

BROOKINGS

REPORT

War and Peace in South Asia

Stephen P. Cohen · Wednesday, November 21, 2001

The shooting has started in Afghanistan, but what will follow it? The administration may not have decided on a course vis a vis other terrorist-harboring states, notably Syria, Iraq, and Iran, but it has calculated that the September 11 tragedy provides a unique opportunity to combine the “war on terrorism” with important objectives in South Asia. President Bush said as much in his early public references to the Kashmir problem, and as the bombing and ground operations in Afghanistan have progressed, more and more has been heard about the need to reconstruct that country.

Even as the first missiles were being launched Washington concluded that there is risk but also opportunity in South Asia. Liberating Afghanistan from the grip of the extremist Al Qaeda-Taliban nexus may be the opening act, but three other objectives have been added to the list. These are the reconstruction of Afghanistan, a salvation operation for Pakistan, and a new role for the United States in the dangerous Kashmir conflict. Pulling off this trifecta would be a major diplomatic and strategic accomplishment. But there are significant pitfalls ahead.

Reconstructing Afghanistan

Several key members of the first Bush administration were “present at the destruction” of Afghanistan. They worked towards removing the Soviets from Afghanistan in the 1980s, only to see the country fall into calamitous disarray in the 1990s. By then Afghanistan had become a Pakistani project as Islamabad sought to exclude Iranian and Indian influence and to extend its writ over the country. Its strategists argued that having “won” the war against the Soviets, Pakistan could become a major Central Asian power in its own right. This led to Pakistan’s support for the Taliban in partnership with

the Saudis, and later with Osama's Al Qaeda. We now know the consequences.

The administration's military strategy is to deconstruct the Taliban-Al Qaeda forces into its components (the Arab brigade, the radical Taliban core, and quite a few opportunistic tribal chieftains), and then defeat or co-opt each of them. The process will be accelerated if the senior leadership of Al Qaeda and the Taliban can be located and destroyed, but Washington is digging in for a war that could last through next spring. While the Al Qaeda and hard-core Taliban units are expected to fight to the end, the assumption is that the many Pushtun groups that signed up with the Taliban can be separated out, and that they will defect once it is evident that the Al Qaeda-Taliban are going to lose. T

Running parallel to this military operation is a political strategy and humanitarian assistance program designed to offer the Afghans a meaningful alternative while holding mass starvation at bay.

The political strategy has proven very difficult to implement. The original expectation was that some kind of coalition could be rapidly pulled together, drawing from elements of the Northern Alliance, Pushtun tribes, and even the exiled king, Zahir Shah. The king turned out to be unimpressive, Pakistan wanted to exclude any elements from the Northern Alliance, members of the Northern Alliance were dead set against the inclusion of "moderate" Taliban forces-if any could be produced, and Iran seeks a role for the Hazara (largely Shi'a) minority.

After two months of political jockeying, it is clear that the Afghans cannot be united easily. However, there is agreement that the new Afghanistan government will include all major linguistic and tribal groups in Afghanistan. If the key regional countries surrounding Afghanistan stick to this commitment, then it is possible that a weak, but more or less representative government can be established in Kabul.

This government could serve as the channel for massive assistance for the reconstruction of Afghanistan's shattered highway system, its ruined canals (vital in this arid land), and basic health and educational services. This operation will require American support, and will have to be coordinated with the termination of the war and the emergence of a new Afghan political order. Ironically, an American administration

that once cautioned against “nation building” finds itself planning a massive state-building project in Afghanistan, possibly in collaboration with the United Nations and key Muslim countries, including Iran.

Salvaging Pakistan

There have been a number of recent, gloomy studies of Pakistan’s prospects. Pakistan is regularly described as a “failed” state, and it is the site of a raging civilizational war between moderate and radical Islam. There are also “intramural” clashes between Sunni and Shi’a in Pakistan, and radical Sunni groups have recently engaged in the systematic assassination of Shi’a doctors in Karachi. Politically, Pakistan is stranded midway between military autocracy and incompetent civilian democracy. The only coherent political organization in the state is the army, and, reversing the usual civil-military question, the army sees the problem as one of establishing effective, if subtle, military control over the civilians, viewed by the “khakis” as unruly and incompetent.

Washington lost much of its influence on Islamabad, after it terminated military training, sales, and economic assistance in 1991. Another set of sanctions was applied in 1998, to punish Islamabad for its nuclear tests. In the political equivalent of “bouncing the rubble,” still further sanctions were imposed in 1999 after Pakistan reverted to military rule.

Recognizing that Islamabad’s cooperation would be vital to any operation in Afghanistan, the Bush administration quickly lifted nuclear sanctions against Islamabad, and suspended the “democracy” sanctions. In response, Pakistan has provided significant assistance to the war effort, and no less important, President/General Musharraf removed from positions of influence many of the hard-line officers who were at the forefront in the effort to maintain the Taliban.

This is not a minor reshuffling of officers: it has put Musharraf in the same, pre-eminent position that Zia ul-Haq attained in 1980 (ironically, also due to a war in Afghanistan), only in this case it could mean that Pakistan is pointed in a more liberal direction, both in its dealings with the Afghans and at home-and conceivably, with New Delhi.

If Musharraf sticks to this decision, then it could be a fateful turning point for Pakistan.

There were signs that he was headed in this direction a month before September 11.

when the government ordered the collection of guns from extremist elements and the banning of several radical groups in Pakistan itself. These had directly challenged the authority of the army itself. Many of these groups were swept away by Pakistan's security forces-with the widespread support of the mainstream political parties.

Adding to America's leverage was the realization that the United States had developed a credible alternative to Pakistan in the form of a new U.S.-India relationship. As much as the fear of economic disaster, this led Musharraf to give in to the inevitable. Having done this, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship is now reset to "normal." The new relationship is notable by the absence of grandiose rhetoric about the long-standing friendship between the two states or their common struggle against a common enemy, etc. Both sides realize that they have concocted a limited strategic partnership. This partnership is important for the United States, but vital for Pakistan, since Islamabad remains a troubled and vulnerable state. Nevertheless the administration has used these events to rapidly restore a partnership that is important to it, and in a way that saves Pakistan's self-respect. It also clears the way for American influence in Pakistan on other decisions. These include the holding of democratic elections (scheduled for October 2002), further restraints on Pakistan's small nuclear arsenal, the maintenance of a free press in Pakistan (one of the best in Asia, and certainly in the Muslim world), a new emphasis on reviving Pakistan's educational and administrative institutions, and a fresh attempt to begin a dialogue with India over Kashmir and other issues. As he was firing or sidetracking the hardline generals, Musharraf contacted Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, requesting that the India-Pakistan summit process be restarted. These are all developments that Washington has been urging on Pakistan, it may be that September 11 indirectly made them possible.

Pakistan-India and Kashmir

After it came to office, the Bush administration sought a much closer relationship with India. Like the Clinton administration, there was little inclination to get involved in the seemingly intractable India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir. However, the present crisis demonstrates that Washington cannot long remain disengaged from this dispute, and it can be expected that Kashmir will once again get a "new look."

This could raise expectations in Pakistan of American support for the Kashmiri cause.

just as it raises Indian fears that the United States has now lost interest (once again) in Delhi. Neither view is shared in Washington. Kashmir is still seen as intractable, but it is also a dispute that demands management. This is because Kashmir has been the locus of a variety of terrorist operations, and it has become a “cause” among radical Islamic groups around the world. Finally, India and Pakistan could stumble into a war over Kashmir, and escalation to a nuclear confrontation is easy to imagine. Thus, while it does not have a formula that will solve the Kashmir conflict (any more than it has one for the Palestine-Israel dispute), the Bush administration does have a template to work from, that of a peace process. A peace process has three components. First, it is a routinized dialogue. Meetings occur on a regular basis, even if little or no progress is evident. Second, the process moves forward because of the expectation that some change in policy on the part of both sides is possible over time. There have to be enough agreements, even tiny ones, to keep the process rolling ahead. Finally, such a process will involve a series of incentives and verification arrangements. The former make it easier for one or more parties to accept a particular sub-agreement, the latter ensure that once an agreement is reached, then violations by the other side will be detectable.

In South Asia (as has been the case thus far in the Middle East) Washington is unlikely to field a high-level emissary, assume a highly visible public profile, or announce that a peace process has begun. It is more likely to intensify its “private” diplomacy, urging both India and Pakistan to resume the aborted summit meetings that were inaugurated by the Indians in Lahore in 1999 (followed by the Agra meeting earlier this year).

Washington will also be forthcoming with offers to help India and Pakistan (separately or collectively) verify specific agreements, and it may be able to offer new incentives that would be geared to such agreements. As part of this dialogue process

With near-normal relations with both India and Pakistan, Washington is no longer seen as a sanctions-obsessed superpower. Musharraf has thrown in his lot with the United States and India still hopes for a larger strategic relationship with Washington. If the Bush administration can overcome its aversion to “peace processes,” it has an opportunity to facilitate one between India and Pakistan. This process will consist of small, baby steps at first, but this could lead to more substantive discussions in the near future. If it does not bring peace to Kashmir, it might bring a more normal relationship between India and Pakistan, and reduce the risk of a larger, catastrophic war between

the two new nuclear states.

Pitfalls

Can the Bush Administration go three for three in South Asia? So far, they seem to be quick learners. They have learned much about Islam and the differences among Muslims, the structure of international terrorism, the need to work with a very heterogeneous alliance and the requirement of obtaining international approval for forceful action. In South Asia, the Bush administration may wind up supporting some serious state-building in Afghanistan, it will try to foster a more moderate and secular-oriented Pakistan, and it is going to take a cautious first-step down the road of seeking a resolution-or amelioration-of the Kashmir conflict.

None of these tasks will be easy, but there will never be a better opportunity to tackle them. Yet, good intentions and massive military power do not ensure success in any venture, and there are several pitfalls that await the United States in South Asia. Some of these pitfalls have been publicly discussed already:

- It has already proven very difficult to assemble an Afghan political coalition from the disparate (and rival) members of the Northern Alliance and various Pushtun tribal groups, while King Zahir Shah has once again proven to be a disappointment.
- The war could be prolonged if Pakistan's intelligence services cannot (or will not) withdraw their assets from the Taliban. Musharraf may have fired his ISI chief, but will the subordinates cooperate with the United States, or continue their links with the nastier elements of the Taliban?
- The apparent defeat of the Taliban may, ironically, spread the conflict to Pakistan, as thousands of Taliban fighters, and the leadership, take refuge in the one foreign country they know best, Pakistan. Washington could hardly bomb its new coalition partner, Pakistan, yet something will have to be done to contain or eliminate those Taliban (and possibly Al Qaeda) fighters. If they should reach Karachi or another Pakistani city in

significant numbers then Pakistan will be faced with the prospect of urban guerilla warfare.

- Afghanistan may not have an effective central government for some time. With the winter approaching, air cover problematic, and no clear political alternative emerging, would Pakistani public opinion tolerate an inconclusive war that dragged on for six months or more? Would the United States be satisfied if it only disrupted, rather than eradicated, the terrorist operations based in Afghanistan?
 - Iran, Russia, and some of the former Soviet Central Asian republics have strong interests in the future of Afghanistan. Pakistan's views on an acceptable regime for Kabul may not match up with the interests of these states, each of which have ties to powerful Afghan factions.
 - In Pakistan the commitment of General Musharraf to join the war against terrorism will be qualified in the case of Kashmir. Pakistan will continue to send "freedom fighters" across the Line of Control. Many of these groups have engaged in horrible atrocities against civilians. Yet, there could be a backlash if Musharraf cracks down against these groups in Pakistan.
 - If Washington cannot contain this Pakistani support for the terror-wielding groups operating in Kashmir, this problem could become wrapped up in Indian domestic politics. The dominant Bharatiya Janata Party wants to show Indian voters and its own hard-line supporters that India can forcefully respond to terrorist provocations. There is already considerable pressure to emulate the Americans by striking the country that is the source of the terrorists¹⁵¹ in this case, Pakistan.
- None of these are inevitable, but they are worrisome. The Bush administration should pursue the reconstruction of Afghanistan, the stabilization of Pakistan, and the normalization of India-Pakistan relations right now, while the momentum for change is in the right direction. If it delays diplomacy until the shells stop falling, then it will also lose valuable time in a region that is quickly running out of peaceful options.

