



August 27, 2009

## Analyzing the Case for Afghanistan

Posted by Michael Cohen

Over at [registan.net](http://registan.net), Josh Foust has taken on the admirable and difficult job of making the case for staying the course in Afghanistan. He argues there are two strategic goals for the US mission:

1. A basic minimal stability in Afghanistan, such that neither the Taliban nor al Qaeda is likely to develop a staging ground for international attacks, whether against neighboring countries or the United States and Europe;
2. The permanent delegitimization of Pakistan's insurgents, such that they can no longer push Pakistan and India toward nuclear conflict;

Number one is a compelling rationale for a US mission in Afghanistan - whether completing that mission needs to be done via robust counter-insurgency is something else altogether. In my view, it doesn't and I will try to tackle that point in a future post.

But to the second point, I'm not sure I completely understand Josh's argument. He explains it more here:

Lest anyone think it is appropriate to write off the India-Pakistan conflict as somebody else's problem, it is never somebody else's problem when nuclear weapons are involved . . . India and Pakistan have come a hair's breadth from nuclear conflict *twice* over Kashmir. And like it or not, it is a compelling and vital American interest to prevent nuclear conflict in South Asia—which makes “fixing” Afghanistan in some way also a vital American interest.

Now I certainly share the view that preventing nuclear conflict in South Asia is a vital American interest, less clear to me is why we need to fix Afghanistan to achieve that goal. Is the fear that if we leave, Afghanistan will become a proxy war for India and Pakistan that could turn into a full-fledged nuclear conflict? I suppose I have to ask where is the evidence for that. I know India is playing a more open role in Afghanistan, but does really rise to the level of proxy war? I do wonder how much of the "Indian influence" is being hyped by the Pakistani government. I'm just not seeing the direct and vital connection that Josh is making.

Josh goes on:

When it comes to Pakistan, the big danger is not in a Taliban takeover, or even in the Taliban seizure of nuclear weapons—I have never believed that the ISI could be *that* monumentally stupid (though they are incredibly stupid for letting things get this far out of hand). The big danger, as it has been since 1999, is that insurgents, bored or underutilized in Afghanistan, will spark another confrontation between India and Pakistan, and that that confrontation will spillover into nuclear conflict. That is worth blood and treasure to prevent.

Again, it's important to prevent such a conflict from emerging, but why is it worth US blood and treasure? I'm actually quite serious here - I don't want to get all [Chris Preble](#) on Josh, but I really don't see why American troops have to be put in harm's way because a blow-up in Afghanistan might turn into a full-fledged India-Pakistan war. Why would the United States willingly hold itself and its soldiers hostage to an unresolved regional conflict? And are there really no other options - for example, diplomatic - for preventing such a war than "fixing" Afghanistan?

But there is something else about this argument that troubles me. Josh alleges that the big danger is if insurgents bored from the Afghanistan fight will try to spark a confrontation between India and Pakistan. I'm not clear as to why Afghan Taliban would in the wake of a US withdrawal want to get involved with the fight for Kashmir (did that happen from 1996-2001?) but the bigger question is that didn't jihadist terror groups *already* try to spark that conflict last November in the Mumbai attacks that killed 173 people? Not to minimize those horrific attacks, but even though the jihadists behind the Mumbai attacks were based in Pakistan - and probably backed by the ISI - it didn't spark a military escalation between the two countries. What would be different if we left Afghanistan?

But I will say one thing, if THIS is the rationale for staying I can understand "why even the war supporters cannot articulate them." I seriously doubt most Americans believe that we should be fighting a war in Afghanistan so that India and Pakistan don't fight one in the future.

I ask these questions not to tweak Josh, but I'm actually curious to hear his answers. So I look forward to the debate.

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Classic exposition, I have also mentioned it in my blog article. But it is a pity that almost no friend discussed it with me. I am very happy to see your article.

Posted by: [maplestory mesos](#) | [August 28, 2009 at 04:15 AM](#)

*#1 A basic minimal stability in Afghanistan, such that neither the Taliban nor al Qaeda is likely to develop a staging ground for international attacks, whether against neighboring countries or the United States and Europe;*

Staging ground??? And you agree this is a "compelling rationale"? You and Foust have lost me.

What kinds of Al Qaeda or Taliban attacks are you imagining could be staged in Afghanistan, and in what would the staging consist? What kinds of staging could possibly take place in Afghanistan that could not just easily take place in any number of other countries which are closer to the likely locations of the attacks? And what level of "minimal stability" could we possibly achieve in Afghanistan that would put any serious dent in the ability of jihadists to store up dynamite, C4, triggers, wires, bullets or bomb vests in a single room in some safe house? What you and Foust are imagining is *maximum security*, not minimal stability, and obviously there is nothing we can do to turn the very large, wild and geographically challenging country of Afghanistan into an American maximum security facility.

Why in the world would anyone "stage" a suicide bombing, car bombing or assault rifle attack intended for a city in Iraq, Africa, Europe or North America in *Afghanistan*?

People seem to be easily dazzled in this debate by various pieces of poorly understood and dubiously applicable language: "safe havens", "training bases", "staging grounds". Terrorists don't need expansive training bases to do the minimal training they need to do. They don't need to go to terrorist "boot camp". They don't need to learn to drill, march and salute. They don't need to maintain a network of headquarters to manage logistically and tactically involved operations. They don't need to hide and protect tanks or battle cruisers or field artillery. They don't even need Evil Masterminds in mountain lairs. Militant jihadism is mostly a do-it-yourself job. To the extent it relies on pre-existing expertise and weapons running networks, that expertise and networking is scattered all over the world and isn't permanently "staged" anywhere.

I'm appalled that eight years after the 9/11 attacks, people still don't understand what terrorism is, what can be done to prevent it, and what can't be done. We're still getting these anachronistically conventional and inapplicable military concepts.

Staging ground??? What world are you guys living in?

Posted by: Dan Kervick | [August 28, 2009 at 08:18 AM](#)

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