

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

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

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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.

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## MR OBAMA'S WARS: PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN

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by Scott Lucas, University of Birmingham

The analysis was so much simpler with the Bush Administration and its ambitions in Iraq. From the first meeting of the first National Security Council, the President and his advisors identified a strategic goal, namely the extension and maintenance of an American predominance, supported by the demonstration case of regime change in Baghdad.<sup>1</sup> While aspects of the plan would be refined between January 2001 and March 2003, moving toward the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by direct military action rather than covert support of an indigenous challenge, the general aspiration remained. The tragedy of 9/11 would be deployed through the move from al Qaeda to the Iraqi menace of weapons of mass destruction. Strategic doctrine, such as the proposal of an Unholy Trinity of terrorism, tyranny, and technology, would underpin the plans; intelligence and analysis would be framed to justify the removal of a dictator who posed an imminent threat to the US and its allies.<sup>2</sup>

The strategic ambition collapsed quickly amidst Iraqi insurgency and the exposure of the deceptions that led to war, but it had a clarity that could not be asserted in the case of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Bush Administration, after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, achieved its immediate goals within four months with the toppling of the Taliban and the installation of a suitable Government in Kabul, but as early as March 2002 it had turned its sights to the Iraqi campaign. The Karzai regime maintained a limited authority, while the Pakistani leader, General Pervez Musharraf, could rely—until the rise of domestic opposition finally forced him from power in August 2008—on billions of dollars in American aid. Violence continued in both countries, but in both symbolism and cost it was dwarfed for Washington by the chaos in Iraq.

As I write this in May 2009, however, Afghanistan and Pakistan are now the central crises for US foreign policy. The Taliban has expanded its area of influence, now operating in 75 percent of the country.<sup>3</sup> The Obama Administration has fired the commander of NATO and US forces in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, with promises of a “new strategy and a new mission” under his replacement, General Stanley McChrystal.<sup>4</sup> Obama’s promises of economic aid and civilian involvement, accompanying a doubling of US troops in the country, have already been eclipsed by the military dimension of counter-insurgency; more than 100 civilians died in a single attack by American aircraft in early May.<sup>5</sup> President Karzai, whose removal was being sought by Washington only months ago, has out-manoeuvred Washington: making new domestic political alliances, he appears to have secured his re-election in

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<sup>1</sup> Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill*

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/national/nss-020920.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.americansecurityproject.org/files/AWW%20Six%20Month%20Update%202009%20\(FINAL\)A.pdf](http://www.americansecurityproject.org/files/AWW%20Six%20Month%20Update%202009%20(FINAL)A.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/12/transcript-gates-mullen-briefing-on-us-command-change-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/06/tuesdays-mass-killing-in-afghanistan-us-military-begins-the-lying/>

August.<sup>6</sup>

In Pakistan, the immediate Washington-supported replacement for President Musharraf, Asif Ali Zardari, has been reduced to a figurehead. Obama's officials are pressing for the abrogation of political agreements with local groups, and a military offensive against the "Pakistani Taliban", who have expanded their operations beyond the Northwest Frontier Provinces and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Missile attacks by American drone aircraft, and the casualties from them, have escalated. Obama's envoy, Richard Holbrooke, travels regularly to Islamabad for meetings without any apparent resolution. Zardari and Karzai visit the US for a summit that is more for the securing of financial aid and of domestic political advantage than for a unifying effort against "insurgents".

Yet it is far from clear that Washington has a strategy, for Afghanistan, Pakistan, or for an "AfPak" combination. The Administration, from the President to General Petraeus, invoke the threat of al Qaeda and "extremists", folding the opposition of local political groups into that formula or setting it aside. Schemes are launched to undermine and possibly even remove national leaders, without any apparent consideration of political alternatives, let alone long-term stability.



In his Inaugural speech in January 2009, President Obama referred to only two countries outside the United States: "We will begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people, and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan."<sup>7</sup> The juxtaposition indicated that the new Administration would not only make the Afghan situation a priority; the latter would supplant Iraq as *the* priority for US foreign policy. The next day Obama's National Security Council took up the issue, and the day after that, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, a holdover from the Bush Administration, indicated that there would be a significant change in approach: the US Government would now pursue "very concrete things" such as establishing control in parts of the country, pursuing al Qaeda, and delivering services and security for the Afghan people.<sup>8</sup>

However, the statements did not herald a new, unifying strategy. For the next month, there was a protracted battle within the Executive Branch between Obama's White House staff and US military commanders, with Gates in the middle. The generals pressed for their request for 30,000 extra troops, raising the total American commitment to 68,000, to be met in full "as the foundation on whatever the president decides to develop in terms of a further strategy".<sup>9</sup> The President played for time, setting aside the military studies that had been prepared for his first day in office for an interagency review led by his envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, and former CIA operative Bruce Riedel.

Meanwhile some Obama advisors were considering a replacement for the Afghanistan President. A White House official told *The New York Times*, "Mr. Karzai is now seen as a potential impediment to American goals in Afghanistan, the officials said, because corruption has become rampant in his government, contributing to a flourishing drug trade and the resurgence of the Taliban." Among those

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<sup>6</sup> **Editor's note:** at the time of publication, election results showing a Karzai majority were contested with accusations of voter and electoral fraud.

<sup>7</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/01/20/the-prepared-script-of-barack-obamas-inaugural-speech/>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.thenation.com/blogs/dreyfuss/400748/afghan\\_escalation\\_no\\_decision\\_yet\\_says\\_gates](http://www.thenation.com/blogs/dreyfuss/400748/afghan_escalation_no_decision_yet_says_gates)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSTRE51279P20090203>

supposedly supporting a change were Vice President Joe Biden and Holbrooke.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond these immediate battles, the question remained: what was the Obama Administration's strategy to stabilise Afghanistan? The President's unease was evident in his first meeting with Gates and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when he asked, "What's the endgame?" According to his staff, he "did not receive a convincing answer", either from his advisors or from General David McKiernan, the commander of US forces in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>

Confusion was soon evident within the Administration. Obama's decision to appoint a special envoy, while checking the military push for quick decisions, had muddled lines of authority. Gates was still involved as a broker, but Secretary of State Hillary Clinton appeared to have an ill-defined role, if she had one at all. While some officials were leaking one message to the media—" [We will] leave economic development and nation-building increasingly to European allies, so that American forces [can] focus on the fight against insurgents,"—other White House staffers were jumping in with another—"There is no purely military solution to the challenge in Afghanistan so there will be a significant non-military component to anything that we seek to undertake."<sup>12</sup>

In mid-February, Obama offered a compromise on the military front, approving about two-thirds of the military's demands while holding the line that a longer-term decision would await the completion of the Holbrooke-Riedel study. Yet even in this supposed resolution, methods and specific objectives remained vague. General Petraeus's acolytes grumbled, "You had people from the Department of Agriculture weighing in. There were too many cooks. The end result was lowest-common-denominator stuff. The usual Petraeus acuity wasn't there."<sup>13</sup> Instead, the unifying rationale was in the rhetorical presentation of "al Qaeda" and "extremists". The President's imagery merely reinforced the message put out by his staff within a week of the Inauguration: "What we're trying to do is to focus on the al Qaeda problem. That has to be our first priority."<sup>14</sup>

Instead of bringing strategic clarity, the significance of the invocation of a bin Laden-led threat lay beyond Afghanistan, for in that portrayal lurked the expansion of crisis, and thus US intervention, in Pakistan. Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made the link at the start of February: "We cannot accept that [an] Al Qaeda leadership which continues to plan against us every single day—and I mean us, here in America—[could] have [a] safe haven in Pakistan nor could resume one in Afghanistan."<sup>15</sup>

Initially the White House balked at Mullen's extension and tried to keep Afghanistan and Pakistan as separate issues. According to The Washington Post, "Senior administration officials described their approach to Pakistan—as a major U.S. partner under serious threat of internal collapse—as fundamentally different from the Bush administration's focus on the country as a Taliban and al-Qaeda 'platform' for

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/28/us/politics/28policy.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/28/us/politics/28policy.html?_r=1)

<sup>11</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/08/update-on-obama-v-the-military-where-next-in-afghanistan/>;  
[http://www.alternet.org/waroniraq/128870/%27what\\_is\\_the\\_end\\_game%27%3A\\_why\\_obama\\_rejected\\_a\\_bigger\\_surge\\_in\\_afghanistan/](http://www.alternet.org/waroniraq/128870/%27what_is_the_end_game%27%3A_why_obama_rejected_a_bigger_surge_in_afghanistan/)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE50R55820090128?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>

<sup>13</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/06/mr-obamas-war-the-spin-isits-not-afghanistan-its-pakistan/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/01/28/the-other-shoe-drops-obama-prepares-for-war-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/03/why-the-us-surge-will-fail-in-afghanistan-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-leave-clues/>

attacks in Afghanistan and beyond.”<sup>16</sup> Less than a week later, however, the President embraced the “AfPak” connection, saying that his “bottom line is that we cannot allow al Qaeda to operate. We cannot have those safe havens in that region. And we’re going to have to work both smartly and effectively, but with consistency, in order to make sure that those safe havens don’t exist.”<sup>17</sup>

Obama did not specify why he had suddenly connected the conflict in Afghanistan to “extremism” in Pakistan; one possibility is that he was increasingly influenced by the process led by Holbrooke and Riedel, who was setting out the notion of “an existential threat from within” in the latter country. The review, completed in late March, asserted:

Afghanistan pales in comparison to the problems in Pakistan. Our primary goal has to be to shut down the al-Qaeda and Taliban safe havens on the Pakistan side of the border. If that can be accomplished, then the insurgency in Afghanistan becomes manageable.<sup>18</sup>

Secretary of Defense Gates and Obama reiterated the connection throughout March: “At the heart of a new Afghanistan policy is going to be a smarter Pakistan policy. As long as you’ve got safe havens in these border regions that the Pakistani government can’t control or reach, in effective ways, we’re going to continue to see vulnerability on the Afghan side of the border.”<sup>19</sup> Despite public opposition from the Pakistani Government and military, the US expanded missile strikes from its secret base in northwest Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> US Special Forces advised Pakistan units while Washington pressed for an offensive against local insurgents.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, as he stepped to the podium on 27 March 2009, announcing the Administration’s conclusions from the Riedel review, President Obama was committing his Administration to two, linked (at least in the American conception) wars: “This is not simply an American problem: far from it. This is an international security challenge of the highest order. Terrorist attacks in London, in Bali, were tied to al Qaeda and its allies in Pakistan, as were attacks in North Africa and the Middle East and Islamabad and in Kabul. If there is a major attack on an Asian, European, or Africa [sic], it too is likely to have ties to Al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan.”<sup>22</sup> Even as his Administration was declaring that it was putting away its predecessor’s framework of the “War on Terror”, Obama was invoking it: “[This is] the same war that we initiated after 9/11 as a consequence of those attacks on 3,000 Americans, who were just going about their

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/03/AR2009020302858\\_2.html?sid=ST2009020401461](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/03/AR2009020302858_2.html?sid=ST2009020401461)

<sup>17</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/10/foreign-policy-highlights-of-the-first-obama-press-conference-thumbs-up-for-iran-and-russia-slapdowns-for-petraeus-and-pakistan/>

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.cfr.org/publication/19321/pakistans\\_existential\\_threat\\_comes\\_from\\_within.html?breadcrumb=%2Fpublication%2Fby\\_type%2Finterview; http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/06/mr-obamas-war-the-spin-isits-not-afghanistan-its-pakistan/](http://www.cfr.org/publication/19321/pakistans_existential_threat_comes_from_within.html?breadcrumb=%2Fpublication%2Fby_type%2Finterview; http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/06/mr-obamas-war-the-spin-isits-not-afghanistan-its-pakistan/)

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/us/politics/08obama-text.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/us/politics/08obama-text.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all)

<sup>20</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/12/pakistan-to-obama-change-us-policy-on-missile-strikes-join-us-in-ground-operations> and <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/22/mr-obamas-war-expanding-the-enemies-in-pakistan/> and <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/15/the-shock-of-hypocrisy-us-operating-from-within-pakistan/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/23/mr-obamas-war-us-special-forces-training-pakistani-units-us-military-pressing-pakistani-allies/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/27/breaking-news-obama-announces-pakistan-afghanistan-strategy/>

daily round.”<sup>23</sup>

In the two conflicts, Pakistan had overtaken Afghanistan as the Administration’s primary concern. Holbrooke told the press, “We have to deal with the western Pakistan problem....Our superiors would all freely admit that of all the dilemmas and challenges we face, that is going to be the most daunting... because it’s a sovereign country and there is a red line.”<sup>24</sup> Yet the identification of crisis did not amount to a strategy. To the contrary, it seemed to undermine Obama’s general proclamation of “a comprehensive strategy that doesn’t just rely on bullets or bombs, but also relies on agricultural specialists, on doctors, on engineers, to help create an environment in which people recognize that they have much more at stake...than giving in to some of these extremist ideologies”; the non-military promises would soon be overshadowed by the military tactics proposed for the immediate emergency.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the rhetoric about striking al Qaeda/extremist enemies and the shift to hitting the Pakistani safe havens obscured the “hole in the middle” of the US approach. Where were the political complement, and specifically the Afghan or Pakistani political partner, for this initiative?

Far from giving in to Washington’s demands or accepting his overthrow, President Karzai fought back, both in the American media and in domestic politics. He publicly criticised US airstrikes, which were killing more and more Afghan civilians, and opened up secret discussions with Taliban representatives.<sup>26</sup> While his effort to schedule Presidential elections in April was challenged by the US and blocked by local electoral officials, who postponed the vote to August, Karzai established new domestic alliances and bolstered old ones.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, candidates favoured by the US have fallen far behind, undercut by political in-fighting, their weaknesses, or their too-close relationship with Washington.

US officials have continued to hint not-so-subtly that Afghans should remove their President in August. Both Clinton and Holbrooke said at the start of April, “We do think [corruption] is a cancer. President Karzai says publicly that he agrees with that. And now it’s up to his government to take action. But I would stress...that there is an election coming up on August 20th....And that election will be a chance for the people to vote on these issues.”<sup>28</sup>

Pakistan offers the different dynamic of a weak President. Asif Ali Zardari’s primary aim has been to maintain his domestic position, particularly in the face of public demonstrations demanding significant political and judicial reforms and an escalating economic crisis.<sup>29</sup> To that end, he endorsed an agreement with local tribes in northwest Pakistan, accepting a Sharia system in exchange for a cease-fire.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/30/full-video-and-transcript-president-obama-on-pakistan-afghanistan-on-face-the-nation-29-march-2009/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/world/pakistan-most-daunting-in-new-plan-holbrooke--bi>

<sup>25</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/30/full-video-and-transcript-president-obama-on-pakistan-afghanistan-on-face-the-nation-29-march-2009/>

<sup>26</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/12/pakistan-to-obama-change-us-policy-on-missile-strikes-join-us-in-ground-operations/>

<sup>27</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/03/karzais-pre-emptive-political-strike/>

<sup>28</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/30/transcript-david-petraeus-and-richard-holbrooke-on-cnn-29-march/>

<sup>29</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/04/pakistan-zardari-maintains-his-wiggle-room-against-washington-domestic-rivals/>

<sup>30</sup> An alternative explanation is that the Pakistani military pursued a political agreement so that, in the likelihood it broke down, they would have legitimacy in strikes against opposition groups. <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/23/analysis-josh-mull-on-mr-obamas-war-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan/>

That step, in combination with Zardari's political weaknesses and history of corruption, put him beyond the acceptable for American steps in Pakistan. So Washington, on the political front, opened up talks with alternative leaders like the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. More importantly, the US sought a direct channel with the leader of Pakistan's armed forces, Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. A senior Administration official said in early March: "We have to re-establish close personal relationships with the army. We have to be sure they're on the same page as we are. Based on what I saw, they aren't yet."

Within days, the connection with Kayani set out that same page to limit any violence from public demonstrations in the Long March against Zardari's government.<sup>31</sup> *The Washington Post*, using Administration sources, then outlined, "The Administration is putting the finishing touches on a plan to greatly increase economic and development assistance to Pakistan, and to expand a military partnership considered crucial to striking a mortal blow against al-Qaeda's leadership and breaking the Pakistani-based extremist networks that sustain the war in Afghanistan....But the weakness of Pakistan's elected government—backed into a corner by weekend demonstrations that left its political opposition strengthened—has called into question one of the basic pillars of that plan."<sup>32</sup>

Those "holes in the middle" in turn point to the superficial nature, and ultimately the weakness, of the Obama plan. Not trusting Zardari to oversee either the military campaign or the programme of economic development, the US began talks with former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif; while Sharif, deposed by the Musharraf coup of 1999, had been seen as too "Islamist" in his politics by Washington, now he was the alternative to the ineffective President.<sup>33</sup> The promises of economic advance were eclipsed by political worries: "[The situation] had gotten significantly worse than I expected as the Swat deal [with local tribes] unravelled," said Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>34</sup>

Within six weeks, those assurances of the non-military dimension have been eclipsed or have fallen by the wayside. Washington pressed Zardari to abrogate the Swat Valley agreements with local tribes, and when the Taliban responded by expanding operations beyond the northwest, the Pakistani military launched an offensive which continues as I write.<sup>35</sup> So far from "growing" the economy and social services, at the time of writing the US-backed drive on the safe havens has generated up to one million refugees, out of a local population of 1.3 million, in and beyond the Swat Valley.

Meanwhile, General Petraeus—having been initially rebuffed by Obama—is reasserting his conception of a military-first counter-insurgency in Afghanistan. Less than a week after Obama said, "What I will not do is to simply assume that more troops always result in an improved situation," Petraeus was putting forth the request for another 10,000 troops.<sup>36</sup> In early May, Petraeus pushed for the firing of General McKiernan and his replacement by General McChrystal, a Petraeus ally whose background is

<sup>31</sup> [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/KC07Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/KC07Df01.html); <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/18/the-us-and-pakistan-bye-bye-president-zardari-but-hello-to-whom/>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/16/AR2009031603254.html>

<sup>33</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/03/bye-bye-zardari-washington-considers-the-political-alternative-in-pakistan/>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/01/AR2009050102824.html>

<sup>35</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/03/video-secretary-of-defense-gates-on-cnn-3-may/>; <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/05/video-admiral-mullen-briefing-on-pakistan-afghanistan-4-may/>

<sup>36</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/04/07/afghanistan-the-problem-of-military-led-development/>; <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/10/transcript-david-petraeus-on-fox-news-sunday/>

in Special Operations. He got this wish from the president.<sup>37</sup> The change came less than a week after US bombs killed more than 100 people in Farah province, the largest civilian death toll in a single incident since 2001.<sup>38</sup> In two major interviews with US broadcasters days later, Petraeus made no reference to non-military activities in Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup>

The irony is not that Obama's promise of a strategy led by politics rather than boots on the ground rings hollow, but that the military approach may be eclipsed by Afghan politics. Manoeuvring to strengthen his own position, Karzai has advocated talks with former foes. By May, his persistence was being met by cautious but clear welcome from former Taliban officials, and it may have even led to a cautious American embrace, as US officials were allegedly in discussions with a California-based representative of the former Afghan leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.<sup>40</sup>

There were still public warnings to Karzai, as in Secretary of State Clinton's testimony to a Senate hearing at the end of April: "With respect to the Government, its capacity, its problems providing services, its perception of being less than transparent, straightforward, honest: it's a problem, I'm not going to tell you it's not." This was followed by her omission of Karzai's name when she added, "Several members of the Cabinet are doing an excellent job."<sup>41</sup> On the day of the Afghan President's visit to Washington, *Washington Post* reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran resurrected the line, "Senior members of Obama's national security team say Karzai has not done enough to address the grave challenges facing his nation. They deem him to be a mercurial and vacillating chieftain who has tolerated corruption and failed to project his authority beyond the gates of Kabul."<sup>42</sup>

However, as Karzai visited President Obama in May, he did so with the assurances that he had struck political deals to lock down voting blocs, notably through the naming of his two Vice Presidential running mates, while potential threats had withdrawn from the electoral campaign.<sup>43</sup> So it was he who could take the high ground, lecturing the US about the civilian casualties of bombing: "It's the standard of morality that we are seeking which is also one that is being desired and spoken about in America."<sup>44</sup>



In an interview with *Newsweek* magazine, published in mid-May, President Obama was asked, "What's the hardest thing you have had to do?" He replied:

Order 17,000 additional troops into Afghanistan. There is a sobriety that comes with a decision

<sup>37</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/05/11/afghanistan.replacement/index.html>

<sup>38</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/06/tuesdays-mass-killing-in-afghanistan-us-military-begins-the-lying/>

<sup>39</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/10/transcript-david-petraeus-on-fox-news-sunday/>; PETRAEUS ON CNN

<sup>40</sup> [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/KD10Ak04.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/KD10Ak04.html)

<sup>41</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/01/aid-and-warning-clinton-backs-palestines-abbas-puts-afghanistans-karzai-on-notice/>

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/05/AR2009050504048.html?nav=hcmodule>

<sup>43</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/05/afghanistan-karzai-out-manoevres-the-united-states/>

<sup>44</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/10/video-and-transcript-pakistans-zardari-and-afghanistans-karzai-on-meet-the-press-10-may/>

like that because you have to expect that some of those young men and women are going to be harmed in the theater of war. And making sure that you have thought through every angle and have put together the best possible strategy, but still understanding that in a situation like Afghanistan the task is extraordinarily difficult and there are no guarantees; that makes it a very complicated and difficult decision.

Significantly, however, as Obama went through the narrative of the decision to increase military forces in Afghanistan, his lengthy reply did not address strategy. Instead, he offered empathy (“meeting with young men and women who’ve served, and their families, and the families of soldiers who never came back”) and context (“a recognition that the existing trajectory was not working, that the Taliban had made advances, that our presence in Afghanistan was declining in popularity, that the instability along the border region was destabilizing Pakistan as well”) before ending in a vague description of process and bureaucracy:

Once that strategic review had been completed, then I sat in a room with the principals and argued about it, and listened to various perspectives, saw a range of options in terms of how we could move forward; asked them to go back and rework their numbers and reconsider certain positions based on the fact that some of the questions I asked could not be answered. And when I finally felt that every approach—every possible approach—had been aired, that all the questions had either been answered or were unanswerable, at that point I had to make a decision and I did.<sup>45</sup>

Even at the level of tactics, Obama’s “decision” seems muddled. The Administration adopted the position of ostensibly supporting the Pakistani Government, while undermining its President. US officials told favoured journalists, “On some major security and intelligence issues, [Zardari] claimed no knowledge or sought to shift blame to others, and the overall impression was of an accidental president who still has an uncertain grasp on power.”<sup>46</sup>

Obama himself blasted the civilian leadership, to the point where he threatened overruling them:

I am gravely concerned about the situation in Pakistan....The civilian government there right now is very fragile and don’t [sic] seem to have the capacity to deliver basic services: schools, health care, rule of law, a judicial system that works for the majority of the people. We will provide them all of the cooperation that we can. We want to respect their sovereignty, but we also recognize that we have huge strategic interests, huge national security interests in making sure that Pakistan is stable and that you don’t end up having a nuclear-armed militant state.<sup>47</sup>

In May, President Zardari was on an extended tour outside Pakistan when the long-awaited (from

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<sup>45</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/id/197891/page/1>

<sup>46</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/04/20/pakistan-whos-in-charge-clue-from-washington-general-kiyani/>

<sup>47</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/04/30/obama-press-conference-nailing-torture-trashing-the-pakistani-government/>

Washington's viewpoint) military offensive against the Taliban was launched. The public face on the campaign was instead Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.<sup>48</sup>

In Afghanistan, the political machinations of the US government, far from getting the 'right' leadership, had merely strengthened the President it hoped to depose. Outside Kabul, the collateral damage of US air attacks alienated civilians, working to the advantage of insurgents. The replacement of the American commander in Afghanistan, far from promising a re-consideration with 'fresh eyes', offered the assurance that the military tactics—without any apparent consideration of their political counterpart—simply needed to be refined and "targeted". In their rhetoric, Obama officials, for all their invocations of "existential threat",<sup>49</sup> risked making Pakistan an (expendable) frontline in US homeland security. As one critic cogently assessed, "In short, it's not the responsibility of the Secretary of Defense to keep Pakistan stable, it is his responsibility to attack extremist safe havens in Pakistan in order to prevent a catastrophic terrorist attack against the US, Canada, or the European Union."<sup>50</sup>

On 19 May, Secretary of State Clinton, in the midst of announcing \$110 million in emergency aid (part of which, she hoped, would be donated by benevolent viewers), declared, "Our policy toward Pakistan over the last 30 years has been incoherent." She did not pause to consider the possible irony of coherence in her own statement: having initially promised aid for the "progress" and development of Pakistani communities, Clinton was now offering the money for their sacrifice, with because 2 million of them had been internally displaced by US-backed military operations.<sup>51</sup>

And perhaps she did not need to pause for consideration. The geographic focus of the Obama Administration may differ from that of its predecessor, but its rhetoric of the battle against al Qaeda and extremists, transcending the reality of the local situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, holds forth Marilyn Young's notion of the "limited unlimited war".<sup>52</sup> In such a war, the strategic ends of not only a military "victory" for US forces, but also political, economic, and social resolution for the populaces in those countries, are peripheral; the ongoing battle is an end in itself. 'War' and 'national security' take over, rationalised by a permanent fear.<sup>53</sup>

Which is why, when asked in the *Newsweek* interview, "Can anything get you ready to be a war president?", Obama could reduce "strategic issues" to an 18-word question:

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/07/AR2009050703130.html>

<sup>49</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/04/23/text-hillary-clinton-remarks-to-house-foreign-affairs-committee-22-april-2009/>

<sup>50</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/03/mr-obamas-doctrine-josh-mull-on-us-grand-strategy-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan/>

<sup>51</sup> <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/20/that-us-strategy-in-pakistan-a-bit-of-money-for-two-million-refugees/>

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.libertas.bham.ac.uk/analysis/YOUNG.MP3>

<sup>53</sup> As I was finishing this paragraph, I was sent a blog by Steve Coll which, in support of continued US airstrikes in Pakistan, set forth "permanent fear" more eloquently than I could ever hope to:

"Suppose the following: Obama overrules his generals and intelligence advisers and ends the drone attacks immediately because of some generalized intuition that the attacks are destabilizing Pakistan. His generals write memos arguing that he is wrong to do so. Six weeks later, a manic-depressive Pakistani-American living in New York City, who happened to visit his cousins in Karachi earlier this year, decides on his own volition to walk into a New Jersey shopping mall with an automatic rifle and kills a dozen shoppers. The advisers opposed to Obama's drone decision leak their memos; the Republican Party follows the path Cheney has blazed and opens a years-long campaign against Obama on the grounds that he and the Democrats are weak, defeatist, etc. Perhaps Obama, with his extraordinary political and rhetorical skills, could overcome such a campaign. But it is easy to imagine why he might wish to avoid the risk." [<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/stevecoll/>]

I think that it certainly helps to know the broader strategic issues involved. I think that's more important than understanding the tactics involved....The president has to make a decision: will the application of military force in this circumstance meet the broader national-security goals of the United States?<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/id/197891/page/1>

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

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## **“THERE MUST BE TWO AMERICAS”: OBAMA’S AFPAK WAR AND THE PATHOLOGIES OF GLOBAL DISORDER**

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by Andrew M. Johnston, Carleton University

The world is full of ironies. Barack Obama came to power at least in part because of his opposition to his country’s post-9/11 foreign policy. He now finds himself defending and expanding the chaotic and possibly counterproductive presence of the United States in central Asia. There were signs of this coming, but Obama’s musings during the 2008 presidential campaign about expanding the Afghan war could have been read as an effort to protect his right flank from charges of “softness” while capitalizing on discontent with the Iraq War. The latter was seen by a growing majority of Americans as not only a distraction from the real target (al Qaeda) but also a war fought under blatantly false pretenses. Focusing on Afghanistan allowed the Democrats to show their requisite manliness *and* fault the Bush administration for missing the point of 9/11.

It turns out that Obama wasn’t just posturing. There were compelling strategic reasons to shift America’s attention away from Iraq toward the much more complex and potentially dangerous arc of central and south Asia. The administration unveiled its “AfPak” policy on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009, acknowledging that not only was stabilization impossible in Afghanistan without an equally stable and cooperative Pakistan, but that al Qaeda had moved into Pakistan’s Taliban-dominated Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and even North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Swat valley, out of the range of NATO’s military and into the ambivalent face of Pakistan security forces who have both opposed and cultivated radical Islamic elements as needed. There is, in effect, a transborder Taliban—Pakistani and ex-Afghan Pashtuns along with other Punjabi “extremists” who are increasingly dominating the NWFP, although the extent to which they represent what Secretary Clinton calls an “existential threat” to Pakistan’s integrity remains unclear.<sup>1</sup>

At home, AfPak was well-received by the American intelligentsia, even applauded by conservatives, who cheered what the new policy seemed to imply: that Obama conceded the Bush administration’s Iraq War surge worked and could be replicated in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> This was the first premise on which the new policy was ostensibly predicated, although not quite to the degree its neoconservative supporters imagined, since the expansion of American forces in Afghanistan is too modest to achieve anything like a military “victory”. Instead, AfPak has moderated US objectives, striking pragmatic tones consistent with the prosaic grittiness of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, the very man who helped Reagan arm the Mujahedin in equally prosaic terms in the 1980s. Gone is the rhetoric of democratic transformation and

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<sup>1</sup> The outlines of the new policy can be found in “White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group’s Report on US Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan,” March 27, 2009, printed in the *New York Times*.

<sup>2</sup> Abe Greenwald, “The lessons of Iraq applied,” *Commentary*, March 27, 2009; Max Boot, “A new counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,” *Commentarymagazine.com*; “‘All Hail Obama’—Obama’s Afghan Strategy—Wins Neo-conservative Plaudits,” *The Spectator*, March 27, 2009; See coverage of press reaction in Eric Etheridge, “The plan for Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2009.

in its place are a series of strategic benchmarks and commitments to economic and civil infrastructure development.<sup>3</sup> The latter are long overdue, of course, and the vocal multilateralism from Washington might undercut the regional (and global) perception that the United States too often pursues its narrow interests at the expense of local clients. But whether outside forces can reverse the economic and civic collapse of the region, and renovate both states without seeming to dominate them remains an open question. The ratcheting down of goals and rhetoric is also politically telling, an admission that the Bush administration's vision was an almost autistic telling of some domestic narrative of hubris and self-assurance that had no relevance on the ground in central Asia. It also sounds like the final days of the Vietnam War, perhaps even a confession that the object now is merely not to lose.

The other AfPak premise drawn from the Iraq War is that Taliban on both sides of the old British imperial frontier known as the Durand line can be parsed into moderate and radical, reconcilable and irreconcilable, elements. Unquestionably Taliban suicide attacks in Pakistan have cost them support, but these potential gains have been offset by civilian casualties inflicted by US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, and by the clumsy government military offensive into the Swat valley. The deeper question, though, is whether Iraq offers the guidance expected by the administration. Aside from the more complicated ethnic terrain in "Pashtunistan," with which parallels may be difficult, the US achieved a form of stability in Iraq by, among other things, massively aiding former Baathist, Sunni paramilitary (the 100,000 strong Sunni Awakening Movement) who have been unusually effective at attacking al Qaeda but now threaten the nominal Shiite government of Nouri al-Maliki. The result has been a three-way consolidation of Sunni, Shiite and Kurd forces in Iraq with little integration into a single nation. Both Shiite and Sunni forces appear to be waiting for the US to withdraw before resuming their civil war. Neither, in any case, is much interested in American liberal democracy.<sup>4</sup> Only the Kurds remain consistently pro-Western. Even if such a similar truce could be brokered across the Afghan-Pakistan border, there's no reason to believe it would hold without a series of other conditions far more intractable being put in place.

Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid sides with the pessimists here, claiming not merely that his homeland is teetering on the brink of collapse, but that it's all been a function of the Bush administration's post-9/11 intervention in the region: "the US-led war on terrorism has left in its wake a far more unstable world than existed on that momentous day in 2001."<sup>5</sup> The attribution of this crisis to the US is not surprising. There's been a systematic failure in the United States (and Canada for that matter) to take seriously the *causes* of anti-American discontent in the Muslim world because the conflict has been structured in such intellectually and morally Manichean terms.<sup>6</sup> The result has been a policy of solipsistic heavy-handedness which, even if well-intentioned, has fed the fires of anger and discontent that threaten both Pakistan and Afghanistan from within. Rashid does, it is true, lay equal blame at the feet of the Pakistani army and Inter-services Intelligence Agency (ISI), both of whom have long defined

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Herold, "Obama's First 100 Days: The Afghan War is becoming America's War," *Global Research*, May 1, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Galbraith, "Is This a 'Victory'?" *The New York Review of Books*, October 23, 2008. See also Joshua Hammer, "Iraq: Before & After, and Now," *The New York Review of Books*, December 4, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York, 2008); "Pakistan on the brink" forthcoming in *The New York Review of Books*, June 11, 2009, in [http://www.ahmedrashid.com/wp-content/archives/pakistan/articles/pdf/Pakistan\\_on\\_the\\_Brink.pdf](http://www.ahmedrashid.com/wp-content/archives/pakistan/articles/pdf/Pakistan_on_the_Brink.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Melani McAlister, "A cultural history of the war without end," *Journal of American History* 89.2 (September 2002).

their country's security in terms of encouraging Muslim militants in Kashmir and supporting Taliban in Afghanistan. The jihadis are seen as a cost-effective way of keeping foreign powers—including most of all, India—away from Pakistan's frontiers.<sup>7</sup>

The double bind for Washington is undoubtedly a product of America's expansive vision of national security, etched through a century of global interventions which, like Graham Greene's Alden Pyle, are often filled with "worldly innocence"—they do not mean to hurt but often do. It is not that the United States is *always* innocent; greed and mendacity have been at work in carving US foreign policy as they have elsewhere. But it may well be the profession of innocence—the true belief in the promise of "America" as global exemplar—that is most dangerous because it's so bad at understanding its own limits and recognizing when it crosses into willful, blind, counterproductivity. Listening to Dick Cheney defend the malevolence that guided his own hand in Iraq only leaves us wondering: is it worse if he really believes what he says?

But the alternative—a realism in which the United States remains poised to defend the single teleology of world history it represents, but is restrained in its application of power—seems hardly more plausible. Anatol Leiven of the New America Foundation has argued that the US can do more harm than good by meddling too much because it remains wildly unpopular in this part of the world—a lesson propounded in the pages of *The National Interest*, and in Leiven's articulation of a foreign policy he calls "ethical realism".<sup>8</sup> He argues that excessive American intervention will only weaken civil society and support for the "ruling class" in Pakistan which is, in his view, still holding on against the Islamist militants and insurgents. Leiven concedes that no lasting solution to Afghanistan can occur without Pakistan's help; other diplomats opine (and Richard Holbrooke's presence confirms this) that no lasting political solution is possible without negotiating with Taliban. The "dream of splitting the Taliban" may be just that, or it may be the essence of sound diplomacy. But either way, it will not sit well with those who measure success in the region in terms of regime change. It's not at all clear that Canadians and Americans can easily tolerate the persistence of repellent regimes when they have for so long been urged

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<sup>7</sup> India's interest in Afghanistan rests on a number of pillars, ranging from a desire for access to central Asian oil to using Afghanistan as a counterweight to Pakistan. Islamabad has likewise seen Afghanistan as part of its strategic sphere of interest in the event of a war with India. This suspicion of Indian intentions in Afghanistan lies in part at the heart of Pakistan's ambivalence toward the Taliban. See Jayshree Bajoria, "India-Afghanistan relations," Council of Foreign Relations backgrounder, October 23, 2008; Raja Karthikeya Gundu and Teresita C. Schaffer, "India and Pakistan in Afghanistan: Hostile Sports," *South Asia Monitor*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 3, 2008; "The next chapter: the United States and Pakistan," Report of the Pakistan Policy Working Group, September 2008. Note that this working group is sponsored by former US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, the man Musharraf claimed threatened Pakistan in the wake of 9/11, and the man linked to the Valerie Plame leak. Another sponsor is Dyncorp International, a military contractor with a controversial track record in Columbia, Iraq, and Bosnia.

<sup>8</sup> Anatol Leiven, "Do no harm," *The National Interest*, March/April 2008, 16-20; Anatol Leiven and John Hullsman, *Ethical realism: a vision for America's role in the world*, (Pantheon, 2006).

to fight on the high moral ground of making the world safe for liberal democracy.<sup>9</sup> The gap between public rationale (required, for all its rhetorical excess, to get at least part of the *vox populi* behind an overseas war) and material interest remains problematic. But even Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has finally and reluctantly conceded what his critics said long ago: the war against the insurgency probably can't be "won". What then, the families of dead soldiers would say, has been the point?

All of this shouldn't come as news to anyone who has studied American globalism—had the name of William A. Williams not been tarred by the politics of the Cold War in the American academy, we ought to have known long ago that the US has never been able to intervene in the name of self-determination without undermining its own moral and strategic position in the societies it liberates. As Mark Twain famously said of the Philippines: "There must be two Americas: one that sets the captive free, and one that takes a once-captive's new freedom away from him."<sup>10</sup> A host of books (Lawrence Freedman's *A Choice of Enemies* or Robert Jackson and Philip Towle's *Temptations of Power* for instance) have found at the core of America's Middle East and central Asian dilemma not simply naiveté, contradictory objectives or incompetence (what country's diplomacy has avoided these?) but "the superpower's belief that inconvenient realities on the ground can be brushed aside because its own power and influence will determine the outcome."<sup>11</sup> It's this underlying assumption of omnipotence that drives American globalism into a bewildering array of Catch-22s: toppling Iran's government to control oil and keep the Soviets out; arming Iran and bolstering its unpopular government; arming Iraq to fight revolutionary Iran; arming Afghanistan fundamentalists to fight the Soviets; courting the Russians to help fight Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan; arming Pakistan to balance Soviet ally India; worrying about Pakistan's

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<sup>9</sup> I am not the only one to notice the irony in the way that conservatives in the West hold up the treatment of women by Taliban fundamentalists as the litmus test of the conflict's higher moral purpose. That those in the West *least* interested in gender equality at home are more sensitive to it abroad may make some psychological sense to someone, but it's also transparently manipulative. The Taliban wasn't mentioned in the pages of *Commentary*, for instance, until 1998, and not again until after 9/11. More interestingly, the new martial spirit displayed by Canadian and American conservatives in the wake of 9/11 places the defence of Islamic women in very traditional terms. In its most basic form, feminist theorists have seen the war as further evidence of the close relationship between gender constructions and war, as both sides expressed curious symmetry in their passion for equating their cause with the warrior spirit of men. In a sense, they are echoing Zizek's argument that the two sides are not really opposed: that the "choice between Bush and Bin Laden is not our choice; they are both 'Them' against 'Us'." Although Jean Bethke Elshtain came out with a surprisingly anodyne tribute to the principles of just war and the burdens of empire, others have seen 9/11 and the US war against terrorism in terms of the *shared* gender discourses of the Islamic terrorists and those Americans, from Francis Fukuyama to James Kurth, who feared the feminization of American culture in the 1990s, and welcomed the return of the nation's fighting spirit after 9/11. J. Ann Tickner quotes George Patton's claim that "war gives purpose to life," as a view increasingly resonant within the dominant American mood after 9/11, and that such a sense of national purpose is more clearly expressed in the actions and desires of men. Women who had been visible in the military and emergency services of the nation prior to September 11 increasingly became invisible. The only place where they were seen was as victims of Taliban oppression, veiled women whose deplorable condition was to be saved by American military power. See Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the desert of the real* (Verso, 2002), 51; Elshtain, "How to fight a just war," in Booth and Dunne eds., *Worlds in collision* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 263-269; Francis Fukuyama, "Women and the evolution of world politics," *Foreign Affairs* 77, 5 (1998), 24-40; James Kurth, "The real clash," *The National Interest*, 37 (Fall 1994), 3-15. Similar ideas were mentioned, if I recall correctly, by Margaret Wente in the pages of *The Globe and Mail*, in which she thanked heaven that a tough man like George Bush was in the White House instead of the sensitive model of masculinity she apparently found in Clinton and Gore. Sarah Wildman also attacked feminists for not responding more patriotically to the war, thus losing a chance to break out of feminist-pacifist dogma. Wildman, "Arms length: why don't feminists support the war?" *The New Republic*, November 5, 2001, 23.

<sup>10</sup> "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," from a 1901 Anti-Imperialist League publication, reprinted in Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Bell's review of Freedman in *International Journal* (Autumn 2008).

influence in Afghanistan driven—in part—by its fear of India; urging communist China to influence Pakistan. And so on.

The contradiction here is between instantiating American security in the world based on a single ethico-political worldview, *and at the same time* promoting the belief that national interests can only be determined by local conditions. For Pakistan the political price for its support of the US in Afghanistan will be the permanent influence of Pakistan in Kabul, not simply because this is historically perceived to be Pakistan's sphere of influence, but to offset growing Indian (and possibly Russian) influence, especially among their allies in the Northern Alliance. And yet as Obama seeks to internationalize the AfPak conflict by drawing regional and global partners into the mix, he ironically runs the risk of provoking the insecurity that drove Pakistan to depend so heavily on Taliban elements along its frontiers in the first place. The point is that there can be no Afghanistan solution without a comprehensive improvement in Indian-Pakistan relations, which is itself impossible without Russia and, most importantly, China.

Historically Pakistan's most reliable ally, China probably commands more influence in Islamabad than most, but faces a series of intractable options (one China expert referred to Pakistan as China's Israel): it fears a loss of access to the energy corridor linking China to the Gulf, and the possibility that nuclear weapons (that it helped build) might fall into the hands of militants. In other words, it unquestionably shares with the West an interest in preventing Pakistan's collapse. But close cooperation with the US might jeopardize Beijing's influence with the Pakistani elite; and front-line military cooperation would raise the prospect of inflaming militant Islamic forces inside China and along other parts of its frontier. Beijing is suspicious of both Indian and—in some Chinese circles—American long-term intentions, namely the prospect of a permanent US presence around China's frontier. In the words of one analyst, China "may not want the West to fail in Afghanistan but it is far from sure that it wants too convincing a success either." Its "special relationship" with Islamabad might actually be more effective alone than in the context of AfPak multilateralism.<sup>12</sup>

In this heady mix of great-power-rivalry and the violent mosaic of the "Pashtunistan" borderlands, Canada is a minor player at best. That said, the war in Afghanistan is the one foreign policy issue most likely to accentuate latent regional and ideological divisions that afflict the country. Canada has been shouldering a disproportionately large military burden in Afghanistan, especially since 2005 when it assumed command of the dangerous, Taliban-dominated region around Kandahar. Its mission is scheduled to end in 2011, a promise the Liberal Party extracted from the Conservative minority government no doubt because Prime Minister Stephen Harper knew that the deadline would be faced by a new government anyway—and if it were a Conservative majority, then the deadline could be ignored. Canada's involvement in Afghanistan began under the Liberals in the wake of 9/11, and was, at the time, widely supported as part of the nation's participation in NATO and shared opposition to al Qaeda. The heightened military burden and growing list of casualties has led to increased demands for NATO support of the Canadian mission. In this respect, Obama's AfPak policy has been welcomed in Ottawa as recognition of the important job Canada has been doing. The administration's new multilateralism also fits better with Canadian foreign policy traditions, and has made the Harper government's domestic defense of the Afghan mission considerably easier.

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Small, "China's AfPak moment," Policy Brief, May 20, 2009, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington, DC; Paul Richter, "US appeals to China to help stabilize Pakistan," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2009.

For Canadians, though, the Afghanistan War is more important for another reason. It has assumed a serious internal dimension that might be lost to anyone outside the country. Backed by some elements in the Canadian military, the Conservative Party has been keen to reverse a self-image many Canadians have that their armed forces are primarily for peacekeeping. Along with some prominent Canadian intellectuals (notably nationalist historian Jack Granatstein), the Conservatives have been using the Afghan mission to revive what they call Canada's "warrior image".<sup>13</sup> The war, in other words, is part of a wider campaign to alter Canada's global image and strategic culture writ large, to reverse what conservative Canadians see as an emasculation of a once proud military tradition, and to align the country more closely with the United States. The policy reflects the ascendancy of the Alberta wing of Canadian conservatism, widely self-labeled as "pro-American" and free trade. The implicit target is the alleged influence exerted by a more anti-militarist Québec on Canadian national policy over the last 30 years. Canada, conservatives argue, became too devoted to soft power, and too keen to argue sanctimoniously with its number one trading partner to the south. Harper and his allies had wanted the country to participate in the Iraq War too, but that decision fell to liberal Prime Minister (and Québecer) Jean Chrétien. The current Liberal leader, Michael Ignatieff, had, of course, supported the Iraq War when he was a public intellectual outside the country but his party's position, needing to distance itself from the Conservatives', is more ambivalent precisely because winning a Parliamentary majority depends on finding policies that bridge these regional divisions. As Québec remains politically important, anti-militarism is hard to dislodge from the nation's strategic culture.

Sociologists have long debated the effect of regionalism on the policy culture of the country. The ideological chasm between Alberta and Québec is often exaggerated but it is measurable: Québec is the least supportive of the war effort and Alberta the most, although a majority in both provinces approved the initial decision in 2001.<sup>14</sup> The growing human cost makes the Canadian public reluctant to end its engagement with Afghanistan (only the left-leaning NDP and the separatist Bloc Québécois openly urge full withdrawal) without some substantial sense of accomplishment, or that the mission is consistent with developmental ideals. That said, as the body count grows (it currently stands at 118) support for the war is slowly slipping, whatever the perceived virtues of Obama's new orientation.<sup>15</sup>

The point is that the merits of the war itself—whether it is winnable in any sense that the public or military might understand the term, whether any party understands the internal politics of Pakistan—enters into the debate only as a weapon in the battle to define Canada's new global identity. Those who defend the virtues of a new martial spirit—and my sense is that, as in the United States, the appeal here is largely cultural and internal to the ideological wars conservative Canadians are waging against liberal secularism and feminism—fall into line with any hope that AfPak offers. Alexander Moens, for example, has written: "For NATO member countries, including Canada, this objective means providing enough military strength on the ground until insurgents and ethnic factions realize that the movement towards a stable central government in Kabul is irreversible. The daunting challenge of subsuming the political

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Foot, "Mission changes Canada's modern image of itself," *National Post*, 9 April 2007, 8; see also Alexander Moens, "Afghanistan and the revolution in Canadian foreign policy," *International Journal* (Summer 2008), 569-586.

<sup>14</sup> Justin Massie, "Regional strategic subcultures: Canadian and the use of force in Afghanistan," *Canadian Foreign Policy* (spring 2008), 19-48.

<sup>15</sup> **Editor's note:** at the time of copy-editing, the body count had grown to 129.

culture of warlords and tribal leaders into democratic institutions, including police and army, may require negotiations with moderate Taliban factions, if any emerge.”<sup>16</sup> Canadian supporters of the Afghan war thus cling to the same dreams and contradictions that animate Obama’s new policy. The suggestion that political factions might be dissuaded from pursuing their causes in the face of Western force, and without a profound and rapid rebuilding of their economies, is perhaps the most historically naïve position one *could* take. I hesitate to glibly revive the specter of Vietnam (or Algeria), but the 20<sup>th</sup> century offers few examples of states whose identity is so indelibly linked to colonial and imperial histories successfully staunching indigenous resistance to their ideological desires.

And it’s not that such indigenous democratic or feminist liberation is impossible in the region. The deeper challenge for progressive elements in the West is to support those who are globally repressed by fundamentalist religions and cultures without falling into Orientalist traps. Our response must be to try to step outside the universalism/relativism dichotomy to argue for what Yuval-Davis calls “transversal politics,” or the politics of “mutual support.” Women and democrats must form transnational, non-state coalitions across borders to provide oppressed people with an opportunity to advocate for better conditions without necessarily being accused of failing to represent their “authentic” culture.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, we might all take hope in Obama’s historic speech in Cairo on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, a speech that, while inevitably failing to satisfy the divergent demands of a deeply conflicted region, struck Jordanian observer Mustafa Hamarneh as “very unlike the neocolonial and condescending approach of the previous administration.” That, in the end, might be more than anything AfPak can do.

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<sup>16</sup> Moens, “Afghanistan and the revolution in Canadian foreign policy,” 584.

<sup>17</sup> Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997); Vuola, “Remaking universals? Transnational feminism(s) challenging fundamentalist ecumenism,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 19, 1-2 (February-April 2002), 175-196.

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

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## THE LESSONS OF THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE

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by Artemy Kalinovsky, London School of Economics

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 made a number of senior Soviet officials uneasy. Many saw the dangers of the intervention turning into a long-term occupation, with Soviet troops fighting Afghan villagers-turned combatants. Others, particularly diplomats who had devoted the previous decade to developing *détente* with the United States, were worried about the international reaction and the long-term damage to US-Soviet relations. When Mikhail Kapitsa, a deputy foreign minister, pointed out to his superior Andrei Gromyko that three invasions by British forces had failed, the latter, a supporter of the Soviet decision to intervene, asked sharply “Are you comparing our internationalist forces to those of the British imperialists?” Kapitsa simply responded, “No, the troops are different. But the mountains are the same.”

The story, related to me by a scholar who interviewed Kapitsa in the early 1990s, is a good illustration not only of the difficulty of raising effective criticism within the USSR against the war at the time of the invasion, but also of finding historical parallels that could be useful to policymakers. Kapitsa was right that Soviet troops would face some of the same difficulties that had confounded British troops in the nineteenth century, but Gromyko’s initial enquiry highlights an important shift in the ideological circumstances surrounding the invasion by the late twentieth century.

US officials have thus far largely avoided drawing any comparison between their own experience in Afghanistan and that of the USSR. There are two likely explanations for this reticence: first, the Soviet intervention is largely seen as a failure, and second, the US role in that conflict was far from benign and indeed contributed to the chaos that enveloped Afghanistan in the 1990s. Indirectly, then, it can be linked to the rise of the Taliban and 9/11. Most importantly, the US sees its involvement as being fundamentally different from that of the USSR; it is spreading ‘democracy’ where the Soviet Union was fighting for the spread of ‘communism’, and doing it with better-trained and better-equipped troops. Despite the many differences between the two interventions, however, it would be wise for the Obama administration to consider some aspects of the Soviet experience as it undertakes to effect a major shift in policy toward the region.

Like Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader who came to power in 1985, the Obama administration has inherited a mismanaged war and wants to bring the situation under control. In Afghanistan, it faces a growing insurgency that undermines efforts at state-building, widespread corruption, and a rapidly-destabilising neighbour in Pakistan. There are several areas where the Soviet experience could provide useful lessons.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For examples from the Soviet experience I have drawn on my own research into the topic. See Artemy Kalinovsky “Soviet Decision-making during the War in Afghanistan, from Intervention to Withdrawal.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2009) and “Politics, Diplomacy and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: From National Reconciliation to the Geneva Accords,” *Cold War History* 8:3 (August 2008), 381-404. See also Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan, 1978-1992* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000)

First, there is the need to establish legitimate government. The Obama administration is reportedly disappointed in Hamid Karzai and may not support him for another term as president. He is seen as too weak to challenge regional warlords and all too willing to turn a blind eye to corruption within his own government. Moscow faced a similar situation in 1985-86. Having decided to embark on a major change of course in the war, Soviet leaders found that Babrak Karmal, the leader who they installed in December 1979, was similarly too weak and willing to overlook corruption. Replacing him with Mohammed Najibullah, former head of the Afghan police, took nearly a year, and the operation carried its own complications. For all of his shortcomings, Karmal turned out to have many supporters within the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and a network of allies and clients that would not accept his removal from power.

This begs the question; does the US have a replacement in mind for Karzai? Similarly, what happens if, after Karzai is gone, many of his influential supporters are hostile to the new leader? There is another, broader question; what will define the US/NATO relationship with Afghan authorities in the coming years? US officials have already reportedly begun to work directly with Afghan ministers and provincial governors in the hope of improving governance, security, and the delivery of essential services.<sup>2</sup> While all three elements are essential for successful counter-insurgency, bypassing the presidency can have the effect of contributing to centrifugal forces, undermining the legitimacy of the office of President and, more generally, Kabul's hold on the provinces.

The desire to finally establish a strong government in Kabul was one of the reasons that, in 1987, Moscow adopted a strategy opposite to the one being pursued currently by the US and NATO. Rather than increasing the presence of Soviet officials working with ministers and authorities in the provinces, Moscow withdrew most of its non-military advisers. It rejected any challenges to Najibullah's authority and sought to demonstrate his independence. The policy had a number of drawbacks, including limiting Moscow's influence within Afghanistan, but it allowed Najibullah to consolidate his power within the PDPA and to hold on to the country without Soviet troops (but with massive Soviet material support), until after the USSR itself collapsed.

More broadly, the non-military aspects of the Soviet counter-insurgency effort hold a number of cautionary tales for US and NATO efforts. Recognizing that the war against the *mujahadeen* could not be won by military means alone, Moscow sent thousands of technical and political advisers to help improve governance, establish enterprises, and modernize agriculture. These efforts were expected to help increase the government's legitimacy and win over villagers who might otherwise support the insurgents. While well-intentioned and perfectly rational/logical from a counter-insurgency perspective, the effort suffered from a number of problems. Many of the advisers and specialists sent to Afghanistan were unprepared for the work that they were sent to do. Cultural differences led to complications at both local and regional level. Lack of coordination combined with inter-service rivalry meant that aid promised to villagers often did not reach its intended destination. Since it was the advisers themselves who were responsible for reporting on the progress of their efforts, the perceptions formed in Moscow were often far rosier than warranted.

This situation may sound familiar in light of recent US and allied experiences in Afghanistan. The

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<sup>2</sup> "An 'AfPak' About-Face for Obama" *Washington Post*, May 10, 2009; "Administration Is Keeping Ally at Arm's Length" *Washington Post*, May 6, 2009

white paper on Afghanistan and Pakistan released on March 30 noted similar problems in aid and reconstruction since the toppling of the Taliban. US and international assistance efforts, the white paper said, suffered from being “ill organized” and “under-resourced” and in most cases had not been subjected to impact studies. Nevertheless, the paper advocates more of the same: more civilian aid from the US and its partners, the UN, and more NGO involvement. Again, as important as reconstruction efforts are, this approach has its own pitfalls. How will effective coordination be ensured with such a wide array of actors? Will their efforts actually give Afghans confidence in their own government or on the contrary highlight its inability to deliver basic services and lead reconstruction efforts? Would not channelling aid through Afghan government institutions and moving all foreign aid work behind the scenes do more to establish good governance practices and build up Kabul’s legitimacy?

There is also the security dilemma. Soviet leaders recognized that they would need to provide continued security for the reconstruction and aid efforts to be effective, as well as keeping villages and towns safe from *mujahedin* attacks. Yet they never committed the number of troops necessary to do this, recognizing that a larger troop presence would invite even more criticism from Western countries, possibly increase tensions with the local population, and ultimately be harder to sustain domestically. Their reliance on air support—itself a result of the shortage of boots on the ground—led to high civilian casualties.

The Obama administration faces similar choices. Reconstruction and development aid is ineffective without security, but providing effective security in the context of the growing Taliban insurgency may require many more troops than the 30,000 already committed by the Obama administration. Increasing that number, or relying on air power (as it is doing in Pakistan), will continue to cause civilian deaths and inflame anti-American feeling. Although US and NATO forces have had some success in training the Afghan National Army, it is still not capable of providing security on its own. At the same time, the Afghan police force and judiciary are notoriously corrupt and ineffective.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, there is the question surrounding the exit strategy. The crux of Moscow’s exit strategy was to support a strong Pushtun leader (Najibullah) and allow him to use Soviet resources to build up personal power (including a presidential guard) and subsidize tribal militias. At the same time, Moscow continued active negotiations with parties supporting the *mujahadeen* resistance, particularly the US and Pakistan, in the hope of convincing them to cut off supplies in return for Moscow’s support of a government that included former opposition fighters. As noted above, the strategy allowed Najibullah to hold on to power, but it did virtually nothing to stop the civil war. The *mujahedin* saw it as a matter of time before Najibullah fell and continued to fight using US- and Pakistani-supplied weapons.

A recent study by the International Crisis Group urges the Obama administration to avoid such a course, which they labelled ‘Find the Right Pashtun’. The study points out that ‘Putting in power a tough Pashtun leader to rule with an iron fist would inflame ethnic tensions within Afghanistan, reignite a proxy war among regional powers and return the country to an even worse cycle of violence.’ It also argues against arming villagers, since this could create unaccountable militias that will only ‘worsen ethnic tensions and violence’.<sup>4</sup>

The ICG’s concerns, in this author’s view, are well justified. In fact, the consequences of these

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<sup>3</sup> “Policing in Afghanistan: Still Searching for a Strategy” *ICG Asia Briefing N°85*, 18 December 2008.

<sup>4</sup> “Afghanistan: New US administration, new directions” *ICG Asia Briefing 89* March 2009.

possible approaches were evident when Moscow adopted both policies after it began pulling out its troops in 1988. Moscow's decision to unconditionally back Najibullah (endorsed by the KGB, but opposed by some in the military) made it virtually impossible to reach an accommodation with Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Tajik commander who had emerged as one of the leading figures of the opposition. The militias were dependent on subsidies from Kabul, which meant that they were dependent on subsidies from Moscow. As the Soviet economy collapsed in 1990 and 1991 these subsidies dried up, as did the loyalty of the militias. More importantly, the approach did little or nothing to strengthen the kind of institutions that might have brought stability to Afghanistan. The Afghanistan of 1989-92 was a sort of 'zombie state'—alive as long as money kept flowing from outside, but stalemated with regard to the myriad of challenges it faced.

Any emerging US strategy will have to balance the need to establish broader institutions and the need to develop stronger executive power in Kabul.<sup>5</sup> Such a strategy will inevitably take a longer term commitment on the part of the Obama administration and its partners. Yet the US president faces much greater domestic pressures than Gorbachev did in the years before he withdrew troops. Already some Democrats in Congress are threatening to put pressure on the administration if it does not start winding down the war within a year. David R. Obey, a Democrat from Wisconsin, told the *New York Times*, "The problem is not the administration's policy or its goals. The problem is that I doubt that we have the tools there that we need to implement virtually any policy in that region."<sup>6</sup>

Obama's challenge is both more difficult and easier than Gorbachev's was in finding stability in Afghanistan. Gorbachev had to deal with the US supplying arms to the *mujahedin*, a sceptical and often hostile Pakistan, as well as, after 1989, a disintegrating Soviet Union. Obama, if all goes well, can hope for a cooperative Russia and even Iran, while Islamabad will likely continue to be supportive of US efforts. But he will also have to solve the problem of opium production, a disintegrating Pakistan, and a restless Congress that will chafe at supporting anything that seems like an open-ended commitment.

Clearly the Obama administration has much to do and not very much time to do it—looking carefully at the Soviet experience could be of great help in reassessing options and shaping strategy.

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<sup>5</sup> See the discussion of Obama's options in a recent paper from the Council of Foreign Relations: Daniel Markey "From AfPak to PakAf: A Response to the New U.S. Strategy for South Asia" CFR Policy Options Paper, April 2009.

<sup>6</sup> "For Democrats, Unease Grows Over National Security Policy" *New York Times*, May 14, 2009.

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## THERE IS NO MORE OUTSIDE

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by Giles Scott-Smith, University of Leiden

In their magnum opus entitled *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri sketch a vision of a postmodern, supranational global space in which national sovereignty, the mainstay of the modern international system and understanding of political power, has effectively come to an end. There is no longer any clear inside and outside, and as a result Carl Schmidt's seminal friend-enemy distinction collapses as well.<sup>1</sup> Writing in 2000, the authors claimed that "today it is increasingly difficult for the ideologues of the United States to name a single, unified enemy; rather, there seem to be minor and elusive enemies everywhere." The removal of the dividing lines of national sovereignties has led to a "smooth space of Empire" where "there is no *place* of power—it is both everywhere and nowhere."<sup>2</sup>

Hardt and Negri's conception is highly relevant when placed in the context of South Asia today. Despite the release by the White House of the White Paper on US policy towards the region on 27 March 2009, there is a continuing debate—or disagreement—between the US military and Obama and Secretary of Defence Robert Gates over strategy and goals in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> It remains unclear what exactly could be termed 'success', let alone 'winning', in what has become the epicentre of the Pentagon's so-called Long War. The White Paper's AfPak strategy "attempts to walk a middle path between a narrow counterterror mission and a much more ambitious nation-building agenda," with all the tensions—administrative as well as practical—that come from trying to mix these two objectives.<sup>4</sup> As the *New York Times* reported on 14 May, 'success' could be no more than "to ensure Afghanistan is not a launching pad for attacks against the United States and its allies," regardless of the type of regime that may establish itself there.<sup>5</sup> Even then, could that goal be fully achieved?

The designation of the two countries as 'AfPak' in policy circles indicates that effectively their own sovereignty has disappeared—they have become no more than a strategic space to be fought over, between governmental departments and military commands before even the battlefield is reached, in the interests of US national security. The balance is fine, because to avoid an unending commitment of US forces and finances, credible local authorities need to be established. As the White Paper astutely declares:

The United States must overcome the 'trust deficit' it faces in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where many believe that we are not a reliable long-term partner. We must engage the Afghan people in ways that demonstrate our commitment to promoting a legitimate and capable Afghan government with economic progress. We must engage the Pakistani people based on our long-term commitment to helping them

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<sup>1</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1932]).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 189, 190.

<sup>3</sup> See 'White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on US Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan,' available at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/Afghanistan-Pakistan\\_White\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/Afghanistan-Pakistan_White_Paper.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Markey, 'From AfPak to PakAf: A Response to the New US Strategy for South Asia,' CFR Policy Options Paper, April 2009, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> C.J. Chivers, 'In Bleak Afghan Outpost, Troops Slog On,' *New York Times*, 14 May 2009.

build a stable economy, a stronger democracy, and a vibrant civil society.<sup>6</sup>

This is clearly taken from the effect of the ‘surge’ in Iraq, when in early 2007 General Petraeus established the US as a continuing player in Iraqi politics at a time when all expectations were on a swift withdrawal. Militarily the surge was of minimal significance, but psychologically its sense of commitment was “stunning”, involving as it did the manoeuvring of the Sunni community away from insurgency and towards a US-brokered political settlement.<sup>7</sup>

Is the current approach able to deliver a similar result in Afghanistan? The political situation is hardly comparable, with little chance of a stable coalition of different forces emerging, and US withdrawal being touted exactly as a *sine qua non* for insurgency leaders to come to the table.<sup>8</sup> In terms of US military strategy, however, other problems arise—not least those caused by the use of high technology. Counterinsurgency methods, required for fighting an armed civilian militia, have increasingly been adopted thanks to the influence of key strategists such as John Nagl, David Kilcullen, and Petraeus himself.<sup>9</sup> These kinds of efforts take time to build results. But alongside this “the United States appears to be accelerating the use of Predator (unmanned aerial drone) strikes against Taliban leadership in Pakistan.”<sup>10</sup> High-tech weaponry is the ultimate evidence for the US military-industrial complex that it possesses an unassailable superiority over its foes. Yet will not a reliance on these means trigger adverse effects?

### TECHNOLOGY: PROBLEM OR SOLUTION?

Last month the *New York Times* published an article that commented on the disparity between the ongoing, explicit revelations of torture conducted by the CIA after 9/11 and the general response to Predator drone attacks in Afghanistan that have caused civilian deaths.<sup>11</sup> Both are forms of violence conducted outside of the law, but while one is up front and very personal, the other is anonymous, distanced, and apparently beyond recrimination.

Since the mid-1990s a so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) has been taking place in the United States that has seen rapid advances in the development of robotics and the deployment of unmanned combat systems, the best examples being the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles or UAVs such as the Predator. Whereas the military leadership—particularly the US Air Force—were originally opposed to these developments because of their challenge to the human control of war, since 2001 there has been a dramatic expansion in procurement, so much so that in 2006 the Senate Armed Services Committee laid down the rule to the Pentagon that manned systems should only be acquired if the tasks set could not be fully covered by a robotic equivalent.<sup>12</sup> The morality of warfare is being tested by this development,

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<sup>6</sup> White Paper, op.cit.

<sup>7</sup> George Friedman, ‘The Strategic Debate over Afghanistan,’ 11 May 2009, Stratfor, available at [http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20090511\\_afghanistan\\_and\\_u\\_s\\_strategic\\_debate](http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20090511_afghanistan_and_u_s_strategic_debate)

<sup>8</sup> ‘US Pullout a Condition in Afghan Peace Talks,’ *New York Times*, 20 May 2009.

<sup>9</sup> See David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). In December 2006 the US Army published its first Counterinsurgency manual in twenty years, see <http://usacac.army.mil/cac/repository/materials/coin-fm3-24.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Markey, ‘From AfPak to PakAf,’ p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Scott Shane, ‘Torture versus War,’ *New York Times*, 19 April 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Singer, *Wired for War* (New York: Penguin, 2009), p. 65.

as author Peter Singer has pointed out. The main question is no longer the how but the who, if one thinks of the unfortunate carnage wrought by Predators in Afghanistan and Pakistan as “unmanned slaughter” and a form of unaccountable war crime.<sup>13</sup> Others have also pointed to the US military’s “unique strategic culture” whereby the application of force through high technology necessarily occurs outside of the constraints of international law.<sup>14</sup> Referring to the November 2002 assassination of six Al Qaeda “suspects” by a US drone in Yemen, Philip Bobbitt rightly states that “it is simply unclear at present what law applies, or indeed whether the ‘spatial’ notion of a zone outside the theatre of warfare makes any sense in a global war against terror.”<sup>15</sup> The problem is that Bobbitt considers these types of activity essential, because of the failures of the UN and “the current system’s inability to deal with global, international terrorism.”<sup>16</sup> The increasing reach of technological weaponry is bypassing the norms of the state system, but so far it hasn’t caused much of a response. Predators were exactly built to cross borders and violate sovereignty with impunity.

Singer has explored the direction that the Pentagon has been moving in technologically, and his conclusions are sobering. Technological superiority has become the be-all-and-end-all mantra of US military thinking since the 1990s RMA, despite strong counter-arguments that the US military will probably be facing fewer and fewer battlegrounds where this will deliver a clear advantage. But the most disturbing aspect of these developments is the fact that there is no overall doctrine as to how high-tech robotics, to give the most apposite example, should be applied within a war-making situation. The assumption is that they will simply make the existing doctrines easier to fulfil.<sup>17</sup> Yet, as Singer has pointed out, this does not work out so well when it comes to the ‘trust deficit’. In his lecture available on TED<sup>18</sup> Singer contrasts the views of a Pentagon officer with a Hezbollah member on how drone attacks are perceived. For the American, it is a clear sign of US military superiority and the ability to give a clear message that nowhere is safe if you pose a threat to US interests. For the Lebanese member of Hezbollah it is no more than proof of American cowardice and cold-heartedness, killing at will with apparent impunity, and therefore only encouraging attacks on US targets when the opportunity arises.

## THE OBAMA LIBERALS: SHIFTING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE LEGITIMATE

The ways in which high-tech weaponry transgresses boundaries on the micro-level (be they geographical or legal) fits with the more macro-level positions held by the many Liberal Interventionists who populate the Obama administration, keen to reinstate a “muscular liberalism” after the Bush years.<sup>19</sup> Just as 9/11 was used to justify the application of US power globally under the heading of a War on Terror, so too have we been in a similar reconfiguration period since 2006, but one where various interpreters of US foreign policy have looked to redefine and maintain some of the key changes of the Bush II years. In their eyes, Iraq demonstrated the problem of trying to work within the established framework of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Theo Farrell, ‘Strategic Culture and American Empire,’ *SAIS Review* 25 (2005), pp. 7-10.

<sup>15</sup> Philip Bobbitt, *Terror and Consent* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 455.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 454.

<sup>17</sup> Singer, pp. 210-212.

<sup>18</sup> See [http://www.ted.com/index.php/speakers/p\\_w\\_singer.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/speakers/p_w_singer.html)

<sup>19</sup> Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 185.

post-WW II institutional order—for the sake of US (and global) security, it is time to create a new order that can provide new sources of legitimacy. A major contribution to this trend was the Princeton Project on National Security that was published in September 2006 under the names of Anne-Marie Slaughter and John Ikenberry. The Princeton Project set out to take the essentials of Bush's national security doctrine, as represented in the Strategies of 2002 and 2006, redefine them, and embed them in new sources of legitimacy. As Parmar has remarked, the Princeton Project is a highly significant meeting-ground for neoconservatives on the Right and “a robust, crusading and theoretically confident liberal interventionism, built around a belief in the efficacy of ‘democratic peace’ and ‘democratic transition theory’.”<sup>20</sup> The US has a stake in the continuing functioning of the post-WW II institutions such as the UN. Yet even a reformed UN will never deliver the necessary results. The Project therefore proposes a Concert of Democracies, a loose value-based forum to “authorize collective action” and “strengthen security cooperation among the world's liberal democracies.”<sup>21</sup> With this power/legitimacy base secured—a formal value-based upgrade of the Coalition of the Willing that would look to claim a special status under international law—the broader goal of assisting the global spread of “Popular, Accountable, and Rights-regarding regimes” (PARs) can be sought.

Slaughter's new position as Director of Policy Planning in Clinton's State Department of course gives the Princeton Project an extra edge. She distances herself from the Bush doctrine only in the sense of less willingness to use exclusively military force, a greater wish to connect with allies, and a belief that solutions can only come in the long term. The UN will not be disbanded, but neither are the expectations high that it can be reformed, and its continuing disfunctionality requires that it be bypassed when necessary in favour of new values-based alliances that can be activated, in the footsteps of George Bush, ‘at a time and a place of our choosing.’ This is essentially the culmination of a process that began with the US-led NATO attacks against Serbia in 1999, conducted without a UN mandate but for a ‘greater good’.

Slaughter will be fully supported in this cause by Ivo Daalder, recently confirmed as US Ambassador to NATO. In an article from 2006 entitled ‘The Future of Preemption’ Daalder, together with UTexas Professor and now Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, recognises the UN as the main source of international law for inter-state relations, referring to the norm of non-intervention and the rules for its transgression in exceptional circumstances (self-defence and Security Council authorisation to maintain peace and international order).<sup>22</sup> Yet the end of the Cold War and the rise of more diverse, irrational threats (rogue states, terrorist groups) meant that the concept of deterrence no longer held—the US nuclear arsenal was no longer a guarantee for security. Daalder accepts that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was both illegitimate and lacking in post-invasion planning, but its intentions were essentially just. The failures of Iraq must not be allowed to bind US foreign policy with limitations the same way Vietnam did—on the contrary. While the UN tried to rebuild its place at the centre of collective security decision-making with the 2004 High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change, others such as Daalder looked to reformulate alternatives and ground a new consensus. Following the re-writing of national sovereignty

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<sup>20</sup> Inderjeet Parmar, ‘Foreign Policy Fusion: Liberal interventionists, conservative nationalists and neoconservatives—the new alliance dominating the US foreign policy establishment,’ *International Politics* 46 (2009), pp. 177-209.

<sup>21</sup> Forging a World of Liberty under Law, Princeton Project on National Security, September 2006, <http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/report/FinalReport.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Ivo Daalder and James Steinberg, ‘The Future of Preemption,’ *The American Interest* (Winter 2006), <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=35>

exemplified by so-called R2P (Right to Protect), Daalder, echoing an essay by Slaughter from 2004,<sup>23</sup> declared that states have responsibilities to prevent the development on their territory of threats to others, including disease and catastrophic environmental decline. If they forfeit this, they effectively forfeit their right to sovereign independence: “States which fail to live up to their responsibilities lose their right to insist that others not intervene in their internal affairs.”<sup>24</sup> Who will act to rectify this? First, the UN route will be chosen, but in the expectation that this will only lead to deadlock and delay the alternative will be first to work through appropriate regional organisations (read NATO) or “coalitions of like-minded states to legitimate decision-making on the preventive use of force”—and we are once again back with the Concert of Democracies, something that Daalder has also promoted in other writings.<sup>25</sup> The mesh is complete since Daalder has also written of the need for a ‘global NATO’ with unrestricted reach.<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Hardt and Negri point out how we are conditioned to assume that power is located in an identifiable place, otherwise known as the United States, and for Slaughter and Daalder it is the US that is once again setting the limits to the possible (i.e. there aren’t any, at least for the US and its Concert of Democracy allies). Yet the limits to their visions are clearly apparent in the AfPak (or PakAf) of today. Civilian deaths, often at the hands of smart bombs released through robotic gun-sights, are increasing just when the White Paper announces the need to overcome the ‘trust deficit’.<sup>27</sup> This can only further undermine attempts to bolster the Afghan government, associating it with violence that it has no control over, and increasing the likelihood that individuals choose for the insurgency instead of the supposed PAR regime of Karzai.<sup>28</sup> Technologies, both empowering and coercive, are contributing to the collapse of national sovereignty, reforming the connection between political space and security, and exactly undermining the rule of law that they want to propagate.

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<sup>23</sup> Lee Feinstein and Anne-Marie Slaughter, ‘A Duty to Prevent,’ *Foreign Affairs* 83 (January/February 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Daalder and Steinberg, op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, ‘Democracies of the World, Unite,’ *American Interest* (January/February 2007), <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=220>

<sup>26</sup> Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier, ‘Global NATO,’ *Foreign Affairs* (September-October 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller and Carlotta Gall, ‘US Admits Civilians Died in Afghan Raids,’ *New York Times*, 8 May 2009.

<sup>28</sup> C.J. Chivers, ‘Arms Sent by US May Be Falling Into Taliban Hands,’ *New York Times*, 20 May 2009.

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## RESPONSE

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by Marilyn Young, New York University

Before I begin I'd like to make a modest suggestion. The military refers to Afghanistan as Af/Pak, Af-Pak or sometimes simply Afpak. I think scholars and commentators should avoid using the term and indeed all military acronyms, except in direct quotation. Afpak is not a place, just as COIN is not a word. Of course, the implications of the terms are in each instance an important subject for discussion and analysis.

All of the papers consider US policy in the shifting, uncertain light of the immediate present. The House of Bush has fallen but the foundations remain: the largest military in the world, two active armies in the field, an unprecedentedly large and growing private army of mercenaries, many of the old staff still at their jobs and liberal hawks eager to take up the tasks bequeathed to them by their neo-con predecessors. Giles Scott-Smith reminds us of the 2006 Princeton Project on National Security, written by Anne-Marie Slaughter and John Ikenberry. It is a troubling document, especially now that Slaughter has been appointed Director of Policy Planning in the State Department. Its call for a Concert of Democracies bypasses the UN, calling for, in Scott-Smith's apt phrase, "formal values-based alliances" that can be mobilized when the US sees fit. Slaughter has declared that states which, by the standards of the US, fail to live up to their obligations "lose their right to insist that others not intervene in their internal affairs." This is as full a statement of American power as any neo-con could wish for.

Thus the Obama administration, like its predecessors, exacerbates the ongoing erosion of other national sovereignties, aided and abetted by new military technologies which, in Scott-Smith's view, are built "to cross borders and violate sovereignty with impunity." Yet as unpiloted drones, launched from somewhere in Nevada, assassinate the enemies of the US in Afghanistan or Pakistan, they also kill large numbers of civilians, undermining the regimes in both countries and "increasing the likelihood that individuals choose for the insurgency..." My only disagreement with Scott-Smith is with the importance he assigns the new technologies. To be sure, quoting Peter Singer, he also indicates their limitations. I am more struck by how each new technological development reproduces the same dilemma. Aerial warfare of all sorts, when employed against countries without adequate air defenses, as has frequently been the case, crossed borders and violated sovereignty with impunity. Like the drones, it also created resistance in the attempt to erase it. I think the real advantage of drones is that they contribute to the domestic invisibility of warfare. While enthusiastic support for a war would be pleasant, all a government really needs is public acquiescence or indifference. Drones, which eliminate the possibility of American casualties and at the same time claim absolute precision, make the war in Afghanistan easier for the public to ignore.

Andrew Johnston, while recognizing all of the contradictions discussed by Scott-Smith and adding a few more, observes as well that Obama's foreign policy represents a "ratcheting down of goals and rhetoric..." It sounds, Johnston writes, "like the final days of the Vietnam War, perhaps even a confession that the object now is merely not to lose." I would add that the final days of the Vietnam War were not just about not losing, they were about the US getting out altogether. For some time, critics and supporters

alike have compared Obama to Kennedy in the early days of the Vietnam War. I've always thought things were further along. Obama is caught in LBJ's predicament. Like Johnson he has an ambitious domestic agenda but must at the same time deal with the demands of two inherited wars. The analogy cannot be pushed too far. The war in Afghanistan is not as much of a domestic liability as the war in Vietnam was for Johnson, and this gives Obama more flexibility than Johnson had. At the same time, as Artemy Kalinovsky's essay makes clear, getting out of Afghanistan may prove both difficult and politically costly. Johnston moves the Afghanistan/Vietnam analogy along to the Nixon period and if that means the effort to create a "decent interval" and get out, then I hope he's right.

I found his account of the specific contradictions that plague not only American policies, but those of Pakistan, China and, in terms of domestic politics, Canada, most valuable. They are the material for a future international history of this war. Johnston concludes by citing Obama's recent speech in Cairo as an example of the possibility of a 'transnational, non-state coalitions across borders' in support of those who seek the liberation of women and the establishment of democratic institutions in the region. I agree. But first the war must end. Chris Hedges has put it very well:

What do you say to those who advocate war as an instrument to liberate the women of Afghanistan or bring democracy to Iraq? How do you tell them what war is like? How do you explain that the very proposition of war as an instrument of virtue is absurd? How do you cope with memories of children bleeding to death with bits of iron fragments peppered throughout their small bodies? How do you speak of war without tears?<sup>1</sup>

With the wealth of citation to which we have become accustomed from the editor of [www.enduringamerica.com](http://www.enduringamerica.com), Scott Lucas moves the reader efficiently through the early months of Obama's presidency. He notes its contradictions, ambiguities, equivocations, its inability to outline a coherent strategy, its collapse into tactics—and there he leaves us. I would have appreciated knowing his thoughts on a way out of the morass.

Artemy Kalinovsky's discussion of the lessons of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, like his rich account of the Soviet Union's endgame in "Old politics, new diplomacy: the Geneva accords and the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan" is a daunting reminder of the difficulties the Soviets faced in disengagement—with or without honor.<sup>2</sup> There is little reason to imagine Obama will have an easier time. Kalinovsky discusses the succession of difficulties the Soviet Union faced as, like the Obama administration, it increased the number of troops, the level of funding for development and reconstruction schemes and the effort to negotiate some way out.

As I followed Kalinovsky through his account of failed Soviet tactics and their resemblance to those the Obama administration is currently either employing or contemplating, it seemed to me that the main difference between the Soviet dilemma in Afghanistan and that of the US is that there is no major power funding the anti-US insurgency as the US once funded the anti-Soviet insurgency. Kalinovsky believes that studying Soviet failure "could be of great help [to the Obama administration] in reassessing options and shaping strategy." Indeed, his account could be very useful in bringing the administration to a

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Hedges, "What War Looks Like," *New York Times Book Review*, May 20, 2009

<sup>2</sup> *Cold War History*, 8:3 (August, 2008), pp. 381-404

realization that its only option is full disengagement.

It is too soon to know what the Obama administration will do in practice. Rhetorically, the president has largely awakened us from the nightmare of George W. Bush's America. I recognize the shortcomings of Obama's Cairo speech, but it has been a long time since any serving American president denounced Israeli policy on settlements so sharply, and to my knowledge no serving American president came as close to apologizing to Iran for the role "the United States played...in the overthrow of a democratically-elected Iranian government." The Netanyahu government was quite justified in being rattled.

Obama renewed his commitment to troop withdrawal from Iraq and promised not to pursue bases there or in Afghanistan nor, indeed to make any claim to their territory or resources. William Pfaff has written on the promise of the speech:

"It would seem a renouncement of the American military program of world-girdling strategic bases, pursued for the past 30 years. It comes as more of a surprise than the Obama statement concerning Israel. It could be much more important to America and its future. One awaits elaboration".<sup>3</sup>

But while awaiting elaboration and indeed to ensure that it comes about, it might be good to bring to bear such pressure as sharp analysis can offer. Kalinovsky has drawn on the Soviet experience; an American, inevitably, looks to the lessons of Vietnam. I do not believe that a shift in tactics can salvage the current US war in Afghanistan anymore than it did in Vietnam. The US can provide neither a military nor a political solution in Afghanistan, any more than it could in Vietnam or than it has in Iraq. The best the US can do in both Afghanistan and Iraq is to withdraw all of its military personnel, including the tens of thousands of military contractors, and protect those whose association with Americans have made vulnerable.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the US should pay reparations to Iraq, perhaps in the form of funding for the rebuilding that will be necessary. There is an ongoing debate about the speed with which US forces should be withdrawn from Iraq. George Packer urges that the US "withdraw as slowly as domestic political pressure, military requirements elsewhere, and Iraqi opinion allow."<sup>5</sup> This formulation leaves room for a rather long stay. Moreover, the speed of withdrawal isn't just a matter of Iraqi opinion, but of the Status of Forces Agreement, which commits the US to withdraw all troops by 2011. Given the current state of factional tension in Iraq, it may well be that a peacekeeping force would be desirable. If so, it should not be an American force, but international and at the request of the Iraqi government.

I find it harder to imagine Afghanistan's future. The mandate of the government in Kabul does not extend much beyond the city limits; the countryside has been devastated by three decades of war; the capacity of any outside power to construct a functioning administration for the country is doubtful. Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is massive international aid to ease the suffering and freedom from US drones, helicopter gunships and search missions.

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<sup>3</sup> "Obama's Cairo Speech," [www.truthdig.com](http://www.truthdig.com), posted June 4, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> On this, see George Packer's article in the spring 2009 issue of *Dissent*, "It Isn't Over." Packer outlines a reasonable way for the US to fulfill its obligations to Iraqis who have worked for it, as the Danes and the British have already done. I should think the same approach could apply in Afghanistan.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* Stephen Biddle, quoted in Packer's essay, believes the US forces in Iraq now serve as a peacekeeping force in the model of the Balkans.

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

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## RESPONSE

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by Giles Scott-Smith, Roosevelt Academy

Marilyn Young claims that the technological advances of drones actually represent nothing new. As she states, “Aerial warfare of all sorts, when employed against countries without adequate air defences, as has frequently been the case, crosses borders and violates sovereignty with impunity.” But the point she misses here is that drones operate in a legal grey area outside of any formal declarations of war. Of course aerial warfare (and later missile technology) transformed the nature of state security through the 20th century. The importance of drones, however, comes from their provision of constant covert surveillance and strike capability wherever the location, be it in situations of war or peace (assuming that this distinction still holds). This is the significance of the 2002 drone strike against al Qaeda operators in the Yemen, which should not be understood as simply another form of aerial bombardment. An F-16 strike would have directly involved a US pilot. Using a robot (even a human guided robot) somehow distances the action from ‘regular warfare’. The implications of this shift are still being worked through, as Singer rightly discusses in his book.

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

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## QUESTIONS AND THEMES FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

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### WHY AFGHANISTAN?

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the goal of toppling the Taliban government that had granted safe haven to al Qaeda leadership enjoyed broad international support. It might even be argued that the goal was a strategic imperative for the United States. But eight years later, the US and NATO are faced with the task of supporting a corrupt, weak Afghan government in an effort 'disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda' and prevent their return to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Yet, al Qaeda is now a grouping of loosely affiliated militant organizations, as much an ideology as a unified movement. Is the focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan justified? Should al Qaeda's presence in these two countries be any more worrying than in Somalia, Yemen or elsewhere in the world?

Can the Obama administration find a satisfactory solution to the conflict, one that can be achieved within a time frame, and at a cost, acceptable to the US public and other NATO participants? Is it simply a question of hitting on the correct tactics, a suitable counterinsurgency, counter-terror or nation-building programme? Or, is America impotent in the face of intractable local and regional problems over which it has no control? Is there a humanitarian alternative? That is, would the withdrawal of foreign troops and the infusion of international aid offer a way for the US to disengage and continue to combat terrorism at the same time?

Are US policymakers misguided in assuming a linkage between Afghanistan and Pakistan or are the two inextricably entwined? Is there an exclusively Afghan solution to the conflict? Does framing the conflict as 'AfPak' make sense? As some of the roundtable members pointed out, there are deep flaws in the language around 'AfPak'. Is it correct to assume that one cannot be addressed without the other and that they pose a combined 'problem'? Does it not ignore the fact that there is a Pakistani Taliban, one that threatens the Pakistani state, and an Afghan Taliban, whose leadership is based in Pakistan but whose goal is the return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan? If the gravest threat to American security interests is the 'Talibanisation' of Pakistan, far more worrisome to the United States and its allies than a terrorist-supporting Afghan state, does it make sense that the bulk of effort is being made in Afghanistan? If, as the president's rhetoric suggests, the defeat of al Qaeda is the goal in the region, why are the US and Pakistani armies fighting the Taliban? Is defeating the Taliban a prerequisite of defeating al Qaeda?

What indications do these papers give us of the likely direction of US foreign policy, as well as that of other allies, in the near future? What does the future of the war in Afghanistan mean for Obama's other foreign policy goals—reaching out to 'the Muslim world'; addressing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; dealing with Iran? Are his efforts in Afghanistan likely to help or hinder these other goals? Given his ambitious domestic agenda, is Obama taking on too much in the realm of foreign policy? What impact will the war have on the domestic front in the United States if it becomes America's longest war?

Like the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, Afghanistan has thus far displayed how limited American military and economic power is in the face of what are essentially social and political problems. Why are US policymakers seemingly loathe to examine contemporary US foreign policy ventures in the context of these past failures? Why, when US policymakers do on occasion invoke 'Munich' or 'Dien Bien Phu', are they employing an appropriate or inappropriate analogy and understanding of history?

What does the conflict and occupation in Afghanistan and Pakistan reveal about America and its allies' domestic cultures? What values are said to be threatened by the Taliban and al Qaeda, and how do these reveal a particular vision of world order that is often taken for granted in our domestic scenes?

The roundtable also raises some questions about the best way to approach the study of contemporary issues in US foreign policy. Written by historians, these papers examine the US intervention in the context of previous ventures in US foreign policy or, in the case of Kalinovsky's paper, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Does history offer us guidance, or would political science, security studies, sociology, anthropology or some combination of these be more appropriate? What methodological approach is most fruitful (and in what ways) when writing about contemporary, unfolding events?