: deteriorating situation.** Over 70% of Afghanistan is now under Taliban rule or in chaos, rather than controlled by the Kabul government. Kabul lacks the capacity for governance, and has weak political legitimacy, outside the capital and sections of the north and west of the country. Therefore, Afghans increasingly rely on local Taliban leaders for municipal, medical and legal services. The Taliban sustain their military operations via the opium trade, non-state aid from individuals and organisations based largely in Iran and Saudi Arabia, and recruiting (from Afghanistan, Pakistan and abroad).

The policies of Washington, Islamabad and Delhi can all have a significant effect on Afghanistan's stability. However, there is no consensus between these powers on security goals; indeed, the potential exists for an escalating proxy war between India and Pakistan within Afghanistan.

US-NATO efforts to promote reconstruction and economic development -- building schools, hospitals and economic opportunity zones -- and political reconciliation have a mixed record. Breaking the connections between Taliban insurgents and the local population is not impossible, particularly if Kabul's ability to provide services is strengthened, and elements of the Taliban prove amenable to negotiation or co-option. However, the porous Afghan-Pakistan border and occasionally heavy-handed US military tactics have undermined such efforts.

**US-Pakistan setbacks.** The US approach to Pakistan since 2002 has been ineffective or counterproductive:

1. **Strategic cross-purposes.** Despite receiving significant amounts of US aid, and the shared objective of eliminating al-Qaida and its global terrorist affiliates, the military regime of former Army Chief and President Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008) did not effectively undermine the Taliban. Islamabad was suspicious about Washington's long-term commitment, and therefore protected certain Afghan Taliban members, so that they might later be used as proxies against Indian influence in Afghanistan -- a policy that had considerable success in the 1990s. Washington did not probe Pakistani strategic concerns, and failed to understand or prevent this relationship.
2. **Spreading militancy.** However, the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan distracted or undermined Islamabad's efforts to bring security to FATA, North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan. While the Pakistani army (particularly ISI) saw maintaining ties to the Afghan Taliban as strategically important, the growth of the Taliban within Pakistan itself became a nuisance, which undermined efforts to stimulate economic development in FATA and stabilise the Afghan-Pakistan border.

3. **Post-Mumbai tensions.** Pakistan was further destabilised in the aftermath of the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai. Delhi blamed Pakistan for tolerating, or even abetting, militant groups dedicated to disrupting India's economic and political stability, such as LeT. In the wake of the attacks, Pakistan moved approximately 20,000 troops from FATA to the Indian border -- which has both increased tensions with India and made restoring order in FATA impossible.

**Strategic rethink.** Acknowledging many of these past failures, Obama and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari have both called for a policy rethink, centred on addressing the frustrating tangle of regional interests and suspicions:

- **'Iraq tactics'**. Obama clearly hopes to apply some of the innovative counter-insurgency tactics pioneered by General David Petraeus in Iraq (now the head of Central Command, which oversees operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan) -- including co-opting or otherwise buying-off members of the Taliban insurgency. US forces in Afghanistan will be bolstered by 20,000 additional troops over the next 18 months.
- **Zardari's security efforts.** Zardari has also made efforts to improve security policy and implementation. The Pakistani parliament has passed two counter-terror resolutions, and established a National Commission for Counter-Terrorism -- charged with coordinating Pakistan's counter-terror efforts, US security and military training programmes, and intelligence sharing between Washington and Islamabad.

Zardari also seeks to increase domestic support for these efforts by highlighting the fact that bomb attacks by militants killed 1,251 Pakistanis in 2008 alone. However, for now, Pakistanis tend to blame the US presence in the region for stoking militancy, rather than the reverse -- making security gains exceptionally difficult (see [US/PAKISTAN: Bombing highlights urgency of reform - September 22, 2008](#)).

**CONCLUSION:** The US president-elect is likely correct to assume that a regional approach, backed by improved counter-insurgency tactics in Afghanistan and a concerted effort to understand Pakistan's strategic priorities, is necessary to contain the Taliban. However, the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks has undermined the stability of the government in Islamabad -- and perhaps the viability of Obama's proposed approach.

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