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Introduction

Since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, policymakers have emphasized two basic national security interests at stake in Afghanistan. The first is preventing al Qaeda and its Taliban allies from reestablishing a safe haven. The second is preventing the violence in Afghanistan from destabilizing Pakistan, thus putting its nuclear forces at risk and increasing the likelihood of nuclear terrorism. Coalition strategy is based on the assumptions that the only way to deny al Qaeda safe haven is by building a strong central Afghan state and that Pakistan's nuclear complex will become increasingly vulnerable to militant attacks if the Taliban succeeds in Afghanistan.

Both assumptions are wrong. The United States does not need to build a state in Afghanistan because the conditions that allowed al Qaeda safe haven in the 1990s have permanently changed. Moreover, the steps needed to help Pakistan secure its nuclear arsenal have nothing to do with the war in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, we continue to operate on the bases of these mistaken beliefs, and the result is that American strategy has become incoherent.

State Building Is Not Needed

State building has been fundamental to U.S. efforts since at least 2004. The logic is simple: failure to build a viable state that can exert control over the whole of the country will provide terrorists and insurgents a sanctuary from which to plot attacks against the United States and its allies. State building is also critical, the argument goes, because the United States cannot leave Afghanistan if it believes the government will quickly crumble thereafter. Success in the long term, we are told, is only possible if Kabul becomes legitimate in the eyes of the people and builds enough strength to tackle the Taliban anywhere in the country.

This argument is doctrinaire for large swaths of the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Policymakers have clung to the seductive logic of state building as the antidote to terrorist safe-havens. President Bush, who was skeptical about state building before taking office, quickly changed gears in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. When asked about his previous doubts during the early days of the war in Afghanistan, Bush replied, "We've got to work for a stable Afghanistan so that her neighbors don't fear terrorist activity again coming out of that country."¹ The president never wavered from this basic position, and his critics argued that he should have done more to help build capacity in Kabul.

The Obama administration has also operated according to the belief that state building and counterterrorism are inseparable. The administration's recent National Security Strategy is quite clear: "In Afghanistan, we must deny al-Qaida a safe haven, deny the Taliban the ability to overthrow the government, and strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future."² At the same time, the administration has pledged to start withdrawing forces in 2011. Thus its strategy takes for granted that state building is necessary and assumes that it can be done relatively quickly.

But state building is a long, difficult, bloody affair. Political leaders in pre-modern societies are essentially gangsters who establish local control by running small protection rackets, using petty extortion to buy arms and rent mercenaries. As they carve out larger chunks of territory, they come into conflict with rival warlords. Those conflicts escalate into violent confrontation and war, which require higher taxes and more efficient organization. In Europe, the victors in this centuries-long evolutionary process sat atop organizations that resembled modern nation-states.³ In Afghanistan, this process is still in its early days.

Trying to build someone else's state is even more difficult, and the United States

has a decidedly mixed record in external state building.⁴ Its most prominent success story, the decades-long postwar reconstruction of Germany and Japan, suggests that success requires a staggering investment of time and resources. Those successes also suggest that the process is most likely to work when new states are built upon existing social and political institutions. In both Germany and Japan, U.S. officials reluctantly set aside plans for recrimination against thousands of fascist bureaucrats, instead co-opting their support in building new democratic governments.⁵

Unfortunately, the necessary ingredients for successful state building—time, money, and existing institutions—are in desperately short supply in Afghanistan. Public and congressional opposition to the war is rising in the United States, and the Obama administration has already announced it will scale back the U.S. commitment beginning next year. In addition, Afghanistan’s political and economic institutions are extremely weak. The fledgling government has had enormous difficulty expanding control outside of Kabul. The judiciary, which is notoriously inefficient, competes in many places with a shadow Taliban court system.⁶ Economic institutions remain fragile at best; witness the recent run on the Kabul Bank.⁷ For all of these reasons, the U.S. desire to build a strong and legitimate government in Afghanistan is not practical.

The good news is that it is not necessary. The United States can achieve its most important objectives in Afghanistan without continuing its costly and quixotic state-building effort. As we describe in more detail below, U.S. forces can pursue al Qaeda and minimize the terrorist threat without establishing a government that can control most or all of the country’s territory.

A state-building failure would not mean victory for al Qaeda or the Taliban. Even if the United States substantially reduces its ground forces in Afghanistan and the Kabul government remains weak and ineffectual, al Qaeda would not be able to recreate

anything like the safe haven it once enjoyed. The original circumstances that made sanctuary possible no longer exist today. In the 1990s there was little domestic support for aggressive U.S. counterterrorism operations abroad, and the Clinton administration debated at length whether to strike large al Qaeda training camps. Today there would be little debate; indeed, the Obama administration would surely welcome the opportunity to conduct strikes against well-defined terrorist strongholds without having to cross over into Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban, which by now is very familiar with U.S. air power, has much to lose by inviting al Qaeda back.⁸ As the Afghanistan Study Group aptly concludes, senior al Qaeda leaders “will likely have to remain in hiding for the rest of their lives, which means Al Qaeda will have to rely on clandestine cells instead of large encampments.”⁹

The U.S. military has recently demonstrated the vulnerability of al Qaeda in Afghanistan. In the Korengal Valley of eastern Afghanistan, an area where the United States has withdrawn conventional forces, al Qaeda attempted to reestablish a training camp in 2010. It was subsequently struck by U.S. aircraft, resulting in the deaths of dozens of al Qaeda affiliates, including two senior leaders.¹⁰ Some observers interpret this as demonstrating that al Qaeda will find sanctuary where U.S. conventional forces are absent, yet it actually demonstrates that U.S. intelligence collection and ability to strike are substantial, even in areas without conventional forces on the ground.

Nor will Afghan militants be eager to provide refuge for the Pakistani Taliban.¹¹ The reason is that not all safe havens are created equal. The Afghan Taliban enjoy some measure of sanctuary in Pakistan because Afghan militants receive support from the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI). Even al Qaeda enjoys a certain amount of safety there due to the limits of Pakistani willingness to allow U.S. operations on Pakistani territory. To be sure, the operation to kill Osama bin Laden shows

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that no sanctuary is absolute. But bin Laden was the highest of high-value targets, and the Obama administration acted only after months of painstaking intelligence work and policy deliberation. Moreover, al Qaeda operatives still residing in Pakistan may believe that they can wait out the United States before it leaves the region. Pakistani militants, on the other hand, are enemies of the Pakistani state, which is not going anywhere. If the Afghan Taliban succeeded in retaking part or all of Afghanistan, it would risk losing ISI support if it offered a substantial sanctuary to Pakistan's enemies. It is possible that some members of the Pakistani groups might find shelter there, but the Afghan militants would have a strong incentive to ensure that their numbers remained low enough to be plausibly deniable to the ISI.

And even if the Afghan militants are foolish enough to grant safe haven to substantial numbers of Pakistani militants, the protection they offer will be qualitatively different from the sanctuary currently enjoyed by Afghan militants in Pakistan. The sanctuary in Pakistan derives from the existence of a Pakistani state and, more importantly, a nuclear-armed Pakistani military.

Attacking Afghan militants on Pakistani soil without permission would be an act of war. Moreover, the United States receives Pakistan's help with intelligence collection along the border region and elsewhere. This means U.S. officials have large incentives to negotiate with the government before conducting operations in Pakistan. Because of the significant risks involved, the United States usually reserves unilateral actions for extraordinary cases. (Witness the lengthy debate that preceded the bin Laden mission and the visible nervousness of administration officials in photographs released by the White House shortly after it was over.) Drone strikes are only allowed in certain areas and ground force operations are apparently not allowed (or are so covert as to be invisible).¹² Paradoxically, Afghan militants have a fairly robust sanctuary from U.S. forces only because of the mixed interests of America's ally.

In contrast, who would stop the Pakistani military from acting in Afghanistan if its proxies harbored substantial numbers of Pakistani militants? If the United States withdrew from Afghanistan and the Kabul government collapsed, the answer is nobody. Pakistan could take covert or overt military action at will or could find new proxies. Indeed, the Taliban was created by ISI when its old proxies proved unable to secure Afghanistan.¹³ The fact that ISI created the Taliban provides yet another reason to believe that few if any of the Afghan proxies of the ISI would shelter large numbers of Pakistan's enemies. To do so would put them between the devil and the deep blue sea, with the Pakistani military playing the part of the sea and the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras of Afghanistan (the old Northern Alliance) in the role of the devil. These latter groups fought the Taliban before September 11, 2001, reportedly with aid from Russia, Iran, and India.¹⁴ They would certainly fight on after a U.S. withdrawal in much the same way. Only ISI support enabled the Afghan Taliban to succeed in the 1990s; if Pakistan was actually fighting against them, they would be in serious trouble.

The upshot of this analysis is that state building is not necessary to succeed in Afghanistan. The decline of the central state will not lead to a domino effect in the region. Al Qaeda will not be able to recreate its old safe haven there even if the government collapses. Pakistani militants will not find reliable sanctuary either, regardless of what happens in Kabul. Rather than investing heavily in state building, the United States can achieve its interests by streamlining its counterterrorism campaign. It does not need to become mired in the bloody business of Afghanistan's political evolution.

Loose Talk about Loose Nukes

American leaders also claim that losing the war in Afghanistan will destabilize

Pakistan, thus putting its nuclear forces at risk. According to the Obama administration, “The ability of extremists in Pakistan to undermine Afghanistan is proven, while insurgency in Afghanistan feeds instability in Pakistan. The threat that al Qaeda poses to the United States and our allies in Pakistan—including the possibility of extremists obtaining fissile material—is all too real.”¹⁵

Prominent conservatives agree. An open letter to the president, signed by, among others, Sarah Palin and Robert Kagan, concludes that the “abandonment of Afghanistan would further destabilize the region, and put neighboring Pakistan and its nuclear arsenal at risk. All our efforts to support Islamabad’s fight against the Taliban in Pakistan’s tribal regions will founder if we do not match those achievements on the other side of that country’s porous north-western border.”¹⁶

Both of these pronouncements echo the conventional wisdom that the war is intrinsically linked to the prevention of nuclear terrorism. Casual arguments along these lines are now commonplace, and they are almost never challenged. In reality, success or failure against the Afghanistan Taliban will not affect the security of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal. The issues are unrelated.

The logic behind the administration’s concern is that militants will have a better chance of acquiring nuclear weapons if they operate from a secure foothold. The stronger the Taliban become in Afghanistan, the more dangerous they will become to Pakistan. And because political instability in Afghanistan is likely to spill across the border, the government in Islamabad will be less capable of stopping them.¹⁷

This logic is wrong. For the reasons discussed above, fear of a safe haven in Afghanistan is wildly exaggerated. Afghan militants may find some protection from U.S. forces by hiding in Pakistan, but Pakistani militants will find no similar refuge in an Afghanistan dominated by Islamic militants. The argument about a spillover effect is based on some unspecified notion about the causes of politi-

cal instability; it imagines that Pakistani institutions will become weaker through some kind of cross-border osmosis. This modern version of the domino theory ignores the fact that the root causes of Pakistani instability are found in Pakistan, not across the border.

Nonetheless, recent attacks against Pakistan’s military and nuclear complex have led to fresh concerns about the security of its technology and fissile material. In addition to the bombing of a bus full of workers from the Kahuta Research Laboratories in 2008, militants also launched rockets at suspected nuclear facilities. In the aftermath of the attacks, one observer concluded that a nuclear-armed Taliban “may not be as far-fetched as it might first appear.”¹⁸

Yet closer examination of these attacks shows that the complex itself, much less the weapons, was never in any great danger. Two suicide bombings led to fears that facility defenses were vulnerable, but in both cases the outer perimeter held. In at least one case, the rest of the sprawling facility was immediately locked down when the attack happened.¹⁹

Rather than attacking facilities directly, militants could conceivably try to intercept weapons or fissile material in transit.²⁰ So far, none of the Pakistani groups have shown anything close to the sophistication and resources needed to pull off such an audacious attack. In any case, a safe haven far away in Afghanistan would not help militants seeking to mass forces inside Pakistan to intercept nuclear weapons.

A more realistic danger is that officials, scientists, or technicians in the Pakistani nuclear infrastructure will help al Qaeda covertly acquire nuclear material and technology. Among proliferation analysts, insider-outsider collusion is the scenario that appears to cause the most concern. The fact that A.Q. Khan, the father of the Pakistani nuclear program, was able to operate a semi-private proliferation network raises concerns that Pakistan still might be unable to control prominent officials within its own nuclear establishment. Moreover, clever officials may discover new ways of forg-

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ing links with nonstate actors. In the 1990s, for example, senior Pakistani nuclear scientists founded the Umma-Tameer-e-Nau (UTN), a nongovernmental organization that provided cover for contacts between nuclear specialists and al Qaeda leaders.²¹

Other factors increase the risk of insider-outsider collusion. Rising anti-American sentiment within Pakistan might cause insiders to become radicals. Ominous trends in Pakistani public opinion could make it more difficult for the Pakistani government to reliably screen new hires. Analysts have speculated about creeping “Islamization” in the officer corps, which would also make it more likely that militant sympathizers could find their way into positions of authority in the nuclear establishment.²² In addition, the rapid expansion of the Pakistani nuclear program during a period of intense international scrutiny means that it will probably have to keep one hand in the gray market in order to ensure continued operations as new projects come on line. (We say “gray market” because Khan’s activities were only partially concealed, and because many of his suppliers acted legally under the relaxed export control regime of the 1970s and 1980s.)²³

Despite the unraveling of the A. Q. Khan network, Pakistan’s nuclear import strategy still encourages private businessmen to facilitate deals for dual-use material and parts for its nuclear program.²⁴ The continuing demand for nuclear technology offers possible opportunities for insider profiteering. Collusion will become more likely if the Pakistani Taliban or al Qaeda learn to navigate both sides of the gray market, combining ideological appeals with large amounts of money.

Pakistan has taken a number of steps over the last decade to mitigate the danger of insider-outsider collusion. These steps have included reorganization, personnel policy reforms, and technological innovations.²⁵ Despite these reforms, however, Western observers remain concerned. Pakistan’s long history of turning a blind eye to nuclear entrepreneurs, as well as its reluctance to punish

A.Q. Khan, cast doubt on its ability and willingness to quickly resolve the issue. Reports of continuing links between the ISI and militant groups raise the specter of collaboration with terrorists and religious extremists. The opacity surrounding Pakistan’s nuclear program—most of its facilities are not subject to international monitoring—makes it difficult to assess the overall level of security.

And even if Pakistan can demonstrate improvements to its peacetime security procedures, the rapid relocation of assets during a crisis might create opportunities for conspirators. Some reports indicate that control over nuclear decisions will be delegated to field commanders during crises, meaning that institutional regulations would be less important than personal loyalty in ensuring nuclear security. Although coordinated attacks against nuclear facilities and convoys would still be difficult under these conditions, insider knowledge would make success far more likely. And as one veteran intelligence official recently concluded, “Pakistani authorities have a dismal track record in thwarting insider threats.”²⁶

At this point it is worth reiterating that none of these problems has anything to do with the war in Afghanistan. Put simply, the United States does not need to fight in Afghanistan in order to keep nuclear weapons away from terrorists. There are better ways to reduce the risk of nuclear theft at relatively low cost. Increased technical assistance, along with quiet efforts to shore up Pakistan’s recent organizational and personnel reforms, will go far to mitigate the danger of insider-outsider collusion. Diplomatic efforts on the subcontinent will also reduce the risk of crises, buying time for Pakistan to implement security reforms and prepare for contingencies. But given the undercurrent of anti-American sentiment in Pakistan which is fueled by the large U.S. military presence in the region, the United States must be careful to assist without provoking a hostile response. Overly intrusive measures and misguided rhetoric are likely to be counterproductive.

Above all, the United States must be patient. U.S. leaders typically fear the emergence of new nuclear powers because they are untested and possibly unreliable custodians of those weapons. They also worry that proliferation begets proliferation: one country's nuclear breakthrough will lead to local arms racing and a period of severe regional instability. Happily, the worst of these fears have never been realized, in part because of methodical diplomatic efforts to alleviate the concerns of emerging nuclear powers and their neighbors. U.S. efforts to facilitate better relations between India and Pakistan might be the most important element in securing Pakistan's arsenal. Routine diplomacy will buy time for Pakistan to implement and improve its security procedures by reducing the frequency of crises. A more low key and patient approach will also cut against the conspiracy theories that underpin extremist rhetoric, making insider-outsider collusion more unlikely.

The problem is that none of this will be done quickly, and the United States is under terrific pressure to change its strategic approach in the region. Of the challenges in U.S. strategy in South Asia, remaining patient might prove the hardest task of all.

Less Is More

The current U.S. strategy, a counterinsurgency and state-building hybrid, is based on weak assumptions. It is also costly in terms of blood and treasure. Between December 2009 and April 2011, 639 U.S. personnel were killed in Afghanistan.²⁷ Some will argue that this is a remarkably low number of fatal casualties, particularly when compared to other U.S. conflicts such as Vietnam. While true in a sense, this cost is still not trivial. Moreover, the combination of U.S. technologies from medical advances to precision firepower that enables this lower level of fatalities is incredibly expensive. Estimates indicate that each U.S. service member in Afghanistan costs between \$500,000 and \$1,200,000 an-

nually.²⁸ With just under 100,000 troops in Afghanistan the bill will range between \$50 billion and over \$100 billion per year.²⁹ The United States is pursuing a costly strategy in Afghanistan that is unnecessary for securing vital U.S. interests in that country.

No matter how many troops the United States dispatches to Afghanistan, at least half of the problem remains across the border in Pakistan and is largely off limits. It is there, in Pakistan's tribal areas, that al Qaeda senior leadership has found sanctuary. Yet despite the limitations on sending troops to Pakistan, the United States has been able to disrupt al Qaeda with covert intelligence collection and drone strikes while seeking to bolster Pakistani security forces.

While U.S. strategy in Pakistan is not perfect, it is astronomically less expensive than the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. If a similar strategy in Afghanistan, which we term the counterterrorism option, could prevent al Qaeda from enjoying safe haven, then it would be both cheaper and, as a result, more sustainable. The latter is becoming particularly important as the U.S. public becomes increasingly disillusioned with large-scale counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. A poll in July 2010 found that 76 percent of respondents thought the United States should begin to withdraw from Afghanistan in the summer of 2011 or sooner.³⁰ A March 2011 poll indicated that 73 percent of Americans thought that the United States should "withdraw a substantial number of U.S. combat forces from Afghanistan this summer" (although only 39 percent expected that Washington would do so).³¹

The counterterrorism option would require an ongoing U.S. presence in Afghanistan but at a much lower level than at present. U.S. conventional forces would begin to draw down in the summer of 2011 as per the president's announced timeline. By the end of 2012 the vast bulk of U.S. forces would be withdrawn. Special operations forces would remain in substantial numbers, with one set of special operators focused on targeting al Qaeda members seeking to return to Af-

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ghanistan. These operators would be based at airfields in the south and east of the country. They would be supported by a modest conventional force equivalent to a few battalions, principally for quick reaction. Another set of special operators, principally but not exclusively U.S. Army Special Forces, would continue to support local allies in the south, while U.S. advisers would continue to work with Afghan security forces. U.S. airpower would continue to provide transport and fire support to both U.S. and Afghan units.³²

The total number of U.S. military personnel this counterterrorism option would require would be roughly 10,000–15,000. This would be supplemented by additional intelligence community personnel and contractors. While not cheap, this would be substantially less expensive in blood and treasure. On the latter, the price would likely be somewhere between \$5 billion and \$18 billion annually. As demonstrated by the previously noted strike in the Korengal Valley, this force would be at least as capable of collecting actionable intelligence as U.S. assets in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, and thus able to conduct effective operations against al Qaeda.

Such a posture would be required both to conduct counterterrorism operations, the principal focus, but also to continue to support the government of Afghanistan and other local allies of the United States. Afghanistan is thus substantially different from both Yemen and Somalia and will require more resources than either. Unlike Yemen, where despite tribal revolt and political upheaval the government does not face a massive insurgency, Afghanistan will require a substantial number of U.S. assets. Unlike Somalia, the United States can neither conduct missions from friendly neighboring countries nor rely heavily on projecting power from offshore, as Afghanistan is landlocked with two of its major neighbors, Iran and Pakistan, having contentious relations with the United States.

To be clear: this posture would enable the Taliban to expand the areas it controls in Af-

ghanistan. Yet even this expansion would be limited, as the Taliban lacks a major natural constituency outside of Pashtun regions. Indeed, many Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks are more anti-Taliban than the United States. With continued support from the United States the central government would be able to retain control of at least half the country, including major cities such as Kabul and Kandahar City. This support should include financial rewards, which would reduce the incentive of local elites and central government figures to “bandwagon” with the Taliban.

This streamlined military approach to attacking al Qaeda, along with adroit and patient diplomacy with Pakistan to help it secure its nuclear complex, provides a practical, cost-effective strategy for achieving core U.S. interests on both sides of the Durand Line. Unlike the present strategy, it does not require open-ended and costly commitments to state building and counterinsurgency. It only requires limiting U.S. goals and setting aside ambitious hopes of using the American military to sow liberal ideals in South and Central Asia. In the long run, however, a less ambitious strategy offers the best chance of sustaining pressure on al Qaeda without wasting scarce resources or overtaxing expectations.

Notes

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