

The War on Terrorism in Central and Southwest Asia

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Brief Analysis

Although al-Qaeda and the Taliban no longer pose a military or political threat in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda cells are regrouping. This threat requires the response of special forces, intelligence, and commandos in order to uncover the terrorist cells and prevent another September 11-style attack. But the main threat posed by terrorism in Central Asia today is the enormous domestic political crisis that has erupted throughout the region.

Crisis in the Region

Central Asia, for the first time since its independence from the Soviet Union, finds itself in the midst of enormous political fermentation, including street riots and shootings of civilians. Indeed, post-September 11 U.S. cooperation with Central Asian regimes has had two profound side effects working at cross purposes. First, these governments have experienced more acceptance on the international scene thanks to U.S. backing, and are therefore more prepared than ever to be tough on dissent at home. At the same time, opposition and democratic forces have become newly active, galvanized to an enormous extent by the expectation of Western support for democratic movements. The result of these phenomena is domestic instability.

For its part, Iran is experiencing total paralysis because of the tension between reformists and the government of Muhammad Khatami. This domestic conflict has resulted in both sides playing out their rivalry in the context of foreign-policy making. Of course, Washington's main problem with Iran is not necessarily with the regime itself but with the Revolutionary Guards and their funding of extremist groups in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

Pakistan is also trying to manage a grave domestic political situation. Upon the defeat of the Taliban, General Pervez Musharraf's popularity at home achieved a peak -- a perfect opportunity for the army to reach out to political forces toward building a consensus on future elections. Regrettably, Musharraf missed that train and treated civil society with utter contempt. The result has been political polarization and a severe economic crisis. The military remains power hungry to this day, as its political ambitions are rejected by both fundamentalists and secular political parties. Current tensions may well erupt into a crisis after the upcoming elections. Disappointingly, Washington has been short-sighted in ignoring the need for a return to democracy in Pakistan. U.S.-Pakistani relations should not focus merely on the issues of terrorism, Kashmir, and the tracking of al-Qaeda members. On the contrary, Pakistan's domestic crisis is intimately linked to the larger war on terror.

This war can only be waged in Central and South/Southwest Asia where there are stable governments with representative bases and public political participation; dictators cannot wage the war on terror. Unfortunately, U.S. policy has not paid much attention to the domestic political ferment in the region. Washington should lay down markers for these authoritarian leaders indicating what domestic reforms they must make in order for U.S. support to remain forthcoming. Those markers -- such as pluralism, free and fair elections, and the empowerment of civil society -- should set forth a process for the institutionalization of democracy in stages. Economic and military aid given to Central Asian countries should also be linked to certain conditions in order to provide incentives for political and economic reform.

Reconstruction of Afghanistan: A Must

Afghanistan must have a political and economic strategy, which the United States should help define. There is a compelling need for reconstruction on both the political and economic front. The new central government of Hamid Karzai in Kabul needs to be empowered in order to extend its authority and writ across the country, such that it can provide concrete economic benefits to the population. The warlords will only cooperate with the central government if there is an incentive, which in practice means financial aid.

The United States has made a substantial contribution to the rebuilding of Afghanistan. It has provided a major part of the \$1 billion which has been pumped into the country since December 2001. Moreover, Afghanistan, six months after a twenty-three-year war, has put 3 million children in school with the help of the international community at a cost of about \$50 million. American-funded educational programs are welcomed by the Afghans because they contribute to dampening the tensions between the different ethnic and tribal groups. The "back-to-school" program provides a clear example of this kind of reconstruction. Still, more should be done. To date, 90 percent of the aid has been humanitarian rather than development assistance. Infrastructure and road building are important for both trade and ethnic cohesiveness.

Building the national army is also critical. The United States is taking the lead role in this regard. However, an army cannot be rebuilt among 200,000 armed men under the command of the warlords who in turn pose a threat to the nascent army's stability. The training of the new Afghan armed forces requires a multipronged approach in concert with a political strategy, set first to demobilize the warlords. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that demobilization is key to political progress in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan must also develop a more open society. In this process, the media is crucial. A solid model for the kind of assistance the international community can provide is the Open Media Fund for Afghanistan, founded in February 2002. The fund provides resources to local radio and television stations and newspapers, as well as to journalists and media associations throughout the country, in an effort to empower independent communications and encourage freedom of expression. In six months, the Fund has allocated grants worth over \$80,000 to Afghan newspapers and magazines.

The reconstruction of Afghanistan is a test case that will illustrate how much the international community cares about the welfare of Muslim countries and peoples, not just about stopping terrorism. If the U.S.-led effort fails this test, the impact in the Muslim world will be extremely negative. Should a political vacuum develop in Afghanistan while the United States and its Western allies turn their attention exclusively toward Iraq, other countries such as Iran or Pakistan will take this as an implicit invitation to enter the scene, and Afghanistan will once again become the seat of Islamic debate on fundamentalism. That said, the responsibility for rebuilding Afghanistan falls not only on American or European shoulders but also on the Muslim world, which should step forward to help the Afghan people. Afghanistan could become the trade hub of the region if the Americans, in cooperation with the international community, encourage the restoration of security throughout the country, along with the necessary economic reforms.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Merissa Khurma.

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