



Ending Afghan war aids Pakistan

By Malou Innocent

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Even as evidence continues to mount that elements within Pakistan are actively assisting the Taliban and other radical groups, American officials insist that Pakistan remains a vital strategic partner. Going forward, Washington would be better off relying on targeted counterterrorism measures for capturing and killing terrorists, and abandoning its expansive counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, which its ostensible partner in Islamabad continues to undermine.

For millions of Americans, the invasion of Afghanistan was a justifiable response to the atrocities of Sept. 11. Many Pakistanis vehemently disagree. They view the foreign military presence in Afghanistan as a hostile occupation of the region and fear the prospect of an unfriendly government coming to power in Kabul. These factors, combined with America's unsavory public image in the region and its sordid political past with Islamabad, make it difficult for U.S. leaders to win full cooperation from their Pakistani counterparts.

"We don't want anti-Americanism to block our ability to get things done here," said former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Anne Patterson. "To achieve our joint goals here, we need a certain level of political acceptance, that's just a fact."

Today, many Pakistanis still see their leaders as putting U.S. interests above those of their own country. The U.S. raid against Osama bin Laden is merely the latest incident putting Pakistani leaders in an uncomfortable position between international condemnation and hostile domestic public opinion.

In addition, the continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan provides fuel to conspiracy theories in Pakistan, including the widespread one that the U.S. and India are colluding to dismember Pakistan and seize its nuclear weapons. For this reason, even as Pakistan suffers from homegrown insurgents, current U.S. policy encourages Pakistani countermeasures in Afghanistan. This is one reason why individuals with ties to Pakistan's spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence, collaborate with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami Group, the Haqqani network, the Quetta Shura Taliban, and other insurgents that attack U.S. and coalition troops in Afghanistan. Perversely, U.S. policy — while not the primary motivation — serves to strengthen passive support for the very jihadist forces America seeks to defeat.

In essence, the U.S. is funding both sides of the war in Afghanistan. It deploys its men and women in uniform to fight and die on behalf of a corrupt regime in Kabul, while sending billions of dollars to a neighboring government supporting the militants our soldiers fight. Prolonging a large-scale military presence in Afghanistan weakens the U.S. militarily and economically. Luckily, waging an indefinite counterinsurgency campaign against bigoted local mullahs is not a vital U.S. interest.

To disrupt terrorist safe havens and round up suspected terrorists, the U.S. can rely on monitoring inaccessible regions with unmanned aerial vehicles, sharing intelligence with close partners around the world, and using

covert operatives against specific targets when absolutely necessary.

The fact is, terrorists can flourish in fragile states such as Afghanistan, as well as in rich and stable ones such as Germany, Spain, and America. That bin Laden was found in Pakistan highlights this fact. In Afghanistan, there is little evidence that foreign troops can capture and kill more insurgents than their presence helps to recruit.

Moreover, a large-scale foreign troop presence in Afghanistan neither resolves the ongoing rivalry between Pakistan and India, nor decreases either country's incentive to use Afghanistan as a proxy battleground. In this respect, Afghanistan's landlocked position in Central Asia will forever render it vulnerable to meddling from surrounding states. As a result, our best efforts may fail to translate into anything more than limited gains on the ground.

Stability in this region will come about after the U.S. scales down its Afghanistan policy to a much narrower counterterrorism mission, and when Pakistan is convinced that its future security no longer lies in continuing its self-defeating support of Islamist proxies. Since the long-term success of Pakistan, a nuclear-armed Muslim-majority country, depends on the public's repudiation of extremism, a more focused counterterrorism policy would have the dual advantage of reducing America's dependence on a dubious ally, and improving Washington's deteriorating relations with Islamabad. For these reasons, the U.S. must re-examine its policies in Afghanistan now.

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