



The Coming Change of Course in Afghanistan

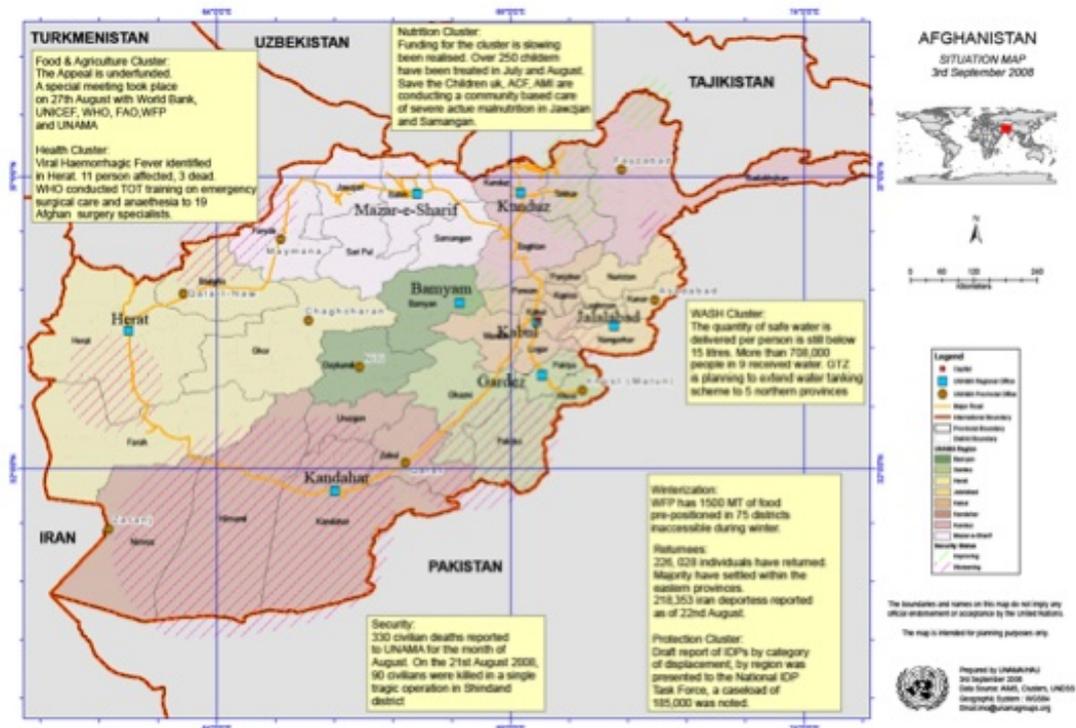
China Hand

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As the US public is dimly aware, things are not going very well in Afghanistan.

The United Nation situation map for Afghanistan issued September 3 (the most recent available) paints a grim picture:



The large swaths shaded with the purple diagonal lines are places where things are getting worse. This includes the entire area surrounding Kandahar on the Pakistan border in the south, as well as areas on the Pakistan-Tajikstan border in the Northeast and other areas on the Turkmenistan border to the Northwest.

Despite the deterioration of security in the Afghan countryside—illustrated by the recent massacre of 24 bus passengers by the Taliban on a major highway in Helmand province—a Taliban reconquest of Afghanistan is unlikely.

Recall that it took years, \$5-6 billion in CIA funding matched dollar for dollar by the Saudis, and a concerted national effort by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan assisting a variety of domestic and foreign fighters to expel the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. It also took officially-sanctioned safe havens in Pakistan that the Russians wouldn't violate, and supply of Stinger missiles to negate the vital Soviet advantage in helicopter-based mobility and firepower.

None of these conditions currently obtain in Afghanistan.

The United States and NATO can't be driven from Afghanistan militarily. Nor, however, can the Taliban be crushed in the foreseeable future.

The political will inside the United States to remain in Afghanistan is not lacking, especially since the Taliban insurgency is tangled up with the unresolved issue of Osama bin Laden, who has still escaped American retribution in the Taliban-controlled or Taliban-friendly areas of eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan.

Barack Obama, the likely victor in the upcoming presidential elections, has made support for the "Good War" in Afghanistan the necessary counterweight to his condemnation of the "Bad War" in Iraq, and has vowed to send two to three more brigades to Afghanistan in order to turn around the situation there. He is not going to put his administration on the wrong side of the "Are the Democrats too weak on national security" debate by trying to disengage from Iraq and Afghanistan at the same time.

The US is going to be in Afghanistan for years to come.

The only thing that's going to change in Afghanistan is the objectives.

The Afghan adventure is expensive, onerous, and unpopular, and most of the 40 or so countries participating in the International Security Assistance Force and the host of NGOs trying to better the lives of the downtrodden Afghani people would like to see a new policy—one that separates the existential goal of crushing al Qaeda from the strictly local issue of what political grouping gets to run the failed state of Afghanistan, and tries to slice and dice and co-opt the insurgency instead of pursuing the impossible goal of crushing the Taliban's entrenched power in Afghanistan's mountains and countryside.

The world has made its voice heard, and America has apparently listened.

All the indications are that the U.S. military and foreign policy establishment has already abandoned the ambitious neo-conservative objective of crushing the Taliban and remaking Afghanistan as a functioning democracy.

America's Afghanistan policy is falling into the hands of the realists, whose highest priority is maintaining a tractable and viable client in Kabul, keeping Afghanistan securely inside the U.S. sphere of interest, holding on to a key chess piece in Central Asia's great game of energy resources and pipeline infrastructure, and offering the Pentagon another basing option to bedevil Russia and Iran.

Despite the absurdity of a multi-year, multi-billion dollar entanglement in Central Asia that will do little more than advance unilateral US security objectives, U.S. allies will be willing to demonstrate their support for new U.S. leadership after the disastrous Bush years, and will probably heed an American call for a redoubled effort in Afghanistan.

The key suppliers of money and manpower to the NATO effort in Afghanistan—Great Britain, Canada, Germany, and Australia—are all under administrations that have made continued engagement in Afghanistan a cornerstone of their foreign policies but now demand a fundamental change in course.

With a broad international consensus on Afghanistan, the United States will now seek to impose a firm hand on the emerging policy process—and prepare public opinion still mired in the obsolete death-match-versus-the-Taliban-and-al-Qaeda mindset pursued over the last six years at the cost of thousands of lives and tens of billions of dollars for a brave new world in which the Taliban enter the government and Afghan democracy goes out the window.

Time is of the essence—in order to halt the military decline inside Afghanistan and to co-opt a burgeoning non-U.S. peace initiative for the region that might pre-empt U.S. direction of the effort in Afghanistan. Otherwise, control of the terms of engagement in confronting Afghanistan's Taliban insurgency might slip from America's fingers.

In counterinsurgency, the U.S. military learned from Vietnam that the battle is not won or lost only on the battlefield; victory in the op-ed pages of the homeland is vital as advocates of a prolonged fight in a distant land struggle to sustain the flagging will and interest of the weary populace and wary commander-in-chief.

Nobody understands this better than David Petraeus, the canny and able general who skillfully orchestrated congressional testimony, opinion pieces by himself and conservative public intellectuals, and media coverage to recast the political terms of debate, and adroitly channel the 2006 wave of US domestic opposition to the Iraq war—and the Baker-Hamilton report intended to serve as its enabling document—into the surge that, for better or worse, will keep American military power at the heart of Iraq's security equation for the foreseeable future.

General Petraeus will take the top spot in US Central Command, responsible for the entire Middle East, on October 31, and is already preparing his plan to rescue the faltering Western effort in Afghanistan.

He recently gave the Washington Post a tour of the virtual armory in which he is forging his weapons in the battle for public opinion—the Powerpoint presentations, op-ed pieces, leaks, and favorable coverage by pundits and reporters that will encourage a new president hungry for a national security triumph to give him a free hand.

From the October 16 [Washington Post](#) :

Gen. David H. Petraeus has launched a major reassessment of U.S. strategy for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and the surrounding region, while warning that the lack of development and the spiraling violence in Afghanistan will probably make it "the longest campaign of the long war."

The 100-day assessment will result in a new campaign plan for the Middle East and Central Asia, a region in which Petraeus will oversee the operations of more than 200,000 American troops as the new head of U.S. Central Command, beginning Oct. 31.

... experts and military officials involved said Petraeus is already focused on at least two major themes: government-led reconciliation of Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the leveraging of diplomatic and economic initiatives with nearby countries that are influential in the war. . . .

Petraeus's Joint Strategic Assessment Team ... is reaching out to handpicked experts as well as State Department, Pentagon and other civilian and military officials with experience in the region.

The team will comprise about 100 people, organized initially into six subregional teams, tasked with investigating the root causes of insecurity in the region with the goal of finding solutions that integrate military action, diplomacy and development work.

Petraeus' vast authority, resources, and latitude in setting the terms of the Afghanistan debate should be a source of concern. As a noted authority on South Asia asserted, "General Petraeus is not in charge of our diplomacy. He can't decide whether we try to form an international contacts group on Pakistan," Barnett Rubin commented.

Ironically, Dr. Rubin's allegiance to the quaint concept of civilian control over foreign policy may have cost him a seat at General Petraeus's round table of knights questing for the counter-insurgency grail.

Jim Lobe [reports](#) that Rubin's collaborator on the think piece From Great Game to Grand Bargain, one of the seminal documents of the Taliban engagement policy, Ahmed Rashid, was invited to join the general's brain trust. But Dr. Rubin apparently was not.

After eight years of catastrophic civilian foreign policy leadership, maybe the zeitgeist of that war is too important not to be left to the generals.

But fear not. In classic milspeak, we are reassured that the military will keep an eye on the military. There's a plan:

An overview of the review team's mission obtained by The Post says that including other government agencies and other nations in the planning will "mitigate the risk of over-militarization of efforts and the development of short-term solutions to long-term problems."

Indeed, the trends both in the NATO countries and in the key South Asian countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan all point to a consolidation of expert consensus in favor of an Afghanistan change of course and a concurrent media campaign to enlighten and guide the befuddled populace in support of the new policy, all under military direction.

Already, the British flank has been secured—apparently, the UK is always needed to provide the figleaf of multilateralism for these sorts of things--with the [appointment](#) of a new numero uno for the British Army eager to support another push in Afghanistan.

In a sign of how things are changing, this development was reported as an exclusive by Kim Sengupta in Britain's left-of-center newspaper, The Independent. Those with memories of the run-up to the Iraq war will remember that these sorts of exclusives used to be the preserve of neo-con outlets like Conrad Black's Telegraph.

A general who believes a "surge" of 30,000 more troops is needed in Afghanistan to fight the Taliban will be appointed as the new head of the British Army today, The Independent has learnt.

General Sir David Richards, who will take over from General Sir Richard Dannatt, is believed to favour sending up to 5,000 more British troops to Afghanistan on top of the 8,000 already in the country. The other 25,000 troops would be made up of US reinforcements and newly trained Afghan soldiers.

In the same issue, The Independent also obligingly excerpted a platitudinous [speech](#) given by U.S. Secretary of Defense (and possible holdover in an Obama administration) Robert Gates—to the US Institute of Peace!-- apparently to reassure Europe that the Pentagon had moved beyond the Bush administration's knee-jerk reliance on military force and is prepared do things in Afghanistan in a holistic hearts-and-minds way:

We must be prepared to change old ways of doing business and create new institutions – both nationally and internationally – to deal with the long-term challenges we face abroad. And our own national security toolbox must be well-equipped with more than just hammers.

The context for all this reasonableness is, of course, the fact that Hamid Karzai, even with the support of 53,000 foreign troops (23,000 US troops under US command, 30,000 US, British, and other troops in ISAF—the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force), has failed to gain traction in the Taliban areas and in fact is referred to as "The Mayor of Kabul" in a mocking reference to the shrinking size of his realm.

Via Dawn:

LONDON, Oct 5: The UK's commander in Helmand has dampened Britain's hopes of a "decisive military victory" in Afghanistan saying that the aim of the mission was to ensure the Afghan army was able to manage the country on its own.

Brig Mark Carleton-Smith told the Sunday Times that this could involve discussing security with the Taliban. . . .

Brig Carleton-Smith is the Commander of 16 Air Assault Brigade which has just completed its second tour of Afghanistan.

He paid tribute to his forces and told the newspaper they had "taken the sting out of the Taliban for 2008". But he stated: "We're not going to win this war." . . .

He said: "If the Taliban were prepared to sit on the other side of the table and talk about a political settlement, then that's precisely the sort of progress that concludes insurgencies like this."

"That shouldn't make people uncomfortable."

Well, it doesn't make the Financial Times uncomfortable:

LONDON, Oct 11: Britain's Financial Times newspaper has advised the US and Nato to review their present policies in Afghanistan and come to some kind of a peaceful settlement with the Taliban.

"It may be shocking that the military might of the West cannot defeat the Taliban, but it is true," said the daily in an editorial: "The unwinnable war in Afghanistan".

The French did their piece by leaking a cable from France's top diplomat in Kabul, reporting that the British ambassador, Sherard Cowper-Coles, believed that a) Afghanistan was going all to hell b) the Karzai regime was doomed and c) the presence of foreign forces only made things worse. From the [JHT](#):

"The current situation is bad, the security situation is getting worse, so is corruption, and the government has lost all trust...The presence of the coalition, in particular its military presence, is part of the problem, not part of its solution," Cowper-Coles was quoted as saying. "Foreign forces are the lifeline of a regime that would rapidly collapse without them. As such, they slow down and complicate a possible emergence from the crisis."

And more from the Danes, in a [report](#) from AFP:

Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moeller said in an interview published Wednesday he supported the idea of the Afghan government holding talks with the Taliban, albeit with some conditions. . . .

The rights women have regained since the Taliban were driven from power in 2001 should also not be negotiable, he said.

"We should civilise the Taliban so Afghanistan is not 'Talibanised' again, otherwise we'll have to leave the country," said the Danish foreign minister.

Japan's Asahi Shimbun joined the chorus in an October 18, 2008 editorial on "MSDF Refueling Bill," pointing out that "The best strategy now is to explore reconciliation through talks with moderate members of the Taliban for a peace agreement to isolate the terrorist organization al-Qaida."

Even the new commander of the British Army, General Richards, while calling for his 30,000 troop surge into Afghanistan, had to concede the need for negotiations:

General Richards also believes that a negotiated settlement may be necessary to end the conflict, but that any talks must take place with the Afghan government and Nato in a position of strength.

Contra General Richards, negotiations have not only already begun, but have already yielded concrete outcomes.

International Peace Day, September 21, was [marked](#) in Afghanistan by a truce between Taliban, international, and Afghan government forces to permit the delivery of polio vaccinations to Afghan children:

Medics with polio vaccinations pushed into some of Afghanistan's most volatile provinces on the United Nations' Peace Day Sunday with a Taliban pledge they should not be harmed during the three-day drive.

The Taliban had also agreed to not carry out any attacks on Peace Day following a call from President Hamid Karzai that resulted in the Afghan and international military forces agreeing to refrain from offensive operations. . . .

The Taliban said Saturday it had ordered its followers to allow the vaccinators safe access to their areas. They had copies of a letter from the group's leadership asking for them to be unharmed, [WHO representative Peter] Graaff said.

In a further sign that the international community sees Taliban political and military strength as signs of a significant domestic insurgency that can and must be negotiated with, and no longer through the lens of the American Global War on Terror (GWOT) as a target for utter annihilation, the UN's envoy to Afghanistan, Kai Eide also gave a cringing shout-out on the UN website to the Taliban to help the UN deliver humanitarian aid in significant swaths of the country in which the Karzai writ apparently runs not:

"I will take this opportunity to appeal to the Taliban and to appeal to its leaders to ensure access for food distribution and to expand the humanitarian agenda that we should share," he said. "There are disagreements on so many things – but let us demonstrate that we can share this humanitarian agenda."

Most worrisome for the United States, Afghan president Hamid Karzai—aware that America's peripatetic viceroy, Zalmay Khalilzad, has his eyes on Karzai's job and perhaps resentful of the overbearing US micromanagement of his administration as a [result](#) -- apparently slipped the leash and did not wait for a change in US policy to conduct talks with the Taliban.

While American pundits fulminated about terrorist havens in South Waziristan, Karzai sent his brother to participate in a meeting with the Taliban under Saudi Arabia's aegis in September.

In an article entitled [Source: Saudi hosts peace talks with Afghan, Taliban reps](#), CNN [reported](#) on September 28:

LONDON, England (CNN) -- In a groundbreaking meeting, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia recently hosted talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban militant group, according to a source familiar with the talks.

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia hosted meetings between the Afghan government and the Taliban, a source says.

The historic four-day meeting took place during the last week of September in the Saudi city of Mecca, according to the source, who spoke on the condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the negotiations.

King Abdullah broke fast during the Eid al-Fitr holiday with the 17-member Afghan delegation -- an act intended to show his commitment to ending the conflict. . . .

The current round of talks is anticipated to be a first step in a long process. According to the source close to the talks, it has taken two years of behind-the-scenes meetings to get to this point. . . .

During the talks, all parties agreed that the only solution to Afghanistan's conflict is through dialogue, not fighting.

Saudi Arabia—a U.S. ally and critical security and economic asset in the region for the last six decades—is also the homeland of most of the 9/11 hijackers, protector of the Sunni faithful, and a long-time ally of the Taliban and other conservative and largely anti-American forces in the Middle East. As U.S. credibility and clout waned in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, Saudi Arabia has been quietly but determinedly playing its own hand in Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, often to the detriment of U.S. clients elevated to power as part of the U.S. democracy crusade.

In US eyes, there's only one thing that Karzai could do that's worse than participating in a competing regional diplomacy initiative spearheaded by the Taliban-friendly Saudi Arabia. And he's already done it.

From the Pakistan media outlet [Dawn](#):

KABUL: Afghan President Hamid Karzai advised the Taliban leader in Afghanistan, Mullah Omar to return to Afghanistan and guaranteed his safety.

In an exclusive interview to Geo television channel, Karzai said, Through Pakistan television channel Geo I propose Mullah Omar to get back to Afghanistan as I will be wholly and solely responsible for his security and I shall be answerable to the whole of the world on his behalf.



Karzai administration officials and Taliban rebels negotiate

Karzai also invited Mullah Omar to join him in the political process of Afghanistan by being hopeful for the next presidential election as Karzai reckoned Omar's return in the best interest of the prosperity and safety of the country.
[emph. added]

Mullah Omar is, of course, the head of the Taliban, brother-in-arms (and according to unconfirmed sources, brother-in-law) of Osama bin Laden, whose government was toppled by Operation Enduring Freedom. From Dawn's tortured syntax, it appears that Karzai is inviting Mullah Omar to participate in the presidential elections scheduled for next year.

Mullah Omar's return to Afghanistan political life would be an intolerably vivid illustration of the futility of the world's six-year effort to remake Afghanistan.



Mullah Omar

As Bloomberg [reports](#), U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, was compelled to say that he drew the line at talks with Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar. "I, in my wildest imagination, would not consider Mullah Omar a reconcilable," he said.

If that wasn't enough, Karzai further hedged his bets by opening talks with the notorious Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of death by shipping container fame, according to The [Independent](#):

According to diplomatic sources the Karzai government opened channels to Hekmatyar through members of his family who visited Kabul. Three months ago the warlord's son-in-law, Dr Ghairat Baheer, was released after spending six years in an Afghan prison and is said to be playing a part in ongoing negotiations.

Although his forces are engaged in fighting inside Afghanistan, Hekmatyar has remained independent from the Taliban and is said to be at odds with its religious leader Mullah Omar. Some of President Karzai's advisors believe that a truce, in which he will be rewarded by being given a government post, may encourage other militant leaders to consider negotiations.

U.S. dissatisfaction with Karzai can be divined from the flood of negative press concerning Karzai's inept and faltering government and the allegation that another brother, who is nominally in charge of Kandahar province, the Taliban stronghold in the southeast, is Afghanistan's biggest opium-trafficker.

It appears that the key job before General Petraeus will be to co-opt the regional impetus toward a negotiated settlement, prevent Saudi Arabia from mid-wiving a power-sharing arrangement favorable to the Taliban, assert American control and direction over the process to assure America's continued presence at the center of Afghan's security equation, and spike the loose cannons that threaten his plan.

Near the top of the list of leaders to be sidelined may well be Hamid Karzai, who apparently does not enjoy the confidence or affection of any of the NATO nations who are being asked to prolong their involvement in Afghanistan, and who have pressed for a housecleaning in Kabul and accommodation with the Taliban.

Britain's acerbic ambassador to Kabul, Sherard Cowper-Coles, is apparently ready to wash his hands of Karzai, according to the leaked French cable reported in the IHT:

Within 5 to 10 years, the only "realistic" way to unite [Afghanistan] is for it to be "governed by an acceptable dictator," the cable said, adding that "we should think of preparing our public opinion" for such an outcome.



Cowper-Coles and Karzai

However, finding a suitable replacement for Hamid Karzai, perhaps from the nascent Afghan army if the available warlords are too unsavory, is not the only issue for General Petraeus.

Even if NATO, the central Afghan authority, and the Afghan Taliban get on the same page, there is still the question of how much collateral damage to tolerate—or provoke—in Pakistan.

U.S. drone attacks and border raids targeting Taliban sanctuaries in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are threatening to turn localized unrest in the mountainous fringes of Pakistan into an existential threat to the Pakistani state.

Inside Pakistan, enthusiasm for U.S. aims and tactics in the Global War on Terror—especially non-stop rummaging through Pakistan's border territories in search of bin Laden and al Qaeda assets— is conspicuously lacking. Support for Pakistani casualties on behalf of the stabilization of the U.S.-backed regime in Kabul is virtually non-existent, especially given the extensive sympathy for the Pashtun and conservative Islamic character of the Taliban inside Pakistan.

The Pakistani Taliban have exploited this apathy with an urban bombing campaign targeting US interests such as the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad and Pakistan government security organs.

Veteran South Asia and Taliban watcher Syed Salee Shazad [reported](#) on the message that the Taliban sent the Pakistani elites with its latest outrage, a bomb hidden in a basket of sweets that destroyed the headquarters of Pakistan's Anti-Terrorist Force in the capital of Islamabad:

A letter recovered from the gift basket read, "If Pakistan does not separate itself from the American crusade on Muslims, these sort of attacks shall continue."

Despite brave chest-beating in the national press about the need to make the war on terror Pakistan's war, it appears that the Taliban has done a very good job of convincing Pakistani opinion that peace in the heartland and accommodation on the borderlands is preferable to a titanic struggle against intermeshed Pashtun and Islamic conservative interests.



Taliban fighters in South Waziristan, their stronghold in Pakistan

An *in camera* session of Pakistan's parliament meant to rally the political parties behind the pro-US/anti-terror initiatives of the civilian government led by Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party turned into a humiliating demonstration that the government lacked the credibility or authority to lead the nation.

Radical Islamic parties openly questioned the premise of a Pakistani war on terror and demanded that the Taliban be allowed to present their side of the story to Parliament.

The powerful democratic party, the PML-N—led by Nawaz Sharif, arguably the popular political figure in Pakistan, refused to make any constructive

contribution to the debate on the government's behalf—a telling indication that the PPP government is profoundly isolated both from conservative and moderate Pakistani opinion on the issue.

Undoubtedly, Sharif calculates that, as the United States slides toward accommodation with the Afghan Taliban, any calls for all-out war on the Pakistan Taliban will become practically and politically untenable.

On October 17, Saeed Shah [reported](#) in The Guardian:

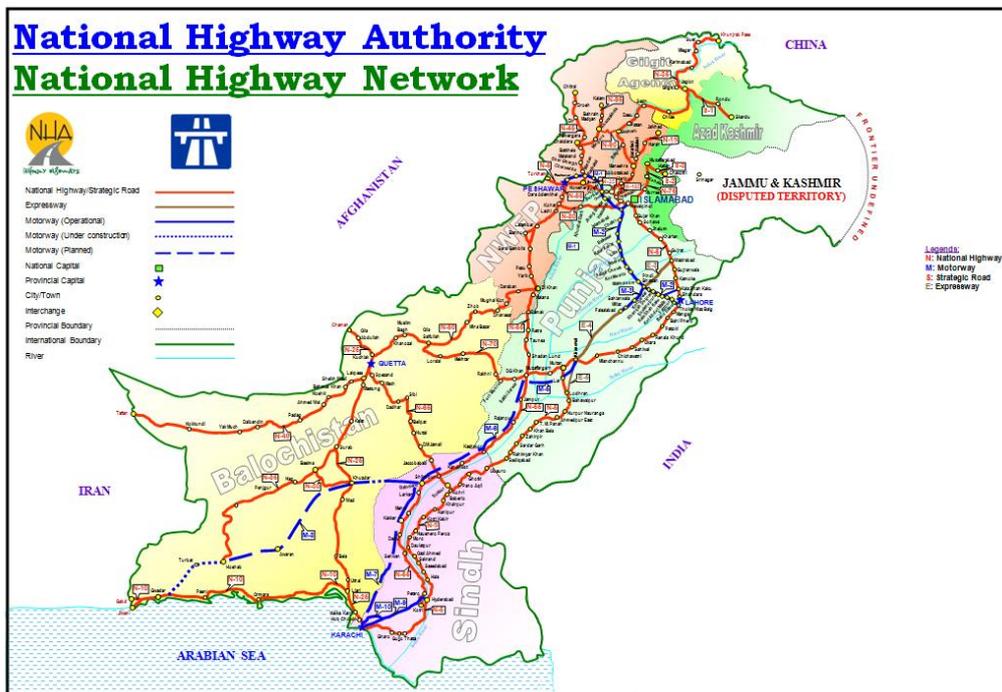
"The majority of the people of Pakistan do not see it as our war. We are fighting for somebody else and we are suffering because of that," said Tariq Azim, a former minister in the previous government of Pervez Musharraf, whose party now sits in the opposition. "At the moment the only ones toeing the line are the People's party."

Members of parliament are particularly angered by recent signals from Washington that it is prepared to talk to the Afghan Taliban, while telling Pakistan that it must fight its Taliban menace. "They [the US] are showing a lot more flexibility on their side of the border," said Khurram Dastagir, a member of parliament for Sharif's party. "The US are trying to externalise their failure in Afghanistan by dumping it on us."

Asif Zardari, widower of Benazir Bhutto, co-chairman of the PPP and president of Pakistan, has staked his political fortunes on splitting with the other democratic parties after the parliamentary election and replacing Pervez Musharraf as America's client in Pakistan.

However, hamstrung by unpopular policies, confronted by a ruthless and militant insurgency, and dogged by a popular and wily rival, Zardari appears incapable of delivering the counter-terrorism results in the border areas that America is looking for.

And Zardari may have signed his political death warrant by temporarily [closing](#) the Torkham border crossing in September into Afghanistan to NATO fuel truck traffic, reportedly as a protest to placate Pakistani military and popular opinion infuriated by the flagrant and repeated US ground and drone incursions in Pakistan.



The Torkham border crossing is at the Khyber Pass and the terminus of the fabled Grand Trunk Road, the immense and ancient artery of travel and trade that crossed British India all the way from Calcutta to the border of Afghanistan.

Torkham is on the only road to Kabul from Pakistan (the only other high volume border crossing, at Chaman, far south in Baluchistan, feeds into the Taliban heartland of Kandahar) and serves as the conduit for fully 70% of NATO's supplies, which travel by ship to Karachi, are trucked up the Indus Valley, climb a long, winding, and perilous route through the frontier territories to Torkham, and then roll down a heavily protected corridor to Kabul.

Closing Torkham is critical matter. I don't think Musharraf ever did it, because he understood that America's massive financial subvention to Pakistan wasn't meant to buy the mobilization of his indifferent army or his equivocal intelligence services—it was to assure a reliable, protected conduit for NATO materiel through Pakistan to Afghanistan.

When, after 9/11, Richard Armitage allegedly threatened to bomb Pakistan back into the Stone Age if it didn't cooperate in the GWOT and help destroy its clients in Kabul—he was probably thinking about getting Pakistan to facilitate the massive flow of fuel and equipment through Torkham.

No doubt when Zardari closed the border crossing, calculators rattled to life in officers throughout the Pentagon as spooks and logistics officers ran the numbers to decide if the immense cost of airlifting NATO supplies to Afghanistan would be a better deal than pumping \$1.2 billion per year in subsidies into the pockets of a feckless and unreliable client like Zardari.

Pakistan is finding itself hopelessly on the wrong side of the regional strategic equation, both in its border regions and across the Durand Line in Afghanistan.

Beyond its traditional intelligence and diplomatic ties to the Taliban, Pakistan's enthusiasm for the US-led campaign against the Afghan Taliban is also tempered by the awareness that its arch-enemy India has rushed into Afghanistan under US and UK cover after the invasion to make hay at

Pakistan's expense.

India made the decision to participate in Afghanistan's reconstruction and has opened four consulates in Mazar e Sharif, Jalalabad, Kandahar, and Herat with the idea of what is known euphemistically as enhancing its strategic depth, a decision that terrifies and infuriates Pakistan. An alarmist report on a Pakistan website melodramatically [construed](#) India's presence in Afghanistan as "107 [consulates] in which 20 intelligence units are burning their midnight oil to destabilise Pakistan."

In an unhappy piece of symbolism, at almost the same time that Zardari was cutting off Kabul's lifeline at the Khyber Pass to the west, India's signature infrastructure project in Afghanistan was completed: 218-km Delaram-Zaranj road connecting Afghanistan's "Garland Highway", which loops through all of the country's major cities, to a customs crossing at the Iranian border and from there down to the Iranian port of Chabahar.



[Constructed](#) by a 400-man team of the Indian government's Border Roads Organization — a military department analogous to the US Army Corps of Engineers tasked with construction of strategic infrastructure, the project was funded as a donation by the Indian government and took five years to complete. Despite the protection of India's ITBP Indo-Tibetan Border Police, multiple attacks by the Taliban claimed the lives of at least five Indian BRO staff and 62 Afghan policemen.

The US\$80 million project carries with it the joint hope of three of Pakistan's enemies—the Karzai government, India, and Iran—that the road will wean landlocked Afghanistan away from its reliance on Pakistan's Karachi-to-Khyber conduit, challenge <http://www.registan.net/index.php/2007/08/20/central-asias-seaport-gwadar-or-chabahar/> Pakistan's massive Gwadar port project (built just down the coast from Chabahar with 200 million in Chinese aid) as the gateway to central Asia and the Middle East, and further weaken Pakistan's position in Afghanistan.



Pakistan regards the entrenched Indian presence in Afghanistan as a threat to its west tolerated by the United States, which has cultivated India, most markedly through a highly concessionary bilateral nuclear agreement, as a large, prospering, and stable counterweight to China's economic and military clout in Asia.

India has little natural constituency of its own in 99% Muslim Afghanistan and would suffer a swift and brutal erasure of its influence if the pro-Pakistan Taliban were to return to power; but it appears that the United States is prepared to support India's interests now and presumably in whatever dispensation is negotiated with the Taliban.

When the United States passed on to the Indian government information <http://meakabul.nic.in/> that Pakistan's intelligence agency was implicated in the bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul—and leaked the accusation to the press—Pakistan must have seen the handwriting on the wall.

The fundamentals simply aren't there for Pakistan to be a sincere or effective participant in US security goals either in west Pakistan or in Afghanistan, and the United States is no longer pretending that it is. More important, however, is the fragility of the Pakistan government, with the US adding to the internal pressures.

In a sign that Asif Zardari's lack of enthusiasm and effectiveness have become a terminal problem, the key points of a pessimistic upcoming National Intelligence Estimate was leaked to the press—an assessment prepared to support General Petraeus's review.

Perhaps General Petraeus wanted his NIE both bleak and leaked in preparation for the upcoming foreign policy/national security tussle for the incoming president's attention.

In another sign of what is, for Republicans, probably a sign of the approaching Apocalypse, the NIE findings were [leaked](#) to the liberal-leaning McClatchy News Service's Jonathan Landay and John Walcott, and not to the Washington Times or even the Washington Post:

A U.S. official who participated in drafting the top secret National Intelligence Estimate said it portrays the situation in Pakistan as "very bad." Another official called the draft "very bleak," and said it describes Pakistan as being "on the edge."

The first official summarized the estimate's conclusions about the state of Pakistan as: "no money, no energy, no government."

Translation: in the forthcoming debate about Pakistan in the new presidential term, there will be no happy talk about our plucky partner in the War on Terror. There will be grim hand wringing about how to keep Pakistan from dragging down US efforts to preserve Operation Enduring Freedom's fruits of victory.

The choices before General Petraeus will presumably be to 1) ignore the facts on the ground and persist in previously unsuccessful attempts to bribe, threaten, or cajole Pakistan's civilian regime to provide effective support in the border regions; 2) wash his hands of Pakistan and let Islamabad cut loose from the Afghan effort and make its separate peace with the Pakistani Taliban; or 3) roll the dice with a new, more capable, and enthusiastic client insulated from the democratic entanglements of the civilian government—i.e. a new round of military rule.

Given the likelihood that a Taliban with safe havens inside Pakistan is unlikely to put the Afghan government and NATO in the "position of strength" that Britain's General Richards believes is a necessary pre-condition for talks, it is quite possible that the United States will look at the turmoil and division in the Zardari administration, recoil at the possibility that new elections will elevate Nawaz Sharif—a client of Saudi Arabia and strongly committed to decoupling from the US war on terror and negotiations with the Taliban—to power, and find itself encouraging a Pakistani general to step forward and to implement the policies that the United States believes necessary.

And, when one considers that General Petraeus might find it desirable—as the British ambassador already believes—to have a boss with genuine military heft replace Hamid Karzai in Kabul in order to affirm the authority and credibility of the Afghan government, the US may be faced with the ironic choice of eliminating two South Asian democracies in the name of a continued struggle to bring freedom to the region.

If the objective of General Petraeus' struggle turns out to be merely to gain the advantage in a negotiated settlement with the Taliban forces we swore to destroy after 9/11, the irony will be deep—and, to many, bitter.

China Hand is the author of the Asian affairs website [China Matters](#) which provides continuing updates on US-Afghan policies. He wrote this article for Japan Focus. Posted on October 21, 2008.

See also Nir Rosen's October 30, 2008 report from Taliban-controlled areas of central Afghanistan.

[How We Lost the War We Won A journey into Taliban-controlled Afghanistan](#)