

Talking Points for  
23<sup>rd</sup> Asia-Pacific Roundtable

Plenary Session 4

***“A New Era of Peace: Opportunities for Advancement in the Middle East and South Asia”***

by

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**The Big Picture**

From the viewpoint of the United States and the new administration, the region from the Middle East through South Asia now constitutes *the* focus of US attention as well as the recipient of a major bulk of US military and economic resources. The *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community* delivered by Admiral (ret) Dennis Blair to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in February 2009 made this abundantly clear. Following a one page discussion of the global economic and financial crisis and its implications, the Middle East and South Asia, and specifically the issues of Afghanistan and Pakistan, were vital parts of the two next sessions entitled “Turning the Corner on Violent Extremism” and the “Arc of Instability.” As the report stated in the section entitled “Arc of Instability”:

“The large region from the Middle East to South Asia is the locus for many of the challenges facing the United States in the twenty-first century. While we are making progress countering terrorism, the roots and the issues related to the many problems in this region go deeper and are very complicated.”

And Admiral Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate just a few days ago (on May 29) that his first priority was that “we must continue to improve stability and defend our vital national interests in the broader Middle East and South Central Asia.”

This presentation will focus on South Asia, and particularly the new US strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. It will also touch briefly upon US-India relations, including the implications of the US Afghanistan and Pakistan strategy for US relations with India.

The United States current approach to the challenges of South Asia is based around the following:

- The strategy for U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan announced on March 27 of this year. The publicly released strategy has been supplemented by numerous statements and testimony by administration officials;
- The ongoing consideration of the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009 or the Kerry-Lugar Pakistan legislation. It is important to note that the Administration has spoken favorably of this legislation and that the legislation's two cosponsors seek the pass a final version that is acceptable to their colleagues but without amendments that would impinge on the administration's and co-sponsors' shared objectives; and finally
- Of course, rapidly evolving developments on the ground in both countries, leadership visits such as those among President Obama, President Karzai and President Zardari, and the inputs of Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke are shaping both the administration's strategy and the debate over the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act.

As will be evident, it is also around these three "inputs" that the American debate is now centered.

In announcing his new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, President Obama highlighted five (5) overall themes:

1. **An Attainable Objective.** "The strategy starts with a clear, concise, attainable goal: disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens."
  - a. In my view, this focus was kept deliberately "tight and narrow" to, in Richard Haas' phrase, "define success down" and makes continued U.S. engagement, both military and financial, in Afghanistan palatable to the American public and Congress.
2. **A Regional Approach.** "For the first time the President will treat Afghanistan and Pakistan as two countries but one challenge. Our strategy focuses more intensively on Pakistan than in the past, calling for more significant increases in U.S. and international support, both economic and military, linked to Pakistani performance against terror...We will...engage both countries in a new trilateral framework at the highest levels. Together in this trilateral format, we will work to enhance intelligence sharing and military cooperation along the border and address common issues like trade, energy, and economic development."
  - a. This regional approach is predicated on a rapidly deteriorating situation particularly in Pakistan as the strategy was being written—requiring the direct and unequivocal linking of Afghanistan strategy with that towards Pakistan. A major effort to assist Pakistan militarily and economically is now in the offing but comes with conditionality: that is, "...Pakistani performance against terror."
  - b. The trilateral approach is meant bridge differences between Kabul and Islamabad that have festered over the past year as the situation on the ground has worsened; though there is some evidence that matters between the two capitals have improved.

3. **Building Capacity and More Training.** “For three years, the resources that our commanders need for training [Afghan security forces] have been denied because of the war in Iraq.”
  - a. In addition to highlighting the Bush Administration’s diversion of effort and troops and material towards the Iraq war, the new administration’s emphasis on training Afghanistan security forces (similar in a way to the path pursued in Iraq) is an attempt to make the Kabul government more responsible for handling its own security and compensating for uncertainties of NATO and other support. In February the President promised to send 17,000 additional US troops and 4,000 more are expected to go for training Afghan national security forces. The ultimate goal is to make the Afghans responsible for the war and allow the US to leave.
4. **Using All Elements of National Power.** “...[W]e will devote significantly more resources to the civilian efforts in both Afghanistan and Pakistan... The President supports the bipartisan bill co-sponsored by Senators Kerry and Lugar to authorize \$1.5 billion a year in direct support to the Pakistani people over the next five years. He also calls on Congress to pass the bipartisan bill creating Reconstruction Opportunity Zones in Afghanistan and the border regions of Pakistan to develop the economy and bring hope to places plagued by violence.”
  - a. The Obama administration took office critical of what it saw as an overly military-oriented strategy. A renewed focus and financial commitment to civilian capacity building is meant to create the conditions for long-term stability in both countries. However, both the Kerry-Lugar legislation to help Pakistan and the Reconstruction Opportunity Zones, given the conditions in the border zones, are subjects of considerable skepticism within the US as discussed below. Nor should this effort be confused with a commitment to ensure the fundamental transformation of Afghanistan and Pakistan.
5. **Bringing new international elements to the effort.** “As America does more, we will ask others to do join us in doing their part. Together with the United Nations, the Administration will forge a new Contact Group for Afghanistan and Pakistan that brings together all who should have a stake in the security of the region – our NATO allies and other partners, the Central Asian states, Gulf nations, Iran, Russia, India and China. All have a stake in the promise of lasting peace and security and development in the region.”
  - a. It should also be noted in the context of this conference that the US very much hopes for continued and expanded assistance from US partners in this Asia-Pacific region for Afghanistan. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates made this pitch during the meetings at the Shangri-la Dialogue last week: “I know some in Asia have concluded that Afghanistan does not represent a strategic threat for their countries, owing in part to Afghanistan’s geographic location. But the threat from failed or failing states is international in scope – whether in the security, economic, or ideological realms. Extremists in Asia have engaged in terrorist acts such as in Bali, terrorist activity and guerilla warfare in Mindanao, and they

have plotted attacks in several Southeast Asian nations. They are inspired by, and at times have received support directly from, groups operating along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border – the ungoverned space from which this threat ultimately emanates. Failure in a place like Afghanistan would have international reverberations – and, undoubtedly, many of them would be felt in this part of the world.”

In light of the themes and approaches of the new strategy, some of the major areas of discussion and debate in the US deriving from this approach are:

- **Focus on Al-Qaeda or Taliban.** There has been some questioning about the focus on Al-Qaeda versus the Taliban given the fact that the AQ has been substantially degraded and the Taliban has been spreading. It is my view that the distinction is sometimes drawn too sharply. Both the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan Taliban have Al-Qaeda elements. And in any case further success and spread of militant groups and Taliban would have the effect of ultimately giving more space to Al-Qaeda. As the *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community* put it:

“Given the increased pressure posed by these criticisms [against al-Qaeda for their brutal acts by Muslim religious leaders and publics], al-Qa’ida leaders increasingly have highlighted enduring support for the Taliban and the fight in Afghanistan and Pakistan and in other regions where they portray the West being at war with Islam and al-Qa’ida as the vanguard of the global terrorist movement.”
- **Will the increase in American forces in Afghanistan work?** In my view, it will work so long as the clearly-articulated goals of the force increase are adhered to. The aim of the force plus up in Afghanistan is clearly stated: “securing Afghanistan’s south and east against a return of al-Qaeda and its allies, to provide a space for the Afghani government to establish effective government control” and give sufficient time to train and expand Afghan security forces so as to let them take the lead in effective counterinsurgency operations and *“allow us and our partners to wind down our combat operations* [emphasis added].”
- **Is a capable, accountable and effective government in Afghanistan possible?** As is well known, there have been mixed views about the policies and approaches of President Karzai and his government. Particularly worrisome has been the corruption in the country as well as the state’s inability to provide basic services. In my view there now seems to be a sense in Washington the President Karzai will win re-election in August and that he will be the one Afghan leader with national standing and with which the US will have to deal but the US will also continue to search for ways to work with others and around President Karzai.
- **Negotiating with the Taliban.** Deriving from the issue of creating a more effective government is the question of whether or not to negotiate with the

Taliban. According to the official policy publicly released in March “While Mullah Omar and the Taliban’s hard core that have aligned themselves with al Qaeda are not reconcilable and we cannot make a deal that includes them, **the war in Afghanistan cannot be won without convincing non-ideologically committed insurgents to lay down their arms, reject al Qaeda, and accept the Afghan constitution** [emphasis added].” Others experts in the U.S. such as Dr. Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace disagree; arguing that it is premature, unnecessary, unsought by the Taliban, and likely to signal weakness to an enemy that seeks to outlast us. Critics also suggest that holding out negotiations with the Taliban might also embolden Pakistan not to commit to fighting them.

- **Can Afghan security forces be prepared for self-reliance in the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism fight?** There is considerable doubt about how quickly and how far Afghan security forces, both military and police, can be prepared to handle the battle on their own. In a recent speech in Washington, the Afghan Ambassador Jawad welcomed the decision to increase support for the Afghan military forces to 134,000 (and police to 82,000 over the next two years) but argued that what Afghanistan needs is 250,000. There is considerable, and justified skepticism in Washington that this much capacity exists in Afghanistan.
- **There are profound doubts about the ability of the US to help turnaround Pakistan’s crisis of governance.** As recent events have shown there is a strong and moderate civil society in Pakistan (it was after all Pakistani civil society that brought about the reinstatement of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court), but it may well be that the political elite are not able to maintain the kind of stability and responsiveness demanded of its citizens. There is a great deal of US congressional skepticism that Pakistan will handle the planned forthcoming aid in ways that improve governance and responsiveness to citizen needs.
- **There is debate in the US whether Pakistan is completely committed to the fight against the Taliban.** Many in the US assess that Pakistan’s longer-term interests in a pro-Pakistan Afghanistan, desire to marginalize Indian influence there, cooperation with Saudi Arabia which in turn seeks to marginalize Iran, and its own domestic connections to a range of militant groups make it highly unlikely that Pakistan is “on board” in the fight against the militants. The recent seemingly successful assault in Swat and other areas is seen as reversible and not easily translatable to other parts of the country. In any case, even if Pakistan were completely committed to the fight against the militants, there are questions in the US about Pakistan’s competency and capability. In the language of the March strategy: “Successfully shutting down the Pakistani safe haven for extremists will also require consistent and intensive strategic engagement with Pakistani leadership in both the civilian and military spheres.” This was a carefully worded statement that both alludes to worries about Pakistani commitment and the role of Pakistani official agencies in creating militant groups.

- **There is near unanimous consensus that the US needs to build a relationship with Pakistan that goes beyond a handful of individuals and the army and address the “trust deficit” by supporting the Pakistan people.** The problem is that it is the handful of individuals who are for the time being and foreseeable future able to do something and the “trust deficit” with the US will take a long time to overcome given the complicated history of the relationship.
- **There is some debate in the US about which is the more immediate danger—dysfunctional governance or the insurgency in Pakistan.** Some argue that the US has overplayed the security dangers to get the Pakistan army into the fight in the West but the real problem is governance and the economy. A March IRI poll showed that most Pakistanis are concerned more about the economy than the insurgency though developments since then may have changed that picture.

### **A Few Words on India**

Set against the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, India seems like an extraordinarily positive prospect to most Americans. Bilateral relations have been booming over the past few years, including the signing of a controversial nuclear deal. India’s recently completed national elections offer the prospect of government stability given the Congress’ unexpectedly strong showing. The Indian economy has certainly been slowed by the global economic and financial crisis but is still like to grow at just under 6% this year. And US expectations for the long-term strategic role of India are high. Secretary Gates told the Shangri-la Dialogue that: “When it comes to India, we have seen a watershed in our relations – cooperation that would have been unthinkable in the recent past. As Admiral Keating, commander of United States Pacific Command, recently wrote, it is a ‘genuine convergence of national interests.’ In coming years, we look to India to be a partner and net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond.”

Given all this, the fact of the matter is that the overall outlook for bilateral relations is not especially warm. There are key reasons for this:

1. The Obama Administration’s Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy inevitably brings direct and indirect pressure on India because of the view of many that Pakistan’s situation could be improved by India relieving pressure on Pakistan’s east. Candidate Obama’s *Foreign Affairs* piece made this explicit and it has been reportedly reiterated privately to India. While India may feel relieved that Special Envoy Holbrooke’s brief says only Afghanistan and Pakistan, the reality is that US policy towards these two countries will be made with one eye towards India. Since the November attacks in Mumbai, however, India is not in much of a mood to countenance outreach to Pakistan. Still there are opportunities for India to be a force for stability.
2. The new US administration largely views India as complicating, not relieving the many problems and challenges the administration prioritize or face, including but not limited to:

- Afghanistan
  - Pakistan
  - Climate Change
  - The incomplete Doha round of trade talks
3. The blueprint for US-India relations after the completion of the nuclear deal now focuses on a transition from the Bush Administration's "Big Idea" to something along the lines of "What is Doable" with India. It is not clear what the agenda for the doable is right now, but it is likely to be along the lines of higher education cooperation and agricultural cooperation while continuing efforts to build military to military ties.

### **Net Assessment about US Policy in South Asia**

1. US policy, notwithstanding statements about lasting commitment, now has an eye toward "improve and exit" from Afghanistan, and avoid catastrophe in Pakistan. There is little appetite in the US for transforming either Afghanistan or Pakistan—as the relatively narrow core goal outlined by the administration indicates. There are of course some who would argue for much more explicit commitment to long-term nation-building in Afghanistan, and there are some words in the strategy that could suggest this commitment exists, but I do not see this goal as the driver of current US policy.
2. Moreover, this "basic" strategy is not minimalist or "hands off" given the enormous military, financial and diplomatic resources devoted to it. But the "basic" strategy does reflect pessimism of the situation and outlook in both countries.
3. In Afghanistan, US pessimism stems primarily, but not only from the ability of the US to count on NATO/European commitment, the lack of confidence in the Afghan political establishment to stem corruption and deliver services to its citizens and the fact that Pakistan continues to serve as a fallback for militants and insurgents fighting in Afghanistan.
4. On Pakistan, I am fairly certain that the Kerry-Lugar legislation will pass giving Pakistan an additional \$1.5 billion per year at least for the next five years (and perhaps longer), but the milestones and benchmarks attached to the legislation are still being discussed and my guess is that some will be attached that dismay both Pakistan and the Obama Administration. There is considerable skepticism in some US congressional and other circles about the corruption and use of past assistance including reports that Pakistan is pursuing rapid modernization and expansion of its nuclear forces.
5. Notwithstanding the sizeable military, economic and diplomatic commitments to both countries, the US should not overstate its own leverage in either Afghanistan or Pakistan. In the end, without serious support from the countries themselves as well as partners in Europe and Asia and elsewhere, just holding the line will be a challenge.
6. The support of the US congress and the American public will depend on three major variables: the rate of American casualties; the measurable progress made, and the economic/financial picture of the United States.

7. In terms of major player dynamics down the road—and perhaps long after a US presence, there appear to be two broad alignments which will have influence in terms of Afghanistan. One will be Iran-Russia-India and the other will be Pakistan-Saudi Arabia-Taliban. Neither will be problem-free for the United States.
8. We will have to stay tuned given the remarkable “on the ground” developments in both countries. The Obama administration has stated explicitly that its strategy is flexible and good that it is so as flexibility will be required to respond the ground realities.
9. We should not forget Iraq. The timeline until June 30<sup>th</sup> to withdraw American forces from major cities could still see a ramping up of violence of the kind we have seen over the last couple of months—and what will happen after that is far from clear.
10. Since we have a new President who has made “hope” an important part of his message, some positive signs should be noted in closing:
  - a. Pakistan’s public seems to have turned against the brutal behavior of the militants in a way that demands government action;
  - b. The Pakistan establishment too seems to have become responsive to the challenge faced by the country;
  - c. There is a large and moderate majority of Pakistanis who are committed a better future.
  - d. **Most importantly, the Obama Administration’s strategy and the passage of the Kerry-Lugar legislation (even with conditions) will have palliative effects.**

A new era of peace for the Middle East and South Asia is some time and distance off. But there are lots of opportunities to advance our efforts. And there is always hope.