

## Opinion » Op-Ed

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### For a more circumspect involvement in Afghanistan

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*The U.S. should treat Pakistan today the way it treated South Korea in the 1960s, encouraging trade and investment.*

In the first week of this month, several new publications drew attention to the overly ambitious strategy being pursued in Afghanistan. In late 2009, those who were sceptical of the United States' embrace of a counter-insurgency (COIN) approach to Afghanistan were overruled in government and sidelined in the public debate. These other voices, this author included, favoured an approach closer to, but not as narrow as, the counter-terrorism (CT) approach advocated by U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden.

#### Focus on Pakistan

Those in the U.S. with an understanding of the South Asia region have long tried to explain to policymakers that Pakistan, not Afghanistan, was the more serious, and driving cause of insecurity in the region. One important, and often-neglected, means of mitigating Pakistan's destabilising force in the region is a bottom-up approach to mitigating the instability within Pakistan and its fragile political structure.

Empowering business people and individuals in Pakistan is the way out of South Asia for the U.S., and the way up for Pakistan. It is also the best way to redress the imbalance that favours the military in that country's political structure. Making a final market for Pakistani goods has always been key. The U.S. should treat Pakistan today the way it treated South Korea in the 1960s, encouraging trade and investment. However, the opposite is the case. Lawmakers from southern U.S. States may be largely responsible for the legislation that has these effects.

Rather than help Pakistani business people, workers, and the state-institution-enhancing process of tax collection and revenue management, the U.S. public law is actively obstructive. Cotton and associated value-added industries such as textiles and garments are a great example. And, tragically, the floods in Pakistan recently prove the point.

World prices of cotton have spiked in recent weeks. Why? The floods in Pakistan have spooked the global cotton market. Pakistan is the world's fourth largest producer of cotton and the floods have made traders worry about a future thinning of supply. Today, the U.S. subsidises cotton prices through national legislation, and then dumps it on the world market depressing prices. In addition, it limits the import of garments and textiles from Pakistan. This limits the integration of value-added industries with Pakistan's cotton growing. That in turn limits investment, employment, and tax revenue in Pakistan.

The last point about taxation and revenue management is a subtle but profound point. Yet, it is one that three decades of comparative politics research has strongly suggested. It is important to state-capacity building and state-legitimacy enhancement; two key issues in Pakistan. Taxation and revenue management, comparative politics research suggests, are processes that enrich in positive ways state-civil society relations and state-apparatus development.

The U.S. should treat Pakistan today the way it treated South Korea after the Korean War. Handouts to Pakistan's military only reinforce the cycle of Punjabi-military dominance and its cynical use of national security issues to perpetuate that dominance. A trade-based, bottom-up approach also works around the kind of resentment produced by U.S. policies that Pakistanis perceive as condescending, such as the 2009 Kerry-Lugar aid bill.

#### New thinking on AfPak

The IISS has called for a new strategy in Afghanistan that emphasises allied efforts in the North and goes with a lighter touch in the South. The South, after all, is where the Pashtun ethnic group dominates. There has been an aspiration for "Pakhtunistan" in that region since the retreat of the British Empire.

Just as the U.S. failed to understand that the Vietnam conflict was one of national aspiration, it has failed to understand that the Taliban, at least in part, gives voice to this Pashtun nationalism in the south of Afghanistan, and to the Pashtun areas of Pakistan (particularly the Federally Administered Tribal Areas — FATA — that border Pakistan).

Three publications suggest a new understanding of the issue. The first is highlighted in this year's International Institute for Strategic Studies annual Strategic Survey and a *Herald Tribune* editorial by IISS president John Chipman. See, "A Strategy for Afghanistan." (<http://www.iiss.org/whats-new/iiss-in-the-press/september-2010/a-strategy-for-afghanistan/>).

The second is an article by Dr. Christine Fair, at Georgetown University, "Clear, Build, Hold, Transfer": Can Obama's Afghan Strategy Work?

(<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a926661837~frm=titlelink>). Important here is Ms Fair's effort to focus on Pakistan, not her view of how to do it. Certainly, Ms Fair's now (in)famous call for a nuclear deal, much like the one the U.S. arranged with India, is not appropriate at this time. But, this shift of focus to Pakistan is necessary.

Finally, Dr. Kanti Bajpai argues that "Exit is a Smarter Strategy." (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/opinion/edit-page/Exit-Is-A-Smarter-Strategy/articleshow/6541291.cms>). Here too is a prominent Indian strategist arguing for what others advised in the Fall of 2009; a limited, "fight from afar" strategy in Afghanistan.

#### Varied voices

These three varied voices may help spur renewed consideration for a more circumspect involvement in Afghanistan in contrast to the "Toughing it Out in Afghanistan" approach advocated by Dr. Michael O'Hanlon and by the President's National Security team. That team, and Dr. O'Hanlon lacked the regional experience to understand the nationalist character of the Taliban-Pashtun dynamics on the Pak-Af borders, and the complexity of a "win" in Afghanistan. They also seem to have misunderstood the role of Pakistan and the logic of Pakistani politics. Dr. O'Hanlon reasoned in his book that CT was what the Bush administration had done for 10 years with such little success; as if all CT tactics and approaches were the same.

Nine months later, a lacklustre Marjah operation behind the U.S., and with a Kandahar operation under way that it seems even General David Petraeus does not fully understand, it seems the CT approach, with a renewed emphasis on engaging in the long-slog of ameliorating Pakistan is now getting the attention it should have had long ago.

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