

## The Scouting Report: Afghanistan and Pakistan

Over seven years after the 9/11 attacks, the border region between Pakistan and Afghanistan remains the front line in the war on terror. President Barack Obama faces a deepening crisis as he prepares to meet with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari.

Brookings expert Vanda Felbab-Brown took questions on this topic in the May 6 edition of the Scouting Report moderated by *Politico* Senior Editor John Ward Anderson. The transcript of this chat follows.

**12:30 John Ward Anderson:** Greetings everybody. I'm John Anderson, a senior editor at POLITICO, and I'll be moderating today's chat with Brookings foreign policy fellow Vanda Felbab-Brown. She's an expert on illicit economies, counter-narcotics strategies, US foreign policy, Afghanistan and a range of other issues, and she also teaches at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

By way of background, I first travelled to Pakistan and Afghanistan about 17 years ago and made dozens of return trips over the years – the most recent to Afghanistan in the fall of 2007 and to Pakistan in early 2008 following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. So I have more than a passing interest, and I'm looking forward to what Vanda has to say.

As usual, I'm grabbing the right to ask the first question. Vanda, there's a meeting scheduled this afternoon between Obama, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari. There is so much distrust and resentment between Afghanistan and Pakistan -- is there really any chance they can set aside their difference and distrust to jointly tackle the shared threats they both face from Islamic radicals – both Taliban and al-Qaeda -- in their border region? Color me skeptical.

**12:30 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** Hi John and everyone!

**12:31 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** Changing the dynamics between the two countries and its leaders will not be easy. Moreover, the level of distrust has expanded to the trilateral relationship -- there is a major trust deficit between Pakistan and the US and also the relationship between the new US administration and Kabul has not been easy.

**12:33 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** President Obama will have only 30 minutes w/ Zardari and Karzai to engage them. Nonetheless, he will be driving home how mutually interdependent the fates of the countries are and that Islamist terrorism and insurgency now poses deep problems and challenges to both countries.

**12:34 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** There have been some improvements in intelligence sharing and border cooperation between the two countries - not sufficient, but a positive development nonetheless. Unfortunately, Pakistan's attention is once again being drawn away toward the east & toward its own jihadist problem now.

**12:34 [Comment From Adrianna (DC)]** Can the international community negotiate with a moderate Taliban?

**12:34 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** The answer depends on the terms of negotiations and on a proper understanding of what the Taliban is and what can or cannot be understood as moderate Taliban.

**12:36 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** Both on the Pakistan and Afghan sides, the Taliban(s) are a conglomerate of various actors, including local antagonized and disfranchised tribes. Some of the individuals as well as groupings also side with the Taliban because they believe that security wise this is less risky and than siding w/ the Afghan government or NATO.

**12:37 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** We can and should engage such actors -- explore ways that we could reassure them and help address some of their local grievances. However, the purpose should not be used to turn them into Anbar-like militias, so -called lashkars.

**12:37 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** The lashkar strategy has not worked well in Pakistan, and will be counterproductive in Afghanistan.

**12:38 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** And we should not kid ourselves that we can have any strategic negotiations with the so-called Quetta shura, the hardcore Taliban around Mullah Omar.

**12:38 [Comment From Donald G. Barnes]** How do you assess the "talibanization-process" in Pakistan and what do you think are its consequences for the regional security?

**12:39 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** Clearly, the influence of jihadi groups in Pakistan has been increasing dramatically. Many of such groups have existed in Pakistan for a long time, but over the seven years they have reached a great momentum and have posed very serious threat to the Pakistani state.

**12:42 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** This is not simply the case with Tehrik-i-Taliban and Mullah Fazlullah's group - Pahstun dominated groups -- but even more worrisomely with jihadi Punjab groups, such as Lashkar--i-Taiba. One of the most worrisome developments has been the increasing capacity of these groups to latch onto non-ideological grievances and cleavages, such as the semi-feudal system that Pakistan exists in, including in Punjab -- a deeply stratified society where access to land is highly limited for example.

**12:43 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** And unfortunately, the Pakistani state -- the civilians and the military and the business community -- has been by and large deeply ineffective in addressing the massive problems, including Talibanization, that the country is facing. Many are still in deep denial about the depth of the problem - even despite the outrage over the Swat flogging and the jihadist expansion into Buner and Dir.

**12:43 [Comment From Prof. Natividad Fernandez]** What is and should be the EU role in Afghanistan and Pakistan? In particular, do you think the EU could contribute with development aid and conducting state missions to Pakistan as a way of conflict prevention?

**12:45 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** The EU should play a direct role in AF-PAK and indeed can play a constructive role. Unfortunately, despite the deployment of European forces to Afghanistan and EU's substantial contribution to econ aid in Afghanistan, EU is lacking a clear policy and in fact it is not certain whether it considers the region of vital importance to its national interests.

**12:47 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** This is clearly unfortunately because Pakistani-based groups pose a serious terrorism problem for Europe as the London bombing and the jetliner attempt, for example, highlighted. EU engagement in Afghanistan is hampered by the lack of resources, national caveats, limited attention, and the desire to withdraw troops as soon as possible.

**12:49 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** Nonetheless, the US should continue exploring with EU how Europe can stay in Afghanistan, how it can expand its economic aid and military/police/governance training. And it is also important, that along with other actors, such as China and Saudi Arabia, the EU and the US continue stressing to Pakistan the importance of not rolling over in the face of the jihadist threats and undertake deep structural reforms. No doubt - a daunting undertaking for which Pakistan lacks resources and will.

**12:49 [Comment From Mitch Potter]** Greetings from a Canadian journalist. I wanted to ask your thoughts about the fragility of Pakistan today. Journalist and author Ahmed Rashid sounded a desperate note yesterday in the Washpost, concluding that "Pakistan needs help today, tomorrow could be too late." Do you also see the situation in such critical terms?

**12:51 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** The situation in Pakistan today is more critical than ever. Pakistan has been in a comprehensive - socio-economic and political decline for decades. The recent years have also exposed the massive internal security threats that the state is facing. The slope of the decline also increased dramatically over the past two years or so.

**12:52 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** There are three difficult scenarios that look more likely all the time. One is collapse of the state that will set off comprehensive internal fracturing -- the Pashtun areas and Kashmir, Balochistan, and perhaps even pockets within Punjab.

**12:55 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** The second is as a jihadi takeover of the central state -- more likely Punjab Islamist groups, like Lashkar-i-Taiba than Pashtun jihadi groups, such as Tehrik-i-Taliban or Fazlullah's people. Lashkar and other groups, like Jaish-e-Mohammad, were created by the ISI to conduct asymmetric warfare against India -- but they have frequently become the proverbial tiger that the ISI can no longer ride and control. But these groups still maintain good contacts to at least some members of the ISI and so if they mounted a direct challenge to Islamabad and Rawalpindi, the military and the ISI could fracture and some elements would likely defect to them.

**12:56 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** The third scenario is further shrinking of the state where neither the Islamists have taken over or the state has collapsed along regional lines and is perhaps in a civil war, but where more and more pockets of the territory are now controlled by anti-state actors.

**12:58 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** That in my view has the greatest probability over the next year or so, unless the Pakistani state develops a sudden will and capacity to mount an effective challenge. And that also means bringing over the middle class - that is now abandoning Pakistan -- both getting ready to leave and writing off the concept of Pakistan on the one hand, but is still also in deep denial and has great ambivalence about whether and how to resist. So the situation is extremely serious, but the US and international options of how to help steer Pakistan in the right direction are very limited.

**12:59 [Comment From Gopi Chari]** What Pres Obama can do to eliminate the ISI threat to Afghanistan?

12:59 Vanda Felbab-Brown: President Obama cannot eliminate the ISI threat to Afghanistan -- the US does not have such power. And important aspect of our policy needs to be a realization that we are not omnipotent.

**1:01 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** However, he will be stressing to Pakistan that its cooperation with respect to Afghanistan will be critical in enabling us to support Pakistan on issues that matter to Pakistan, such as economic and military assistance and help with India.

**1:01 John Ward Anderson:** ISI is also deeply infiltrated at some levels by the Taliban, and Pakistanis need to recognize that and deal with it.

**1:01 [Comment From Avraam Jack Dectis]** One of the big problems in Afghanistan is illicit cannabis production. In the USA, at least 50% of the population lives in states that allow for medicinal cannabis. It seems likely that in a few years cannabis will be rescheduled for general medical use. In that event, does it seem possible that the USA will allow cannabis to be imported and would Afghanistan reverse its ban on cannabis cultivation and allow the export of their high quality highly prized product to the American medical consumer?

**1:03 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** The policy to deal with the illicit crop cultivation in Afghanistan cannot rely and wait to major changes in US domestic attitudes to scheduled substances. While there are some possibilities of a more liberal regime toward cannabis in the US, the politics of it will not be easy. Nor is it evident that this could easily be translated into a similar policy in Afghanistan.

**1:04 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** A more permissive regime in the US could well be accompanied by increased production in the US and US producers would likely far outcompete Afghan once.

**1:05 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** What's critical for weaning Afghanistan off poppy and later cannabis is first the expansion of the state and the provision of sustained security and then a robust-long term rural development that focuses on high-value, high-labor intensively crops, such as fruit.

**1:05 [Comment From Damien Tomkins]** China shares borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan and India and has strong bilateral ties with Pakistan. In addition, China's investment of over \$3 billion into the Aynak copper mine in Afghanistan furthers their interests in that country.

**1:05 [Comment From Damien Tomkins]**

My question is what role do you think China can take in helping with Pakistan/Afghanistan situation?

**1:06 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** Yes, China is an important regional player. It has substantial influence in Pakistan -- and overall its relationship with Pakistan are right now much less toxic than Pakistan's relations with the US.

**1:07 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** China also shares US interests in Pakistan -- it does not want to see Pakistan as a breeding group of jihadi terrorism, it does not want to see Pakistan fall apart or be taken over by radical Islamists and it does not want to see any leakage of nuclear weapons out of Pakistan.

**1:08 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** China has already played an important and helpful role in helping the US diffuse the India-Pakistan brink-of-war tensions in 2002 after the Jaish-e-Mohammad bombing of the Indian Parliament in 2001. China has also been providing a lot of economic and military aid to Pakistan.

**1:09 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** So it can contribute a lot. And effective US-China-EU cooperation on Pakistan would also help anchor China in the international system as a responsible great power and that shares the burden of managing the international system in a constructive way.

**1:10 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** Of course, India has a deeply competitive relationship with China which would have to be managed, but managing the India-China relationship will be inevitable even regardless of how much of a constructive role China plays with respect to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

**1:11 [Comment From Briana]** Whenever this realm of discussion is taken on by either the media or experts I never feel I hear enough about how we are engaging India, a practical ally, on this topic. Are we? How are we? What could be done better? I understand it is difficult with the history in the region and the mis-trust you spoke to earlier.

**1:13 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** We are in fact engaging India rather intensely. US diplomacy in the wake of the Mumbai attacks, for example, clearly helped deescalate the tension between the two countries and restrained India. Our problem on this particular issue is that the US has been promising to deliver on Pakistan stopping its terrorism sponsorship against India and its asymmetric options, but for a variety of reasons we have not been able to deliver.

**1:14 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** But our own partnership with India has not been easy. The nuclear deal was meant to codify a new friendly relationship with India - perhaps amounting to a strategic partnership, but we have not seen India deliver on a host of issues that we care about - from Burma, global warming, Iran, and engagement in Afghanistan.

**1:15 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** India itself is rather ambivalent of whether it considers the US and ally or merely a partner on some issues but perhaps an opponent on many other. It certainly does not want to be seen by the US as a counterbalance to China.

**1:17 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** And the India political-military leadership is ambivalent about what it wants in Pakistan -- some would prefer a strong military dictatorship and bemoan the by-days of Musharraf. Others believe that a democratic and stable Pakistan is in India's best interest. And yet others in the intelligence-military apparatus and even foreign policy believe that the Pakistan threat to India will be minimized by Pakistan falling apart.

**1:18 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** This thinking of course generates the worst paranoia and obstructive behavior in Pakistan and the challenge for the US is to persuade India and that a collapse of Pakistan is not in its best interest.

**1:18 John Ward Anderson:** I lived in India for three years and there is longstanding distrust between it and Pakistan, much fueled by lingering resentment over the partition that separated the two countries at the end of the British raj, but even more fueled by the continuing fight over the mountainous region of Kashmir, which both countries continue to claim. It is one of the most dangerous and tense borders in the world, and there are numerous incursions that occur all the time. Furthermore, many radicals from Pakistan make their way to the Indian side of Kashmir to

fight there, and some travel even further into the country to stage terrorist attacks against civilians as far away as Mumbai, as Vanda noted. In those circumstances, it historically has been difficult to bring Pakistan and India to the table to discuss anything other than their immediate problems. What's needed is a firm commitment by Pakistan to stop cross border incursions into India, and then a willingness by both countries to finalize an agreement on the Kashmiri border, which virtually everyone thinks should be along the existing line of control. After that, they might discover that they have many shared interests they could help each other resolve. And as an aside, I've been reading over Vanda's comments and agree with everything she said, particularly about the India leadership's long-standing ambivalence toward the US.

**1:18 [Comment From RAJ OJHA]** Do you think that USA will serve the international community well by neutralizing the nuclear asset in Pakistan once and for all. Having nuclear bombs in the hand of a responsible nation is one thing and have it in the hand of jihadist is another.

**1:19 John Ward Anderson:**

Here's a 10 minute warning everybody. Great questions so far, so if there are others, fire away before we wrap up.

**1:20 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** Well, the neutralization of Pakistan's nuclear weapons would of course serve the interests of the world. However, the United States does not have an easy neutralization option. Pakistan is estimated to have somewhere between 20 and 100 nuclear weapons, and the higher numbers are more likely accurate. The weapons are dispersed throughout the country and their locations are not easily known.

**1:21 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** Thus, it is hard to imagine that an outside power could swoop into Pakistan and snatch the weapons. Moreover, there are some serious indications that the nuclear weapons are well-safeguarded and built-in safety mechanisms and permissive links preventing unauthorized use.

**1:22 Vanda Felbab-Brown:**

But it is important to look at the nuclear weapons issue not only from the perspective of proliferation and takeover by undesirable state actors, but also from the perspective of Pakistan.

**1:23 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** Pakistan has developed the nuclear weapons in response to what it defines as a critical security threat from India and what it correctly sees as its conventional inferiority to India. Hence, the nukes are a key component of its definition of security -- and that's not true only for the military-political establishment, but also for the middle class.

**1:25 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** The more we talk about someone taking the weapons away, the more we are antagonizing the country and perhaps inadvertently only contributing to Pakistan's unwillingness to help us help it to take on its internal security challenges. So we need to be extremely careful about what we say publicly and how we reassure Pakistan that we don't want to see it carved up, in a civil war, or at India's mercy.

**1:25 [Comment From Qiang Zou (Legal Daily)]** Analysis says President Obama did well by making a clear goal in Afghanistan, which is fighting Al-Qeada. But he does not give us a timetable to achieve the goal. How soon you think the strategy will become a success or will the US hold to an indefinite goal?

**1:26 John Ward Anderson:** and if I may add to that question, how should success be defined in Afghanistan, and how long will the American public give Obama have to achieve it?

**1:26 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** In the US, there is in fact a lot of pressure for benchmarks and a timetable of progress. This is generated a lot of pressure to talk about exit. However, I believe that the exit talk is counterproductive.

**1:27 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** We need strategic patience -- the challenges in Afghanistan are daunting, but the consequences of failure are extremely high.

**1:28 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** The new rolled out strategy is correct in its outlines, but it yet remains to be seen whether it will be resourced properly, and that includes in terms of the time given to the mission.

**1:30 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** The White paper identified the goals in Afghanistan in terms of preventing Al Qaeda and global terrorist safe havens. But the strategy and in fact the thinking in Washington is not fully clear on what accomplishing this means: a stable, unitary Afghanistan run from Kabul. I would posit that it does. Such Afghanistan will also be critical important for helping to stabilize Pakistan.

**1:30 Vanda Felbab-Brown:** If we settle for only minimal disruption of terrorist safe havens, such as via bombing, we'll be limited in the effectiveness of our strategy. But to be able to do more means devoting the proper resources and time to the region.

**1:31 John Ward Anderson:** Wow! Great questions today and wonderfully responsive answers from Vanda. Thanks to you all for making this so enjoyable. Watch the Brookings website for announcements about our next chat, and thanks again to Vanda and all of our participants.