

A Round Table on the Obama Administration and the 'AfPak' Question

'WE ARE GOING TO STAY LONG ENOUGH TO SET UP THEIR OWN INSTITUTIONS': OBAMA AND THE 'AFPAK' QUESTION

by Simon Toner, *NeoAmericanist*

In February, *Newsweek* magazine carried the cover story 'Obama's Vietnam'. The article was not especially illuminating, but it represents the most prominent of a plethora of articles in the US media which have argued that, upon assuming office, Barack Obama's administration inherited a mismanaged, under-resourced war which was turning into a quagmire. Obama was elected as a candidate for change with an enormous popular mandate, and at least in part as a result of his opposition to the war in Iraq. And yet, throughout the presidential campaign, he expressed his determination to pursue, even escalate, the Bush administration's war in Afghanistan. In light of the growing speculation surrounding future policy towards the war, which is being fought largely along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, *NeoAmericanist* solicited the opinions of five diplomatic historians from Europe and North America. The panellists of this roundtable were asked to offer their insights into what the Obama administration hopes to achieve in Afghanistan and what the new directions and strategies will mean for the region, which many policymakers and pundits are now controversially referring to as 'AfPak'. But above and beyond the question of what this means for the region, *NeoAmericanist* asked the panel of historians to discuss what policy shifts in Washington might mean for larger trends in US foreign policy, the alignment of international power and the feedback effect these larger shifting currents may have in the domestic arena of the US and allied countries.

For most, Barack Obama's foreign policy has offered a very definite and much welcomed departure from the Bush years. Obama's apparent rejection of unconditional support for Israel, his efforts in the area of nuclear weapons reductions and his handling of the current crisis in Iran look to be the height of a particular brand of soft-power diplomacy which the Obama administration has itself labelled "pragmatic". This makes Obama's determination to pursue the fight in Afghanistan and his framing of the conflict in the same 'US vs. al Qaeda' terms as the Bush administration all the more confusing. The president has remarked that Afghanistan and Pakistan represent the 'central front' in the "War on Terror." While this may be the case, one must ask whether the disparate groups that make up the Afghan and Pakistan insurgencies or even al Qaeda itself represent a grave enough threat to the United States to warrant an escalation of the war in Afghanistan and the further destabilisation of an already wobbling ally in Pakistan.

It has long been obvious that Obama is not the radical that many of his more optimistic leftist supporters would have hoped. Instead, his abandonment of the most belligerent policies of the Bush administration and his belief in the worthiness of the war in Afghanistan places him in line with the centrists of the foreign policy elite—the Princeton Project authors that Giles Scott-Smith writes about below. Obama's decisions on Afghanistan has thus far would confirmed that he shares, with these policymakers, a faith in the kind of 'liberal interventions' that have marked much of the US's post-Cold War foreign policy and perhaps more worryingly, its unshakeable belief in the ability of American power

to transform complex local problems halfway around the globe. It is also clear that Obama endorses, if not fully believes, that 'global terror networks' represent the gravest threat to US security and furthermore, that they can be defeated.

Juxtaposed with Iraq, the US intervention in Afghanistan has long been characterised as 'the good war' or 'the necessary war' in America's larger "War on Terror." As a presidential candidate, Obama regularly presented the conflict as vital to the national security interests of the United States—although he has been much more uneasy with the divisive Bushian language of "the War on Terror." Despite an apparent rejection of the Bush Doctrine, the generic assumptions of the "War on Terror" and an awareness of the role of soft-power and small scale warfare, the full-out occupation of Afghanistan remains central to the Obama administration's foreign policy. As early as his second presidential debate with Senator John McCain, Obama pronounced his support for a big-stick approach to the borderlands, suggesting that 'if Pakistan is unable or unwilling to hunt down bin Laden and take him out, then we should'. Since taking office, Obama has displayed little compunction in pursuing this goal, escalating the drone attacks in Pakistan and increasing the number of US forces in Afghanistan by more than 20,000. But in recent months, with an increase in civilian casualties at the hands of US forces in Afghanistan, an unfolding humanitarian disaster in Pakistan and the enormity of the tasks facing the new administration in both countries, the moral parameters (not to mention national parameters) of Obama's strategy for the region have become less clear cut than the US President would like to suggest.

Even, as Marilyn Young observes in the beginning of her piece, the very term 'AfPak' is deeply problematic. Increasingly used by the foreign policy establishment in the dying days of the Bush administration and the early days of the Obama presidency, the moniker has always pointed out a tricky tension in the occupation of Afghanistan. The full-scale invasion of a nation and the installation of a new government seems an inappropriate method for controlling extra-national or transnational militant organizations. But, tactics aside, faced with the eight year old national occupation and continued support for a national government, the question that faces the administration is whether it can adapt a strategy of building an enduring Afghan state in order to 'disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda', to a regional focus without revealing the contradictions therein. Can the war in/with Afghanistan be extended to include parts of Pakistan without undermining the nationalistic fabric that Bush and now Obama want to see emerge from the war? And can a functioning, Western-oriented Afghan government be built by foreign troops whose very presence has thus far been the primary factor contributing to the growth of the insurgency? In a telling grammatical gaffe, Captain Bill Pelletier, a US Marines' spokesman, said of the recent push into the Helmand Valley "we are going to stay long enough to set up their own institutions." The comment encapsulates the tensions and contradictions of US policy in the region.

On the one hand, Obama's own rhetoric has indicated that the war in Afghanistan is meant to ensure that the country is allowed to determine its own national character—reinforcing the idea that the nation is the primary currency of the international system. Yet, on the other hand, introducing 'AfPak' into the national security discourse, American think-tanks and the now influential counterinsurgency or 'COIN-dinista' lobby have shown that the ultimate focus of the war is an ideological one which has no boundaries. In creating the "AfPak" moniker, Americans have effectively invented an imaginary, homogenous space, aimed at reimagining the structures that justified the invasion to begin with.

Rhetorically, the term is useful for those who support the assumptions which accompany it. Stressing that the 'AfPak' policy addresses the interrelatedness of the two crises blurs the line between the conflicts

in Pakistan and Afghanistan, reducing it to the shared problematic of a single ethnic tribe, the Pashtun. This effectively ignores the border between the two countries and thus makes it easier for the US to quietly (at least in domestic terms) violate the sovereignty of Pakistan. The US now finds itself fighting a war in Pakistan using pilotless drones and political pressure to turn the Pakistan military into a proxy of American military strategy. And yet, paradoxically, as it ignores the existence of a sovereign border, the US goal is to disengage from the region leaving behind independent and viable Afghan and Pakistani states.

If this tension was not precarious enough, the 'AfPak' term also indicates how blinkered the US has become in seeking a resolution to the war. When Richard Holbrooke was mooted as Obama's special representative to the region late last year his remit was slated to include India. By the time of his appointment in January, however, Holbrooke was introduced as special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The new administration's willingness to drop India entirely from Holbrooke's portfolio after strong Indian opposition to the idea of being lumped in with the 'AfPak problem' served to highlight the US's narrow vision of the conflict through even a regional lens. In adopting the 'AfPak' vision, the administration has signalled that it is freezing out other essential players, including Russia and China, but most notably India, the perceived threat which first led the Pakistan military and intelligence services to foster militant Islamist groups, including the Taliban. The new administration may be making the attempt to engage these actors on the issue but only in the context of US concerns regarding Afghanistan rather than, for example, in the context of India's concerns about Kashmir or Russian fears about the US presence in Central Asia.

At the heart of the administration's most recent strategic review, which outlined the 'AfPak' vision, was the notion that al Qaeda requires a physical space from which to launch attacks on the United States. This was in large part the logic behind putting considerable pressure on the Pakistani military to launch the Swat Valley Offensive. That offensive has undoubtedly been one of the most counterproductive of US tactics in the region. In an example of the self deception that many US policymakers engage in, Richard Holbrooke argued that the true test of success for the military's offensive into Swat would be Pakistan's ability to deal with the 2.5 million displaced persons that had been generated in the process. The *New York Times* reported on June 12th that as a result of drone attacks and the Swat offensive, al Qaeda operatives were fleeing north western Pakistan in favour of Yemen and Somalia. US policy has apparently failed to take into account that al Qaeda is an ideological group that will not recognize territorial or geographical boundaries. Nor will the Pashtun, who constitute large parts of the insurgency, and who have historically displayed no allegiance to or even recognition of Afghan and Pakistani state structures. Yet it is this very territoriality that the US is trying to construct—national, sovereign Afghan and Pakistani states—by employing tactics that display how false geopolitical independence truly is. It is contradictions such as these that are most striking when reading our contributors' essays.

Scott Lucas's work offers a firm primer for those unfamiliar with the strategic and technical debates around the conflict in Afghanistan. Lucas outlines the route that the administration has taken in its first months in office and highlights that, short of invoking the al Qaeda threat, the administration has failed to articulate a coherent strategy. Furthermore, he argues, the US has found no political complement to its military first effort. While trying to cultivate friendly Afghan and Pakistani governments, the US has oscillated between toying with removing the leaders of these governments and supporting them.

Andrew Johnston argues that the Obama administration has taken on the dubious lessons of the Iraq

surge and transferred them to the Afghan theatre. For Johnston, the US war in Afghanistan is consistent with earlier ventures in US foreign policy, a “product of America’s expansive vision of national security, etched through a century of global interventions.” The Obama administration is convinced that US power alone is enough to solve the ‘AfPak problem’ and is ignoring the larger regional and global picture for the sake of achieving more immediate goals. He then goes on to explore the divisive impact the war has had on Canadian domestic politics, one of the major non-American players in the conflict. Johnston’s piece drives at the interconnectivity of international relations by highlighting the interdependence between domestic and foreign relations.

In February, then-commander of US and NATO forces General David McKiernan, referring specifically to the Soviet experience, said “there’s always an inclination to relate what we’re doing with previous nations. I think that’s a very unhealthy comparison”. Artemy Kalinovsky shows us why it might be wise for US policymakers to study the lessons of the long Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. His paper highlights three areas in particular in which the US appears to be replicating failed Soviet tactics: namely, the difficulties of establishing legitimate local government, the contradictions of a development program led by non-Afghan agencies and ‘the security dilemma’.

In the fourth paper, Giles Scott-Smith argues that the development of high tech, anonymous weaponry combined with a ‘muscular liberalism’ dominating large parts of the foreign policy establishment makes it tempting and increasingly easy for the US to violate state sovereignty in the pursuit of the “Global War on Terror”, even though in this instance those tactics detract from the strategy of creating viable Pakistani and Afghan governments. Scott-Smith also examines the academic work of some of Obama’s leading foreign policymakers, whose ideas and convictions will shape policy not only toward Afghanistan and Pakistan but toward every corner of the globe.

In the final piece, Marilyn Young, a foremost scholar of the Vietnam War, has taken the time to respond to the four papers and offers insights of her own. Young argues that “the US can provide neither a military nor a political solution in Afghanistan” and has no doubt that the best thing for the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as the United States, would be a unilateral withdrawal.