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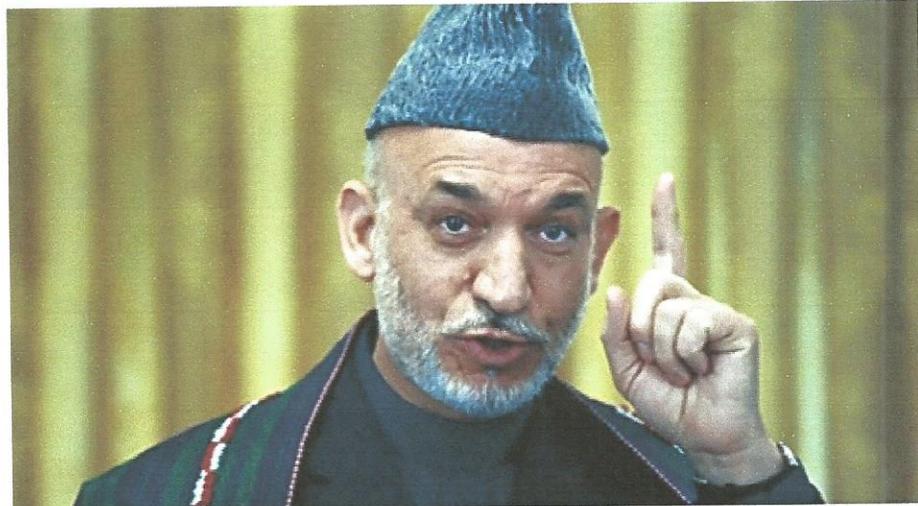
# The U.S. Needs a New Af-Pak Strategy

by Frank Schell

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**The high,** arid plateaus and escarpments of Afghanistan were never in America's sphere of influence. Until 9/11, the United States had no strategic interest in that desolate land, unkind to the Greeks, Mughals, British, and Soviets – who like us, were viewed as occupying powers. The British themselves were confronted by a fiery insurrection of nationalistic Pashtuns during the First Afghan War in the mid 19th century. It ended with a massacre of their forces during the retreat from the garrison at Kabul.

Against this backdrop of history, there is even more soul-searching to be done by the U.S. and NATO coalition, now that Abdullah Abdullah has withdrawn as a candidate for president and the elections to be held Nov. 7 have been cancelled and incumbent Hamid Karzai declared the winner. Dr. Abdullah was ostensibly an example of political competition in an aspiring democracy, whose ascent was envisioned to strengthen the legitimacy of government, one way or another. Now we are left with Mr. Karzai, the isolated and sartorially splendid head of state accused of corrupting the Afghan elections, supported by a U.N. statement of evidence of fraud. Further, his brother, Ahmed Wali, is reportedly engaged in drug trafficking in the region. Many must now be asking, with al Qaeda substantially weakened in Afghanistan, is Afghanistan now worth it and at what price?



AFP Photo / Shah Marai  
Afghan President Hamid Karzai addresses a press conference at the Presidential Palace in Kabul on N

But this is not just about Afghanistan. Action on the ground can push the Taliban into the adjacent North West Frontier Province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas of neighboring Pakistan, a nuclear armed ally of the United States. We have also seen that the Taliban poses a potent threat to the Pakistan Army in both NWFP and FATA, and potentially in the southwest province of Baluchistan.

A strategy for the so-called Af-Pak region must start with a definition of the Taliban today. No longer the Islamist group that aided the al Qaeda attackers of 9/11, the Taliban now is more of a peasant revolt – a group of well-armed mercenaries, drug traffickers, and disenfranchised youth without prospects – making a bold challenge to the government authorities who have not been able to deliver social services in remote rural areas. Comprised largely of Pashtuns, the Taliban also projects ethnic nationalism, and like the Kurds, there are tens of millions of them on both sides of a frontier, but without their own country. Preventing the Taliban from overrunning Pakistan is an objective that should resonate with the American people – although a pro-Taliban coup from within is another alarming contingency.

In March, U.S. President Barack Obama affirmed that the objective was “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan and to prevent their return to either country in the future.” The President stated that “the Taliban . . . must be met with force and they must be defeated.”

At this juncture, al Qaeda is diluted in Afghanistan with much of its leadership killed or captured. Al Qaeda is a global challenge, best met through counterterrorism (CT) methods of human intelligence, interdiction, insertion teams, and the use of technology such as Predator unmanned aerial vehicles. Disrupted and dismantled, only the Muslims themselves can ultimately defeat it, and end the conflict that is dividing Islam along the lines of Sunni vs. Shiite, and Wahabi versus pro-Western moderates.

Similarly, the Taliban is an ideology that must be contained until such time as there is enough rural reconstruction and economic opportunity to bring moderate elements into the mainstream. Defeat of the Taliban will not occur until there is rural integration and delivery of human services – food, clothing,

medicine, clean water, and access to justice – in the tribal areas of Af-Pak. Military engagement is a part of the longer-term solution.

We must recognize that Afghanistan may never look like a democracy, with fractious tribes that have never accepted central authority. But their ability to threaten Pakistan is another matter, and, while secular, India is vulnerable to disruption. It has a 150 million Muslim population that is in some respects marginalized and has not reached the level of affluence of the aspiring Hindu middle class. This is a fault line in Indian society.

The idea of deploying additional American forces can be sold to the American people if certain criteria are met. First, the Karzai government must commit to installation of democratic processes like the Iraqis did, albeit in a country with more infrastructure and traditions of government. Second, the NATO commitment must be increased in a meaningful way, with relaxation of some rules of engagement that have limited NATO's combat role. Third, Pakistan must exert itself more in the search for al Qaeda leaders believed to be in hiding there, very possibly in Quetta. Among the leading recipients of American military and civilian aid, Pakistan needs to act like a committed ally, not a skittish one, ambivalent to the U.S. presence. Joint Predator drone operations could presage more robust military collaboration, and it is not unreasonable to demand more U.S. presence in that country.

Finally, India should be engaged and brought to the table. Thus far, it has been largely a spectator, probably fearing that the Kashmir dispute might be internationalized. As a first tier global economic power, India needs to accept the responsibilities and risks that come with that stature. Its economic achievements as a democracy give it moral authority not seen since the 1950s when it was initially non-aligned, and its armed forces each rank among the world's top five. Anything India can do in form or substance to decrease tensions with Pakistan should be considered to allow Pakistan to deploy resources to the western front. Even a symbolic pullback from the Kashmiri Line of Control would be useful, along with some effort to assuage Pakistan's fears of rising Indian influence in Afghanistan and in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan.

While thus far the debate has been about the U.S. and NATO commitment to Afghanistan, the stakes are higher across the border.

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