

Afghanistan and Pakistan: Understanding a Complex Threat Environment

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Paul R. Pillar
Georgetown University

Current conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan are multifaceted, interrelated, and affect a variety of U.S. interests. They are not reducible to any clear categorization of allies and adversaries. Although it is appropriate to consider events in Afghanistan and Pakistan together because of the ways in which operations and the concerns that drive them cross the Durand Line (the border between the two countries), many of the conflicts have their own dynamics rooted in local interests. And some of the interests at stake have dimensions that extend well beyond Pakistan and Afghanistan.

U.S. Interests

Several U.S. interests are involved in these conflicts.

One is counterterrorism, and more specifically curbing the capabilities of terrorist groups that may have the capability and intention to do major harm to Americans, including possibly in the U.S. homeland. The recent history that weighs heavily on one's thinking in this regard is Afghanistan prior to 9/11, when the Taliban, which then ruled most of Afghanistan, maintained a close alliance with Usama bin Ladin's al-Qa'ida. Preventing a recurrence of that situation probably is the objective that most Americans would believe is worth expenditure of effort in the region, if such effort can indeed preclude a recurrence. The U.S. interest in counterterrorism goes beyond preventing reinstatement of a Taliban regime in Afghanistan, however, especially given the presence within the northwest portions of Pakistan of foreign Islamists, including Arabs of bin Ladin's organization—and according to most informed speculation, bin Ladin himself and his deputy Ayman Zawahiri.

Another set of interests involves Pakistan, the sixth most populous country in the world. The specific U.S. interests here include enlisting Islamabad's cooperation in matters of immediate interest to us, including counterterrorism. It includes the stability of the Pakistani state, with all that implies regarding the inability or unwillingness of the Pakistanis to extend cooperation, or the possibility of political change in Pakistan that might mean even less willingness by Islamabad to cooperate with the United States. It also includes all other facets of the U.S.-Pakistani relationship, and all other ways that this important country could affect matters important to the United States not just now but in the future.

Closely related is U.S. interest in maintaining peace and stability in the relationship between Pakistan and India. The continued rivalry, despite easing of tensions in recent years, between these two South Asian powers that have fought several wars may still present one of the greatest risks anywhere of nuclear weapons being used

in combat. Given the preoccupation of both countries with the conflict between them, anything that involves Pakistan necessarily also involves the Indo-Pakistani rivalry.

Another interest of the United States and the West is narcotics. Afghanistan is the biggest producer in the world of opium poppy used to make heroin. The problem of poppy cultivation is inseparable from problems of infrastructure and economic development in Afghanistan, where it remains very difficult to make a living growing legal crops that may have higher volume but lower value. The drug trade also is inseparable from the Taliban insurgency, which profits from it.

This does not exhaust U.S. interests at stake in this region. The fact that the United States has an ongoing military commitment in Afghanistan, in the process of being substantially augmented with 17,000 additional troops, entails numerous immediate interests involving the security of our forces and the meeting of their operational requirements.

The ongoing stabilization and counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan leads to other secondary interests and concerns for the United States. Contributions of troops, for example, and the restrictions placed on those troops, have been issues in relations between the United States and the Europeans. Some look on the stabilization effort as a test of NATO's ability to perform. Some see the counterinsurgency as a test of the United States's ability to see a commitment through to success. But conversely, images from the conflict have damaged images of the United States elsewhere, especially in portions of the Muslim world where U.S. military operations and collateral damage and casualties resulting from them are seen as further inclination of an American inclination to inflict harm on Muslims.

And finally, to complete the list of U.S. interests involved, there are U.S. relations with other outside powers that have stakes or interests in this region. Afghanistan in the past was a focus of a Great Game between imperial powers. Today, events there, and U.S. reactions to those events, have a bearing on U.S. relations with such outside powers as India, Russia, and Iran.

Conflicts

The conflicts currently playing out in this region begin with the insurgency in Afghanistan, which is being waged chiefly in the southern and eastern portions of the country, mainly by the loosely organized radical Islamists we know as the Taliban. We, and the Afghans, could see what the Taliban's objectives entailed when the group controlled most of the country prior to late 2001. Most Afghans do not support those objectives, but the Taliban has benefitted from popular dismay with the mediocre performance and corruption of the current central government.

Underlying the insurgency are various other divisions and conflicts that have been ingredients in the more than three decades of civil war and strife through which Afghans have suffered. There is an ethnic element, which has pitted Pashtuns of the east and south against other ethnic groups such as Tajiks and Uzbeks. There are sectarian divisions, between the majority Sunnis and minority Shia, who predominantly belong to the traditionally subjugated Hazara ethnic group. And there are the struggles for power, interspersed with deal-making, between the central government and centers of power elsewhere in the country, especially those chieftains and militia heads we usually call warlords.

The insurgency and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan have spilled across the border into Pakistan. Taliban elements use territory in the tribal areas of northwest Pakistan to stage attacks against government and western forces in Afghanistan. And US forces have conducted operations across the border into Pakistan, most notably with unmanned aerial vehicles. Most of the latter operations have been aimed against al-Qa'ida operatives, but a few of the most recent ones appear directed against Taliban elements that, like those fighting in Afghanistan, are Pashtun and Islamist, but who instead are concentrating their efforts inside Pakistan.

The activities of the Pakistani Taliban constitute one of the newly salient lines of conflict within Pakistan. The protagonists include a set of loosely allied—although sometimes contentious among themselves—Islamist militia chiefs who now run most of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which stretch along the border with Afghanistan. They also have asserted themselves in some districts outside the tribal areas, especially in the Northwest Frontier Province. The last two years have seen substantial combat between the Pakistan army and the Taliban militias, interspersed—as in Afghanistan—with truces and agreements that have confirmed Taliban control over substantial swathes of territory. The most recent of these agreements, within the last month, concerned the Valley of Swat within the Northwest Frontier Province.

Instability in Pakistan, as in Afghanistan, reflects several lines of conflict that have been part of politics in Pakistan throughout its six decades as an independent nation. The fighting with the Taliban is one facet of one of those lines, between an Islamist minority and the much larger majority of Pakistanis who are either secular or practice a milder, non-militant brand of Islam. There also are continuing ethnic and sectarian divisions, including sometimes violent clashes between Shia and Sunni.

Uneasy relations between the civilian political establishment and the army have been a constant theme in Pakistani history, with each alternatively running affairs for several years until the Pakistani people get sufficiently fed up with the incumbent government to force a change. Since General Musharraf's time ran out about a year ago, Pakistani politics have been turbulent and unstable and remain so. Any new understanding between the civilian politicians and the army, particularly over such questions as dealing with the Taliban in the northwest, remains to be worked out. The acrimony between supporters of accidental president Asif Zardari and the leader of the main opposition party, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, is as strong as ever, punctuated by last week's ruling by the Pakistani Supreme Court barring Sharif from running for office. No end to the current political turmoil is in sight.

Pakistani Perspectives

It is important for us to understand that Pakistanis and Afghans do not necessarily see this mosaic of conflicts in the same way we do. In particular, Pakistani leaders, civilian and especially military, view it differently from us. Pakistanis see everything through the lens of their standoff with India. This is why, although Pakistan's security problems appear mainly in the northwest, their military forces are still oriented more toward the southeast.

This perspective also colors Pakistanis' views toward Afghanistan and the Taliban. For Pakistan, Afghanistan is its strategic depth in confronting India. The Taliban were originally a creation of Pakistan. And for some Pakistanis, even if they

realize that their creation has gotten out of control in a way that was not foreseen and that causes additional problems for Pakistan itself, the Taliban are still a useful hedge against the considerable uncertainty in Afghanistan. Although it is unclear exactly how extensive are current sympathy and support for the Taliban within the Pakistani military, Pakistani officers are not going to view the Taliban in the same frame of reference as we do. And they will see little advantage in incurring significant costs and casualties in trying to wrest control of frontier areas that the Pakistani government never controlled in the first place.

Trends and Realities

Three major trends of the last couple of years shape the policy conundrum the United States faces in this part of the world. One is the deterioration of security in Afghanistan, and along with it increased popular dissatisfaction with the Karzai government. A second is the expansion of Taliban activity in Pakistan. And a third is growing resentment and even anger, on both sides of the Durand line, over collateral casualties from U.S. military operations.

One old and continuing pattern—in addition to the aforementioned Pakistani attitudes—that also shapes the policy problem is the inability historically not only of any outside power to pacify Afghanistan but also of any central government in Kabul to control the entire country. Peace, or a semblance of it, in Afghanistan has traditionally come from deals and compromises that leave multiple centers of power. I do not see reason to expect this pattern to change.

Questions for Policy

The first step in setting any new course for U.S. strategy in this region is to determine what U.S. policy objectives ought to be. That is not simple, despite the ease of enumerating the U.S. interests I mentioned earlier. Even the most defensible objective—preventing the establishment in Afghanistan of the kind of home for a transnational terrorist group that existed there until 2001—is not self-evident, given the difficulty of demonstrating that different levels of U.S. effort in Afghanistan would make the difference between such a terrorist haven being or not being established. And that is in addition to the question of how important such a physical haven is to terrorist groups who do most of their preparations for attacking western targets elsewhere, including in the West itself.

Policymakers also must set relative priorities among the sometimes conflicting U.S. goals in the region. The goals can conflict even as far as counterterrorism alone is concerned. We have seen this with some of the U.S. missile strikes on both sides of the Durand Line, which have achieved some tactical gains in taking terrorist operatives out of combat, but also have incurred popular wrath that increases sympathy and support for terrorist objectives.

Finally, policymakers must determine the absolute priority of U.S. objectives in the region, in the sense of whether they are important enough to warrant the costs and commitment necessary to achieve them. And that requires taking the measure of the American public's willingness to sustain such costs.