

Perspectives from Fragile Crescent: A South Asia Crisis Simulation

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The Obama administration has arguably inherited the toughest national security environment since the end of World War II. Instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan has propelled South Asia to the top of a U.S. national security agenda already crowded with a long list of major problems that includes North Korea, Iran, and Iraq.¹ The political, security, and economic trends in Afghanistan and Pakistan have taken a turn for the worse, as the two countries confront an increasingly violent Taliban-led insurgency and al Qaeda-linked militant jihadist groups. To make matters even worse, Pakistan's relations with India have been damaged by the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks.

In February 2009, as national security experts were discussing proposals for U.S. strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, a small group of senior governmental officials from the executive and legislative branches gathered at the National Defense University (NDU) in Washington, DC, to participate in Fragile Crescent, a South Asia crisis simulation exercise. The exercise posed a number of hypothetical scenarios intended to stimulate thinking about current and future challenges in South Asia. The Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) Center for Applied Strategic Learning at NDU developed the exercise and hosted the event. This report recaps the highlights of the exercise and discussions among experts.

Background

The exercise focused on three policy challenges: balancing the interests of key stakeholders in Afghanistan, confronting the major drivers of instability in South Asia and mitigating its effects on development efforts in Afghanistan, and addressing

the India-Pakistan rivalry and its impact on stability in Pakistan and counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan.

The exercise focused on the period from April to September 2009 and involved three distinct moves during which scenario updates were introduced via video and graphic injects. The first move opened in mid-April 2009 with the report of an attack against a major International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troop contributor's diplomatic presence in Kabul. The attack took place amid a significant escalation in Taliban-sponsored attacks on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan and Alliance supply lines transiting Pakistan. In the second move, the scenario advanced 10 weeks, and participants were confronted with an attack on a major Pakistani government facility in Islamabad. In the third and final move, the scenario advanced to early September, when participants were faced with an India-Pakistan crisis provoked by Pakistan-based Islamic militant attacks on Indian military targets near the Line of Control in the disputed Kashmir region.

Each move was followed by a facilitated discussion. Participants developed hypothetical recommendations for senior U.S. policymakers including direct responses to the events posed in the scenario, as well as policy and strategy initiatives to secure long-term U.S. policy goals. In the course of the 3-hour exercise, participants focused on three key areas around which a new South Asia strategy might be formed:

- ◆ securing the long-term substantive commitment of allies and partners to the international coalition carrying out the state-building effort in Afghanistan

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- ◆ rebalancing the international development effort in Afghanistan to leverage the strength of local communities while taking care not to undermine nascent national-level institutions or disrupt regional balances needed to support the greater integrity of the Afghan state over the long term
- ◆ shaping the long-term U.S. relationship with Pakistan and managing the likely destabilizing events that might erupt in the near term.

Secure Commitment

As the United States moves forward to implement the new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, it will be important to gauge the level of support that the United States can count on from its NATO Allies and coalition partners. The extent of each Ally's and partner's support will depend on the level of domestic political support in each country and its vision of its domestic and international interests. The United States and Allies need to define each participating nation's economic, military, and political contribution. If a country cannot commit troops free of caveats that restrict their operational employment, it may be more beneficial and politically expedient to ask it for financial resources or logistical support. Indeed, the most pressing needs in Afghanistan center on traditionally civilian competencies, such as governance, a justice system, and agricultural development.

Public opinion in countries contributing to the coalition is a key vulnerability. The year 2009 is a pivotal one that could determine the future of Alliance commitment to Afghanistan. The change in U.S. administrations provided a fresh opportunity to recalibrate the coalition effort. But the level of international goodwill and support that the United States had received from its transatlantic partners has dissipated over the past 8 years. Convincing the Europeans of the need to succeed in Afghanistan is a major task facing the Obama administration. Providing incentives and a smart division of labor among Allies and partners might provide ways to strengthen and sustain the coalition. At the same time, the United States and its Allies and partners will have to be prepared to deal with setbacks. With violence growing in Afghanistan (even in previously quiet provinces), responding to a major attack on NATO forces will be essential to prevent such an attack from sapping the political will of the coalition.

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Visible political progress in Afghanistan is critical to sustaining European support. The strategic importance of a successful Afghan presidential election (currently scheduled for August 20, 2009) cannot be overstated, given that the legitimacy of the president is a fundamental issue affecting the future stability of Afghanistan. It is vital that Afghans perceive the upcoming election and the campaign season leading up to it as fair and transparent. But it is equally important that the international community sees it in the same vein. Postponement of elections from the currently planned date because of security concerns could further erode European commitment, while holding the election too early could contribute to insecurity, boost perceptions of unfairness, and undermine the election's legitimacy. European monitoring groups will play an important role in oversight of the election, but there is uncertainty as to the ability of the Afghan government to conduct a secure election without more direct involvement of NATO and U.S. forces.

Exercise participants noted that the United States, NATO, and other international partners should make support of the election a top priority and ensure that the necessary resources are allocated toward helping the Afghan government ensure the integrity of processes leading up to the election and its security. That means more troops on the ground as guardians for what is sure to be a contentious campaign season.

The lack of coordination among Allies and partners and conflicting agendas have hampered their overall effort. The Obama administration's new mission statement for the Afghanistan-Pakistan effort aims to "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens." This statement is intended to provide much-needed clarity. NATO's initial commitment under Article 5 of its charter was, from the viewpoint of many Europeans, solely for a peacekeeping and development mission and not a protracted counterinsurgency/counterterrorism mission involving combat. This has contributed to loss of political will in some NATO member states and lack of cohesion in the international effort. It remains to be seen if the administration's refocusing of the Afghan mission has any impact on the resolve of key NATO members and their willingness to fall in line with manpower and resources in support of the newly articulated objectives.

Some participants reported that many military personnel from European countries contributing to ISAF often want to do more, but they are constrained by caveats imposed by their governments. This was attributed to disagreements over ISAF's purpose. It is apparent that the United States is probably the only nation that can provide the leadership necessary to address this lack of cohesion

and coordinate the myriad organizations helping stabilize and develop Afghanistan. However, it is equally apparent that leadership without allied support would be futile.

Defining realistic, attainable near-term goals for Afghanistan is an important first step toward unifying the international effort. More important in the view of some exercise participants, the United States should now be prepared to make reasonable concessions—temper its demands on NATO allies with regard to Afghanistan—so as to avoid having the Alliance become a single point of failure in the Afghan effort, ultimately diminishing the strength of the Alliance and weakening the national security of the United States. It remains to be seen whether the Obama administration will be successful in bringing about better cohesion among the allies, partners, and other stakeholders.

Rebalance International Development

The strength of Afghanistan is in the country's strong local communities. Goals such as economic development, improved governance, and judicial system reform have a better chance of succeeding if the balance of effort is shifted

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to provincial and district levels. Yet national-level institutions remain essential to the long-term stability of the state, so care should be taken not to undermine the fragile central government in Kabul. Any provision of resources to the local level should, to the greatest extent practical, be accomplished with the sanction of—and in the name of—the central government. An important step is to catalogue the parochialisms in Afghanistan's numerous locales and tailor the vision of a future Afghan state and the approaches to development accordingly, while at the same time continuing support for the growth and development of essential national-level institutions.

Public opinion trends in Afghanistan show that where the United States or ISAF has a sustained presence, even when involved in sustained combat, popular support is relatively strong; and where presence is sparse or sporadic (in-and-out operations), popular support is relatively low. This dynamic is consistent with basic counterinsurgency theory. The coalition is generally welcomed in many parts of Afghanistan, but given that nation's history, there is deep skepticism that the United States and NATO will stay the

course. A better public diplomacy strategy should accompany a local focus to build a foundation of trust between Afghan communities and the U.S.-led coalition. With 80 percent of the population considered illiterate, the challenge is getting a message across that negates the opposing message being skillfully crafted by the Taliban-led insurgency. Furthermore, Washington should continue to institutionalize whole-of-government counterinsurgency, reconstruction, and stabilization capabilities that facilitate the building of local partnerships. The enactment of authorities similar to the Commander's Emergency Response Program, which started as a stop-gap program to provide funds directly to military commanders for the purpose of supporting small-scale development projects, could greatly improve U.S. interagency capacity in this area.

With regard to Afghanistan's opium problem, locally focused efforts should be placed in the context of a larger regional approach to avoid unintended consequences. The opium dilemma spans local, national, and regional interests and should be addressed effectively at each level simultaneously.² In provinces such as Helmand, local authorities do not have the capacity to address expanding poppy cultivation on their own, so national forces are currently needed. Interagency efforts at building the Counter Narcotics Police-Afghanistan into an effective drug law enforcement agency have seen some success, but only in Kabul.³ The next phase would be to duplicate this success in Helmand and other provinces to create local capacity for the counternarcotics mission. But as counternarcotics capacity is added at the local level, the United States, NATO, and the Afghan government should anticipate the potential for displacement of clandestine heroin processing laboratories and other illicit narcotics activity to other provinces and neighboring countries, to include Iran. Thus, in conjunction with a new emphasis on local development, the United States and its partners should be prepared to facilitate stronger regional cooperation around issues of common interest, such as the opium trade. Successful counternarcotics programs in some neighboring Central Asia countries could provide a foundation and model for such cooperation.

Shape Long-term Relations with Pakistan

Success in Afghanistan requires the Pakistani government and military to confront two key issues: the continued support of militant groups by elements within the Pakistani Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence, and the sanctuary enjoyed by the Taliban's *Quetta Shura* (council) led by Mullah Mohammed Omar in Pakistan's restive Balochistan Province. The Pakistani government and military will not be committed to this endeavor unless confidence in a

long-term U.S.-Pakistani relationship replaces the general feeling among Pakistani civilian and military leaders that the United States will eventually disengage from the region and roll back its economic and military support. The lack of confidence in its relationship with the United States strongly influences Pakistan's strategic calculations and motivates its continued clandestine support for militant organizations.

Furthermore, in the context of establishing a long-term commitment to Pakistan, the United States and its allies should recognize that Pakistan is a country in crisis that requires a sustained international development effort on par with the one occurring in Afghanistan. Just as a boost in confidence in a long-term political-military relationship could begin to sway Islamabad's strategic calculus in favor of Western interests, building confidence in America among the Pakistani people is prerequisite for more direct involvement in Pakistan's development.

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There is widespread popular resentment over Pakistan's entanglements with the U.S.-led campaign, and Pakistanis, in large measure, blame the United States for governance failures and rising militant violence in their country. Indeed, it is unclear what level of assistance, at present, the Pakistani government could welcome from the United States beyond accepting more military aid. Past indicators demonstrate the political difficulty that Islamabad has had with accepting more overt U.S. involvement in security and development. For example, deep mistrust has caused the United States to be repeatedly rebuffed on offers of help to secure nuclear facilities and for any assistance that would require U.S. "boots on the ground" in Pakistan.

Thus, the United States should reshape its approach in such a way that it signals a long-term commitment to Pakistan's security and prosperity without aggravating perceptions that it is interfering with the country's sovereignty or simply using Pakistan to achieve its own ends.

But as the United States moves to reform its image in Pakistan, it should anticipate destabilizing events and prepare to react in measured ways and to exploit strategic opportunities. The United States should be ready to support the Pakistani government against any attack from militants. Highlighting militant attacks on Pakistani people would potentially help demonstrate why the United States and

others are seeking to support regional stability. Additionally, the United States should anticipate how various attacks could trigger a sudden escalation in tensions between Pakistan and India. The United States should quickly stake out a position in the aftermath of such attacks and prepare to leverage available diplomatic channels to head off any rise in tensions between the two countries. The United States should assume that it might have to move forward with diplomacy to defuse a crisis despite the absence of clear information.

The United States should also prepare to use its foreign assistance and political leverage to shape the calculations of Pakistan's leaders in the face of destabilizing terror activities or political upheaval without reinforcing Pakistani lack of confidence in the United States as a steadfast ally. The United States has an enduring interest in helping Pakistan continue to strengthen its institutions and should not allow episodic terror attacks or lapses into varying states of emergency rule to halt or reverse Pakistan's tenuous progress toward better governance. Participants generally thought that the United States should seek to avoid sudden disruptions in aid similar to the decade-long hiatus in U.S. International Military Education and Training assistance to Pakistan during the 1990s. In retrospect, the sanctions that suspended this assistance may well have damaged America's strategic relationship with Pakistan; certainly, the U.S. military lost touch with a generation of key Pakistani military leaders.

Finally, a solid foundation for a long-term relationship with Pakistan will not be achieved without considering the future course of the India-Pakistan rivalry over Kashmir. While the effect of the Kashmir dispute on regional stability might well be overstated, the United States should prepare to help defuse any crisis so Kashmir does not become a distraction that undermines Pakistan's commitment of resources to counterinsurgency operations in its tribal belt, with the concomitant consequences for allied efforts in Afghanistan.

The United States should understand, however, that India is against internationalizing the Kashmir dispute, which it views as partly an internal issue and partly a bilateral issue with Pakistan. For its purposes, Pakistan would likely support international pressure to resolve the Kashmir dispute and would welcome direct United Nations and U.S. involvement.

On balance, participants thought that the United States and its allies should attempt to help manage the Kashmir issue and keep it from being a distraction without conflating the disputed region as the linchpin of South Asian stability. To pursue this goal with the needed discretion, the United States should be prepared to engage the new Indian

government in thinking through potential crisis scenarios involving the region. Washington and New Delhi should leverage the political turnover in their countries to strive to come to an a priori understanding of where and when the United States can be constructive in helping to manage future crises without interjecting itself directly into

comprehensive education and institutional reform may be the most important factor in helping a message of moderation gain widespread traction in South Asia

the Kashmir issue, and where and when it would be more appropriate to consider the role of regional players for taking the lead on mediation. Nevertheless, all things considered, during a serious flare up in Indo-Pakistani tensions over Kashmir that raises the specter of nuclear escalation, the U.S. administration would likely face significant political pressure to engage as a mediator despite the sensitivity of the issue. Just as important, the administration will have to consider how outcomes will affect the integrity of the global nonproliferation regime and the behavior of other countries, namely, Iran and North Korea.

Higher Order Considerations and Shaping Perceptions

One unifying theme emerged from this wide-ranging discussion among exercise participants: progress is sorely needed in the war of ideas on several levels. As the United States and its allies adopt a new approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan, a new strategy may be measured by how well it mobilizes support, both within the countries and within the international coalition. Achieving a consensus around clearly delineated objectives and missions may determine whether coalition support can be sustained, and sustaining support may well require changing the nature of assistance from some European allies from mostly military to mostly nonmilitary contributions. If the Afghan mission can benefit from a shift in focus to local development to leverage the strengths of local communities in the fight against the Taliban insurgency, the United States should consider how this can be done without undermining the legitimacy of the central government and how the confidence of local communities in the staying power of the coalition can be strengthened. If Pakistan requires a development effort on the scale of Afghanistan that is led by the United States, then the United States should consider how to signal its

commitment to a long-term relationship without undermining public support for the Pakistani government and how to exploit disruptive events—natural or anthropogenic—as strategic opportunities to convince Pakistan’s people of our commonality of interests in opposing militant extremism.

Ultimately, comprehensive education and institutional reform may be the most important factor in helping a message of moderation gain widespread traction in South Asia, but this is a generational undertaking. Accordingly, the greatest challenge facing the Obama administration as it implements its strategy for South Asia is to build public support on a more modest definition of short-term success. And this must be accomplished while simultaneously building the confidence of Afghans and Pakistanis that the commitment of the United States and its allies to vanquishing extremism and developing the region is an enduring one.

Notes

¹ For an overview of the Obama administration’s strategy and policy with regard to the conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan, see <www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/afghanistan_pakistan_white_paper_final.pdf>.

² The narcotics trade in South Asia provides not only funding to militant groups such as the Taliban but also a source of livelihood for local populations. The United States and the International Security Assistance Force have found it difficult to complement poppy eradication efforts and other programs to shut down the opium industry with the development of alternative livelihoods for Afghan farmers, making eradication efforts counterproductive in many cases.

³ Development of the Counter Narcotics Police–Afghanistan is an interagency program supported by the Combined Security Training Command–Afghanistan, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (Department of State), and Drug Enforcement Administration (Department of Justice).

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