

**The Scouting Report – Expand the Agenda in Afghanistan and Pakistan
Live Web Chat with *Politico* Senior Editor John Ward Anderson and Brookings
Fellow Vanda Felbab-Brown
December 17, 2008**

12:30 John Ward Anderson:

Greetings everybody. Nice to be chatting with you today and thanks for joining us. I'm John Anderson, a senior editor at Politico, and I'll be moderating today's session of the Scouting Report with Brookings Foreign Policy Fellow Vanda Felbab-Brown. Vanda has a new report that will be released tomorrow, "Memo to the President: Expand the Agenda in Pakistan and Afghanistan." The report will be discussed tomorrow by a very distinguished group of panelists at Brookings, and you're all invited. Here's a link for more information:

http://www.brookings.edu/events/2008/1218_afghanistan_pakistan_transition.aspx

By way of background, I covered Afghanistan and Pakistan for The Washington Post off and on for more than 16 years, traveling there often, and so this is a topic close to my heart. Let's get started.

12:31 John Ward Anderson:

Since I'm the moderator, I'm giving myself the first question. Vanda, you recently wrote that the situation in Afghanistan was "dire," that Washington was in a "frantic scramble to come up with a new strategy," but that the "options being batted around have a slim chance to fundamentally reverse the worsening trends." And you specifically criticized the concept of surging allied forces to improve security, similar to the surge of troops in Iraq. But don't all signs point to this as the likely choice President-elect Obama is going to make? Def. Sec. Gates is already planning on adding 20,000 more US troops to Afghanistan by next spring. Are we heading in the wrong direction?

12:32 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

John, thanks for a great question. An improvement in security in Afghanistan is critical. An increase in troop levels, including US and NATO troop levels, is an indispensable component of a strategy to improve security. However, the question remains whether the United States and NATO will be capable of surging at levels necessary to improve the security situation substantially and have it remain that way. Consequently, it is equally important to continue increasing the Afghan National Army that ultimately needs to have the responsibility for the security of its country. Moreover, it is important to imbed the military component of the strategy within a renewed political framework in Afghanistan; otherwise any security gains may prove short-lived.

12:33 John Ward Anderson:

What are the chances NATO countries will pony-up more troops?

12:35 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

The Obama administration will be well-placed to engage our NATO and non-NATO allies in Afghanistan on best ways for them to help in the stabilization and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Our allies are looking to the new administration for leadership. Consequently, the new administration will have large political capital to work with. That said, there are great limits - domestic political as well as military - to the ability of our

partners to substantially increase troops levels. But reductions in caveats on their forces would be also important.

12:36 [Comment From Mark from Greenbelt, MD]

How have the terror attacks in Mumbai affected the tensions in Pakistan? What's the fallout?

12:37 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

The terrorist attacks in Mumbai are not only horrific in their own right; they also have serious repercussions for India-Pakistan relations and for the security situation in Afghanistan.

12:38 Reader Poll - Do you think the US should increase troop levels in Afghanistan?

Yes 100%

No 0%

12:39 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

The tensions between India and Pakistan are currently highest since 2001 when Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba attacked the Indian parliament. The tensions could result in a military confrontation between these two nuclear-armed countries. It is also likely to divert Pakistan's attention from its border with Afghanistan where many dangerous jihadist groups are located. That is bad for improving the security situation in Afghanistan also.

12:39 [Comment From Frank]

What about the influence of the drug trade in Afghanistan? How can we be more effective there?

12:40 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

The burgeoning drug trade in Afghanistan has serious negative repercussions for the security situation there. It also undermines legal economic development and critically contributes to corruption. Consequently, taking actions against it is very important.

12:42 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

Yet inappropriate, premature actions will be highly counterproductive. The drug economy still represents at least 30% of the country's GDP. Many people in the rural areas depend on the opium poppy economy for basic livelihood. Consequently, our efforts need to concentrate on providing legal alternatives to the populations along with interdicting high level traffickers.

12:42 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

Ultimately, counternarcotics efforts will not be effective without substantial improvements in security.

12:43 John Ward Anderson:

Vanda, how involved is the Taliban in the Afghan drug trade?

12:44 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

The Taliban is clearly profiting from the drug trade. The standard estimates are that about 50% of the Taliban's income comes from drugs. The remaining 50% come from

fundraising in Pakistan and the Middle East and from other illicit economies in the region.

12:46 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

Yet it is important to understand that the Taliban obtains much more from its protection of the poppy economy than simply financial profits. It also obtains large amount of political capital by offering itself as a protector of the population and southern tribes from eradication. Since the population is deeply dependent on opium poppy, it welcomes the Taliban's protection. In fact, it is this protection service against eradication that provides a critical underpinning of the Taliban's relationship with the population.

12:46 [Comment From CJ Grisham (ASP Blog)]

As a Soldier, I've witnessed first hand how our hands are tied in Afghanistan. We're expected to pretty much chase the Taliban and terrorist forces to the border, then we simply give up except in extreme circumstances. The Pakistani military is not providing the necessary "cooperation" that either our government or theirs is making a public case of. Will the "rules of engagement" be relooked and possibly changed with increased political pressure placed on Pakistan to allow cross border chases under a President Obama?

12:48 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

The Obama campaign expressed its clear concern with the lack of Pakistani cooperation in pursuing the Taliban. Clearly, this concern will carry over into the administration. There will be substantial pressure put on the Pakistani government and military to address the safe havens.

12:49 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

However, the administration will also have to be sensitive to the fact that the Pakistani government is very fragile. The war against the Taliban and against terrorism is widely unpopular in Pakistan, as are US incursions into Pakistan.

12:50 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

The counterterrorism campaign will not be advanced if Pakistan undergoes further state collapse. Consequently, the new administration will have to be acutely sensitive to how US actions strengthen or undermine the Pakistani government.

12:51 John Ward Anderson:

Vanda, is it a good idea for US troops based in Afghanistan to strike inside Pakistan without notifying the Pakistan government beforehand? Couldn't that further destabilize an already politically weak Pakistan government? On the other hand, can the Pakistan government be trusted with sensitive information, given that its intelligence services are infiltrated by Islamic extremists?

12:52 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

John, you have precisely identified the dilemma that the current administration is facing and the new one will face as well. Obviously, it is preferable for the broader relationship and the stability of the Pakistani government to consent to such operations. That said, the United States should not deny itself the option to act alone and quickly if the targets are in fact of immense strategic significance.

12:53 Reader Poll - Should the US take military action against terrorists in Pakistan?

Yes -73%
No – 27%

12:54 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

But such actions should indeed be limited to most strategic targets when we have robust intelligence. All too frequently we have attacked and missed the targets, uselessly antagonizing the Pakistani people.

12:54 [Comment From Kate Kuehn]

I'd like to hear your thoughts on the U.S. military's decision to launch a program to recruit local Afghan militias (very similar to a program used in Iraq). Do you believe this program can be successfully transplanted to Afghanistan? What particular challenges will such a program face?

12:55 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

This program is already under way. But we need to very carefully consider its strategic implications as well as its likely tactical impact.

12:56 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

The tribes in Afghanistan are very weak and fractured. Like their counterparts in FATA in Pakistan, they have been under a systematic attack from the Taliban. In Afghanistan, they have been battered for thirty years. They have not proven effective in resisting the Taliban.

12:58 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

British trials with the tribes in Musa Qala left the tribes unable to resist the Taliban and the Taliban just took over the district. Moreover, the arming of the tribes is not easily consistent with the idea of a unitary Afghanistan run from a central government in Kabul. It will add to centrifugal forces that have plagued the country and likely give rise to similar militias in the north.

12:58 John Ward Anderson:

I've spent a lot of time in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I am skeptical that such a program (using the Sunni awakening councils to combat Al Qaeda) can be transplanted from Iraq to Afghanistan. The tribal situation in Afghanistan is much more complex and decentralized than in Iraq.

12:59 [Comment From Jacob, Baltimore]

In your opinion what are the first steps President-elect Obama should take in strengthening our relationship with Pakistan?

1:00 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

President-Elect Obama needs to make it clear to Pakistan, Afghanistan, regional partners, and our allies that South Asia will in fact be a critical priority for his administration. The new administration needs to make it clear that the United States will not abandon Pakistan and that it is interested in having a robust continuing relationship with Pakistan.

1:02 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

Yet it also needs to communicate to Pakistan that we and the regional stakeholders expect Pakistan to be a responsible actor that resolutely faces terrorism and take serious actions against it. Similarly, however, the new administration needs to develop a robust relationship with India and not have India feel that the US is only interested in India as a result of our focus on Afghanistan.

1:02 [Comment From CJ Grisham (ASP MilBlog)]

With Pakistan and India tensions rising and Russia providing nuclear materials to Iran, how will Iran affect the whole Pakistan/Afghanistan scenario? What has the Obama administration mentioned as its policy toward Iranian influence in Afghanistan?

1:03 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

Iran is an important player in the regional dynamics and has important influence on developments in Afghanistan.

1:04 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

In 2002, it demonstrated that it is willing to work with the United States and be a responsible and helpful actor. Its interests overlap with some of the US's important interests in Afghanistan -- the defeat of the Taliban, suppression of the poppy economy.

1:06 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

It is important that the Obama administration engages Iran with the framework of engaging other important regional stakeholders. It has indicated its readiness to talk with Iran about its nuclear program. A dialogue on Afghanistan can provide an important and useful platform for the beginning of such an engagement.

1:06 John Ward Anderson: I agree with Vanda on the importance of Iran, which shares borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. Obama's willingness to enter a dialogue with the Iranians could be an important step in boosting regional stability. They can be an important part of a solution in Afghanistan and Iraq.

1:06 [Comment From Katie, Cambridge]

How can the world combat the madrasas that are educating young Pakistanis and Afghanis in extremist Islam that are the next generation? Is it possible to do this in a non-violent way such as through education?

1:08 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

Indeed, developing a nonmilitary strategy is ultimately the only way to deal with the problem of the radical madrasas. It is important to note that not all madrasas do in fact preach violence and hatred toward non-Muslims. The rise of many such madrasas is linked to several factors, one of which is the collapse of the education system in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

1:09 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

Improving the education system in both countries will provide an important opportunity to change perceptions as well as to give young Muslims the opportunities to have an economically-successful and productive life.

1:10 [Comment From Joe in Silver Spring]

To what extent are Pakistan's protests against America's use of its territories to launch strikes against the Taliban designed to placate its citizens and other anti-US critics in the

Arab world, when, in fact, Pakistan's government welcomes such strikes for its own preservation?

1:11 John Ward Anderson:

I think that there's a good likelihood that Pakistani leaders do not oppose US strikes against Islamic extremists inside their country, but they cannot afford to say that publicly.

1:13 John Ward Anderson:

It is a double-edged sword. They may welcome the strikes for their country's long-term benefit, but they are, after all, politicians who have to bend to public opinion to stay in office, and Pakistanis are very nationalistic. They do not want the US or anyone else crossing their borders without permission, especially given that many US strikes have in fact killed civilians, not terrorists.

1:13 [Comment From Brenda in FL]

What can Pakistanis in the settled areas (i.e. outside of FATA) do to prevent the spread of militant Islam in their cities if, for example, the aim is to reduce the Islamists ideology in a 5 year period?

1:14 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

Many of Pakistan's problems, including the rise of terrorist jihadist groups that increasingly threaten Pakistan itself, stem from the critical weakness of the Pakistani state and institutions.

1:15 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

Pakistan today is a failing state in many respects. It will not be able to overcome many of its difficult predicaments unless it develops strong, competent, and accountable institutions. The Pakistani people can and should play an important role in that. They should strive to develop a strong civil society -- one manifestation of its beginning was the protests against the Musharraf regime.

1:17 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

They also need to develop much more robust parties that allow for a broad spectrum of people to participate in the political process and that can produce competent and committed leaders. They also can avoid letting themselves be sucked into a hostile preoccupation with India.

1:18 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

Finally, the Pakistani people need to embrace the fight against terrorism as their own. That also, however, means a full incorporation of FATA into Pakistan, including changes in the political setup of the tribal areas and a serious socio-economic development for the region.

1:18 John Ward Anderson:

Does Pakistani President Zardari have the clout to clean Islamic extremists out of the ISI? Or if he tried, would that bring down his government or spark a coup?

1:21 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

John, that is in fact the 60K question that many in the United States and abroad are asking. It is also the question that the Pakistani civilian government itself is exploring. President Zardari will not succeed in the task of establishing a civilian control over the

intelligence and military services in Pakistan -- something that has eluded the civilian governments since the establishment of the country -- without recognition on the part of at least some elements of the Pakistani military that terrorism now threatens Pakistan itself.

1:22 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

The Pakistani military also needs to have a serious stock of its own performance -- very lackluster - in running the Pakistani state. The Obama administration can help in important ways. For example, it can help diffuse tensions between India and Pakistan -- difficult as that is after Mumbai - so that the Pakistani military does not feel externally threaten.

1:23 John Ward Anderson:

We're running out of time, everybody, so just a few more questions. But keep 'em comin'.

1:25 [Comment From martha, st paul, mn]

What's your sense of the Obama administration's plans for the region? Does it sound like he's going to ramp up the search for bin Laden? How will that be seen in Pakistan and Afghanistan?

1:27 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

During the campaign, Mr. Obama has clearly indicated that the most critical front in the war on terror is Afghanistan-Pakistan. He also clearly stated that the hunt for bin Laden and other top echelons of al Qaeda will be a critical priority. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan need to be prepared for that.

1:27 John Ward Anderson:

Thanks everybody for joining us today in this lively chat, and thanks especially to Vanda for offering her insights. Please join us again for the next chat, which will be sometime in January. Stay tuned to the Brookings website. Happy Holidays!

1:28 Vanda Felbab-Brown:

My pleasure. Happy holidays.