

Prospects for 'AfPak'

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The next year will determine the success or otherwise of Western policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Following his inauguration in January 2009, President Obama initiated an interagency review of US policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In March 2009 it was affirmed that the **"core goal of the US must be to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan"**.

Although the policy was coined 'AfPak', conceptually the core problem was now defined as nuclear armed, deeply unstable Pakistan's role as a sanctuary for terrorists, particularly in the Pashtun border areas, which are the rear base of the Afghan Taliban, the home of the Pakistan Taliban and the refuge of al-Qaeda. However, Afghanistan is hardly an afterthought. Additional troops have been pledged by coalition allies to fight the Afghan Taliban. The US bears by far the largest share, increasing its presence by 30,000. The UK, which has broadly supported the AfPak policy so far, is contributing 500 extra personnel, bringing its total presence to 10,000. The hope is that this military 'surge', backed by a host of interlinked political and development initiatives, will create the conditions for significant troop withdrawals from Afghanistan from mid-2011 onwards.

BY THE END OF 2010 WE SHOULD HAVE A GOOD IDEA OF HOW SUCCESSFUL THE AFPAK POLICY IS GOING TO BE.

2010 has seen a renewed military effort by US and UK forces to push the Afghan Taliban out of key strongholds in Helmand Province.

An offensive in Kandahar Province is expected soon. There are also moves, following the January 2010 London Conference, to further build local security capabilities, strengthen governance, tackle corruption, combat the narcotics trade and promote the reintegration of Taliban fighters. The Afghan Government, led by President Hamid Karzai, and the UN have also begun to explore the potential for political reconciliation, including through negotiations with parts of the Taliban leadership, although some, including within the US administration, appear to view these efforts as premature.

Troop withdrawals from Afghanistan could begin in mid-2011 – but was it wise to specify this timeframe?

In Pakistan, a major US-led development plan, mainly aimed at the border areas, is slowly taking shape. Peace talks with the Pakistan Taliban are not envisaged, but the Pakistani military's appetite for large-scale action against militants has diminished since 2009, when it conducted a series of offensives. In recent months, there have been arrests of senior Afghan Taliban figures in Pakistan. Although publicly welcomed by the coalition allies, doubts have been expressed both about their impact on future negotiations and about Pakistan's motivations. US drone attacks against militants on the Pakistan side of the border continue, despite their continuing unpopularity among ordinary Pakistanis.

CAN AN AFPAK POLICY THAT COMBINES SUCH MILITARY AND POLITICAL 'SURGES' WORK? AT THE MOMENT, THERE ARE FAR MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS.

- Do the coalition allies have a realistic and shared 'bottom line' on Afghanistan? Is agreement possible over whether the Afghan Taliban should be part of a future power-sharing arrangement, provided it severs all links with al-Qaeda, or must it be 'moderates only'? Can Karzai and his supporters be relied upon to lead on political reconciliation when that outcome could involve a significant loss of power and influence? If a viable power-sharing arrangement is not taking shape by mid-2011, will troop withdrawals begin anyway as part of a 'run for the door'? Will the Afghan Taliban wait out the next 18 months, believing that time is on its side? Can current allied military operations alter such calculations? Will the Afghan army and police be ready to take over crucial security roles by mid-2011?
- Will the benefits of the enhanced development initiatives now proposed for Afghanistan and Pakistan materialise quickly enough, given inevitable donor delays, problems of 'absorptive capacity' on the part of the recipients and rampant corruption? Is there a danger that more immediate military and security considerations will compromise or over-ride these priorities?
- Can Pakistan's political and security establishment be persuaded to cease 'hedging their bets' through supporting the Afghan Taliban when it remains so

anxious about growing Indian influence in Afghanistan? Can the US overcome its 'trust deficit' in relation to Pakistan? Is a weakened Pakistan Taliban managing to reconfigure itself, perhaps with a greater presence in settled and urban areas? Is it realistic to expect the complete defeat of the Pakistan Taliban, or will there ultimately have to be negotiations with them too?

Majority Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan



Heritage Foundation, Revitalizing U.S. Efforts in Afghanistan, October 2007

- Given their history and culture, will the Pashtuns of the border areas ever accept, as some advocate, full and unambiguous incorporation into the political and administrative life of either of the two states in which they currently live? Indeed, might AfPak, through its heavy focus on the border areas, even be paving the way for a more or less independent 'Pashtunistan'?