

To: President-Elect Obama
From: Vanda Felbab-Brown, The Brookings Institution
Date: December 18, 2008
Re: Expand the Agenda in Pakistan and Afghanistan

The Situation

You inherit a dangerous crisis in South Asia. The war in Afghanistan is not being won. Al Qa'eda has built a stronghold in the mountains between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The November attacks in Mumbai painfully show the serious threat of jihadist terrorism. As a result of those attacks, tensions are running high between India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed countries that have fought four wars.

Your administration will need to deal urgently with many interrelated dimensions of the crisis:

- The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan is becoming stronger and has succeeded in creating an atmosphere of great insecurity. In much of Afghanistan's south and increasingly in its east, government officials, international advisers and even local district chiefs do not dare travel outside provincial capitals without military escort.
- In many locales the insecurity has brought economic development to a standstill. Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world; lawful economic opportunities remain meager for many, and only international aid saves millions of people from dire food crisis.
- Poppy cultivation and the drug trade are burgeoning, providing resources for the insurgency and fueling government corruption.
- The Afghan people are questioning the performances of the government of President Hamid Karzai and the international community. The people are deeply troubled by the growing insecurity, the weakness and corruption of the government, the rise in criminality and the lack of rule of law.
- Across the border in Pakistan, the Taliban and Al Qa'eda enjoy safe havens and have integrated themselves into a complex web of jihadist groups. Despite some of these groups' long-standing links to the Pakistani intelligence services, they increasingly threaten the security of Pakistan itself.
- Pakistan is a fragile and failing state with weak civilian leadership, reflecting a long history of military coups and ineffective governance, and a collapsed economy.
- The current tensions between India and Pakistan easily could escalate into a proxy war in Kashmir or Afghanistan, if not into a direct military confrontation. Highly dangerous in itself, an escalation would—as before—divert Pakistan's military resources away from its border with Afghanistan and weaken the government's resolve to take on the jihadist groups.

Despite the grave situation, there are several promising opportunities:

- The Mumbai attacks underscore, for Congress and the general public, the strategic importance of the region and the need for broad, multilateral and coordinated efforts against terrorism in South Asia and globally. There is now a general recognition in the United States that the war in Afghanistan is not going well and needs an infusion of resources and a new strategy.
- Our NATO allies and countries in the region are looking to your administration for leadership and a new direction in Afghanistan. They also look to you to spur multilateral engagement with Pakistan.

- The Afghan people are similarly turning to your administration to help reverse the disturbing trends in their country. Despite their current dissatisfaction, the people as a whole have not embraced the Taliban. They still want an Afghanistan free of oppressive armed groups, warlords and criminals and capable of satisfying their fundamental economic needs.
- Although weak and facing multiple internal challenges, the Pakistani civilian leadership of President Asif Ali Zardari has repeatedly indicated its willingness to reach accommodation with India and counter the terrorist threats facing both countries.

Your Stance

During the campaign, you identified the resurgence of Al Qa'eda and the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan as the greatest single threat to U.S. security. You repeatedly promised to refocus attention and resources on the region by:

- *Increasing troop levels in Afghanistan.* Three more American brigades have been authorized already. Reductions in troop deployments to Iraq will permit further increases in Afghanistan.
- *Seeking a similar contribution from our allies.* Your political capital and a new focus on Afghanistan will enable you to show how the allies can contribute to success in the region in a productive, sustained way.
- *Pressing the Afghan government to meet more of the needs of its population and tackle corruption and the opium trade.* Your administration's increased engagement can help convince the Kabul government to take resolute action against corruption, including drug trafficking, and improve governance, especially if our contributions are backed by additional technical assistance from other countries. It is equally necessary to find ways to strengthen provincial and district governments.
- *Increase nonmilitary aid to Pakistan while holding it accountable for disrupting Taliban safe havens and providing security along the border with Afghanistan.* The Biden-Lugar bill that would commit \$15 billion in development aid to Pakistan over 10 years provides a vehicle for assistance. While beefing up economic assistance, you need to stress to Pakistan that jihadist terrorism now threatens its own security and that combating terrorism is in its own national interest.

Further Recommendations

In addition to implementing your campaign proposals, you should broaden your efforts in South Asia, demonstrating further your vision and resolve.

Security in Pakistan: You should continue counterinsurgency aid and training for the Pakistani military, enhanced with careful monitoring of the flow of dollars. Although U.S. military action against high-level jihadists in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas may sometimes be warranted, such strikes should be undertaken with great care to avoid civilian casualties.

Security in Afghanistan: It is necessary to increase troop levels in Afghanistan. In addition to obtaining greater deployment of NATO troops, you should continue efforts to enlarge the Afghan National Army, which ultimately must hold responsibility for the country's security. Swift reform of the Afghan National Police, now widely seen as corrupt and incompetent, is also necessary, as is strengthening the Afghan judicial system. These institutions need to focus on delivering the essential rule of law to the population.

Although earning the confidence of Afghan tribal leaders is important, the tribes are unprepared to assume a military role in the counterinsurgency. Fractious, fundamentally weak and caught up in local disputes, they have a poor record in fighting the Taliban. Similarly, strategic negotiations with the Taliban hold little promise of success. Although a mechanism for demobilizing individual fighters and small splinter groups would be highly beneficial, the Taliban leadership has repeatedly shown a lack of interest in any outcome short of NATO withdrawal.

Socio-Economic Development and the Drug Trade: Socio-economic development is critical for Afghanistan's future, for sustaining any gains in security and for achieving progress in counter-narcotics. It should lead to improvements in infrastructure, irrigation and micro-credit and to the creation of value-added chains and employment. And, it should be directed to high-value, labor-intensive crops as well as to off-farm income, such as from textiles. Targeting high-level drug traffickers in Afghanistan is essential. Eradication of poppy crops should focus on areas where there are enough lawful economic activities to offer a viable alternative.

Development efforts should be imbedded in a regional economic framework that also helps develop Pakistan's border areas.

Donor Coordination: Lack of coordination among the Afghan government and the international actors hampers both security and development. While several initiatives have been undertaken to improve coordination, they have proved insufficient so far. Your administration can help build organizational structures to streamline program management and make greater use of existing mechanisms.

Public Awareness Campaign: Many development projects have improved the lives of the Afghan people; roads and wells have been built. Yet, inundated with Taliban propaganda, the Afghan people appear mostly unaware of these successes. In Pakistan, the United States—rather than Al Qa'eda and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan—is blamed for the violence that is ravaging the country. To win local support, the administration should craft and sufficiently fund an effective public awareness campaign.

Regional Framework: Unfortunately, the Mumbai attacks are likely to derail any rapprochement between India and Pakistan, including over Kashmir. Yet, it is critical that your administration help the two countries deescalate the current tensions and avoid a military confrontation or a proxy war. While urging Pakistan to cooperate more fully in counterterrorism efforts, the administration should engage India in a direct and robust relationship. However tragic and destabilizing, the Mumbai attacks can inject an important sense of urgency into regional stakeholder deliberations, by showing that terrorism in any form cannot be tolerated and that a platform for multilateral engagement must be constructed. Besides Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, engagement should also include Europe and our other important allies in Afghanistan, as well as China, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

You may wish to consider outlining your overall strategy toward South Asia in your Inaugural address, when Americans and leaders across the globe will be listening carefully. The upcoming NATO summit in April 2009 will provide another important opportunity to roll out a new policy for the region.

Success is vital. A complete state failure in Pakistan would generate a grave and severe crisis, as would any serious military confrontation between India and Pakistan. Across the border in Afghanistan, failure against the Taliban would indicate how limited the United States and the international community can be in helping countries achieve security and development. The world is looking to you for leadership in reversing dangerous trends and building a security framework in a vital region.