

## Prerelease: Ahmed Rashid Takes On the Crisis in AfPak

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By Ahmed Rashid.

**IN AFGHANISTAN:** a war going in the wrong direction, a fatally flawed election, reconstruction at a standstill and a growing political vacuum that the Taliban is filling even as some NATO countries contemplate withdrawing their troops.

**In nuclear-armed Pakistan:** a long-running multidimensional crisis, political and ethnic strife, an unprecedented economic depression, and growing local Islamic extremism which plays host to al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban.

**In central Asia:** the start of a suicide-bombing campaign by Taliban-inspired extremists wanting to derail regimes and governments that are themselves beset by corruption, unwilling to carry out economic reforms, practice authoritarianism and pauperize their people.

**In Washington and European capitals:** growing doubts about President Obama's commitment to and the viability of the U.S.-led military and nation-building campaign in Afghanistan, continuing suspicions about the intentions of Pakistan's military, the inability to push ahead with a regional strategy or engage with Taliban moderates, and now a lack of a credible government in Kabul.

Some of these points were highlighted by General Stanley McChrystal, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, when he sent his new Afghan strategy document to the White House on August 30, 2009. McChrystal called for a widening and deepening of a proper counterinsurgency campaign with the deployment of more U.S. troops and civilians—a campaign that was outlined by President Barack Obama in March when he presented his assertive new Afghan strategy to the American public. Obama then, and McChrystal now, stressed the need to rebuild the Afghan government and win the people's support—in other words, carry out nation building, a phrase that was banned from the Bush White House for eight years.

The speed of the deterioration in Afghanistan, however, has blighted Obama's March strategy, depressed U.S. congressional and public opinion, and called NATO governments to openly question their future commitments. The rigged Afghan elections have created enormous doubts about Karzai's credibility and legitimacy, while Western forces suffer the heaviest casualties to date under a continuing and withering Taliban offensive. Although talking to the Taliban has been a major plank of the Obama plan, it is impossible to imagine any such talks while the Taliban remains militarily strong and is convinced it is winning.

Every news day in Washington has brought different ideas and more dissent to the debate. Yet with all the talk about policy options, two issues remain exquisitely undebated. Although McChrystal clearly described the threat from the Taliban as lethal, what is still only hinted at in Washington is that it is the Taliban and not al-Qaeda that could capture power in Kabul and send the entire region into a tailspin as neo-Taliban members spread into Pakistan and central Asia.

Al-Qaeda still poses a global threat to Western and Muslim states alike, and defeating it is the main focus of U.S. policy. However, all the concerns about instability in Pakistan and central Asia should actually revolve around how to contain the Taliban and local extremists.

The proposal by some Americans to reduce the U.S. presence in Afghanistan and instead fight al-Qaeda with drone-fired missiles would only push this vast strategic region swiftly into chaos. Moreover, such thinking still does not address how to get at the leadership of al-Qaeda and the various Taliban movements—all of whom are sitting in Pakistan rather than Afghanistan. The Pakistani military has not been persuaded to turn its ship around and develop a clear policy that does not differentiate between the pro-Pakistan Taliban and the "bad" Taliban.

Ultimately the choices are stark. Either the United States and Europe abandon the region to the forces of violence, extremism, poverty and the danger of loose nukes—with all its consequences—or they remain committed and prepare to carry out both counterinsurgency and nation building. Afghanistan, Pakistan and central Asia are on the cusp of a critical historical moment on which the region's future stability depends. Only U.S. leadership alongside that of the international community can assure that the region does not fall to extremists or other vicissitudes.

THE DISASTROUS legacy that Obama inherited in Afghanistan is primarily the fault of former-President George W. Bush and his failure to deliver sufficient political, military and economic resources to both the country and the region writ large. But lest we think revisiting the past is an unnecessary detour into mistakes no longer relevant, it is fixing these missteps that is key to preventing a complete radicalization of the region.

The descent of Afghanistan to the brink of anarchy was solidified last year. It was the result of eight years of blunders, miscalculations and wanton neglect. It is in these areas that Obama must now course correct.

It was the Bush team's lack of a strategic agenda for Afghanistan in three critical areas that led to an inevitable escalation of violence. There were woefully insufficient U.S. troops and no comprehensive strategy that would have integrated U.S. military and civilian activity to help the Afghan government increase capacity, improve governance and speedily build its security forces. Greater interagency cooperation in Washington and Kabul—similar to the relationship built up in Iraq between U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker and U.S. commander General David Petraeus—was nonexistent.

Second, there was no comprehensive diplomatic or regional approach to Afghanistan's six direct neighbors, a necessary precondition if Bush's team was to come to grips with the complex history of these states' interference and battle for influence in Afghanistan. Two of them, Iran and Pakistan, were clandestinely backing the Taliban. Still, Pakistan's military ruler, then-President Pervez Musharraf, remained Bush's hero. And Afghanistan's influential distant neighbors Russia, India and Saudi Arabia were also ignored.

Last, there was no political strategy for state building and improving governance by dealing comprehensively with President Hamid Karzai, government ministers, warlords, tribal elders, governors, the parliament and other players. Setting out clear benchmarks for Karzai and his government to adhere to should have increased Afghan effectiveness, but Bush's regular telephone calls to the president were largely wasted on fireside chats, rather than focusing on setting priorities and resolving policy issues. To top it all off, Bush made only two trips to Afghanistan in eight years, the last just a few weeks before he finally stepped down.

The only positive agenda that seeped through into Afghanistan in 2008 was the new U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine, pushed by General Petraeus, that was working well in Iraq. However there were insufficient troops to carry out its principal tactic, which rather than chasing insurgents meant protecting population centers and building trust in the government. In July 2008, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned the Bush administration that Afghanistan needed at least three more brigades, about twelve thousand soldiers, but admitted troops could not be spared because of Iraq. Later that winter, Mullen diverted U.S. troops destined for Iraq to Afghanistan, so that they could clear out the Taliban from provinces adjacent to Kabul and reopen Taliban-blocked roads. But though necessary, this served only to stem disaster. It was not enough to make progress. Greater U.S. funding for a faster buildup of Afghan security forces only started in 2007. And, unlike Iraq, which had an existing army, the new Afghan army had to be built from scratch. By the end of 2008, Taliban attacks had risen by 40 percent over the previous year. Compared to Iraq, the new doctrine arrived in Afghanistan without resources.

This culminated in a critical deterioration—a reality pointed out repeatedly by the U.S. military, but unacknowledged by the Bush White House. In the spring of 2008, large tracts of Afghanistan in the south and east, and for the first time provinces around Kabul, were under the control of the Taliban, which began to appoint its own governors, courts, police and tax collectors to run these areas. The Taliban's two greatest assets became its safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly the recruiting and logistic bases in Pakistan's tribal areas and Baluchistan province, and the uninterrupted flow of money from the likes of donations, drug sales and kidnappings.

More than half of the country's thirty-four provinces turned into no-go areas for Afghan government officials, foreign aid workers and even some NATO forces who were not allowed by their governments to fight the Taliban. For the first time since losing its regime, the Taliban had broken out of its traditional Pashtun ethnic

power base in the south, making it easier to deploy guerrillas to the north and the west in 2009.

The Taliban expansion in 2008 was matched by its extraordinary progress in improved military tactics: more sophisticated ambushes, suicide car bombs, mine warfare, multiple urban terrorist attacks, and targeted killings and kidnappings to demoralize the Afghan public and Western civilians. The Taliban began to primarily target aid workers, the Afghan police and government officials, thereby undermining all attempts to establish state control.

In the last months of the Bush presidency, the military deterioration was in plain sight. Yet even then little was done. Only one comprehensive meeting took place between the Bush White House and the Obama and McCain campaign staffs on October 15 to warn them of the impending crisis in Afghanistan. The Obama team was horrified by what it learned at that meeting; the administration made clear it would do nothing until the handover to the new president.

OBAMA PROMISED a new strategy. By dovetailing several ongoing policy reviews, the new president delivered a plan in March—a mere three months after taking office. The Bush era's strategic failings were largely corrected. There was to be a new comprehensive approach bringing civilian expertise and development work on par with that of the U.S. military, all to help the Afghan government build capacity and increase outreach to the villages. Additional U.S. assistance would be given to root out corruption, and investment in agriculture would help win the war on narcotics.

A new regional strategy would try to heal rifts and rivalries between the neighboring states, and a regional czar—veteran diplomat and deal-maker Richard Holbrooke—was put in charge. He assembled a group of experts to negotiate with these neighbors as well as a Washington-based interagency team that was duplicated at the U.S. embassy in Kabul to quicken implementation.

The new U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine would be followed even more rigorously with twenty-one thousand extra U.S. troops, a new chain of command with the appointment of General Stanley McChrystal as head of all U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, and money and trainers for doubling the size of the Afghan army from a once-projected eighty thousand to two hundred fifty thousand soldiers.

A political strategy for the Afghan government remained to be developed. A handful of American and foreign experts warned that the Afghan presidential elections due in April 2009 and already delayed to August could lead to chaos and should possibly be put off again; the United States needed to get a grip on the military situation. But these calls went unheeded and thus we witnessed Obama's first mistake, one that would lead to a botched election and the current crisis of confidence.

With the Afghan elections around the corner, the main players in Washington felt Karzai was an inept and unreliable leader. Leading officials on the Obama team had long ago made up their minds about the Afghan president. Obama criticized Karzai when he visited Afghanistan in July 2008, and as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Joseph Biden had several testy conversations with the Afghan president. Holbrooke, who had visited Kabul in 2006 and 2008, had written articles criticizing Karzai. But there was no plan to deal with this leader they found so lacking.

Karzai clearly showed little interest in improving governance, curbing corruption or drugs, and rarely visited schools, hospitals or Afghan army units to see progress on the ground. He ignored the parliament, preferring to stitch deals together with the warlords. Every time I raised these issues with him he refused to accept any criticism and defended his actions vigorously, invariably turning the subject around to conspiracies he thought were being hatched against him by the United States and Britain.

Of course, the Afghan president liked dealing with Bush because Bush never made demands, while he found the Obama people too prickly and exacting. As former-Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad has said, "the administration, some key members of the administration, did not like [Karzai] and wanted to get rid of him . . . . And the meetings with him were quite contentious." Karzai's reaction to the Obama team's tougher stance was to play hard to get. He refused to dispense with his warlord and drug-trafficking friends in high places. He took on an anti-American stance, believing that this would win him Afghan votes and force Obama to woo him. The tension only ratcheted up further when Karzai heard gossip that some Americans were considering the idea of an interim government before the elections without him being part of it. In the end, the Obama team

refused to endorse Karzai.

Holbrooke repeatedly said the United States wanted a level playing field for the elections, but the best of intentions had gone awry. Along with no plan to deal with Karzai, there was no clear U.S. policy toward the warlords and drug traffickers with whom Karzai was allied. There was no attempt to make the Afghan-run Independent Election Commission more neutral, which was stuffed full of Karzai's nominees, or to insist that the commission and the UN rectify all the visible signs of pre-rigging—like multiple id cards being issued—that were apparent months before the elections.

Meanwhile, between January and August, over \$300 million worth of preparations for the elections were to suck up all the oxygen in the country. The extra U.S. troops, the counterinsurgency strategy, the larger funding for development was all geared to guaranteeing the safety and viability of the elections rather than to beating back the Taliban.

And yet election-day security was still impossible to achieve. The Taliban launched some four hundred attacks as Afghans went to vote, and the 38 percent election turnout was slightly more than half that of 2004. The postelection uncertainty triggered by massive evidence of rigging by the government and some by Karzai's main rival, Abdullah Abdullah, resulted in a flood of apprehension in Washington and European capitals. If there was no legitimate government, for whom would U.S. and NATO troops be fighting and dying?

There is no easy answer to the conundrum of a flawed election and the failure of the United States, the UN and the European Union to set down markers for a fair poll months earlier. Though the White House has admitted it expects Karzai to remain as president (despite the ongoing recount of 10 percent of the ballot boxes), the damage is done. Above all, it has cost Obama considerable support at home and abroad.

THERE IS now a palpable loss of will—for Obama (the very champion of a reinvigorated Afghan strategy), the American people, their European allies and the governments contributing to the NATO effort.

Lawmakers have begun to compare Afghanistan to the U.S. debacle in South Vietnam and to the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan. An ABC poll said that 51 percent of Americans want U.S. troops out of Afghanistan. The most bizarre turnaround has come from right-wing Republicans who now back Obama and urge more troops, while left-wing Democrats from Obama's own party are pushing for a pullout.

The UN has called for a major conference by the end of 2009 to discuss future goals in Afghanistan. Already, several European countries have hinted they will discuss only one goal—a set date for certain withdrawal of NATO troops.

The truth is that a majority of Europeans want out. Spain (with one thousand troops in Afghanistan) has suggested leaving by 2015; Germany, with four thousand troops, has suggested a “transition strategy” by 2013; and some Italian leaders have demanded that their two thousand eight hundred troops leave by December. The Polish government faces 71 percent of the public opposed to the deployment of its two thousand troops. Japan's new government has stopped its naval-refueling mission for NATO ships in the Indian Ocean.

The United States considers some of these countries to be far less than key to the mission because their forces are mandated by their governments NOT to fight the Taliban. Their task is instead described as reconstruction, as though Afghanistan was in a postconflict-nirvana building boom. Many of these contingents are confined to their camps, surrounded by the Taliban whom they choose not to fight.

But the real problem is that there are serious countries with fighting troops who are also tired, overstretched and don't have the budgets to carry on. The Dutch say they will pull out their one thousand eight hundred troops from Uruzgan province by 2010, the two thousand eight hundred Canadians will pull out from Kandahar by 2011, while even stalwart Britain with nine thousand troops is debating a withdrawal date as its 2010 elections approach.

This is a disaster in the making. As Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO's new secretary-general, categorically warned those looking to leave, the public debate about Afghanistan “has started to go in the wrong direction. . . . Let no one think that a run for the exits is an option. It is not.”

It is as if the dangers lurking in the region are almost forgotten.

What is at stake now is more than Afghanistan. And yet the situation only continues to deteriorate. The Taliban's ideology and tactics are spreading beyond the borders of Afghanistan, into Pakistan and beyond. The region is now at risk of becoming a greater extremist threat than it was before 9/11.

OVER THE past eight years the Taliban has become a role model and inspiration for extremism in the whole region. Today there are Taliban movements in Pakistan and central Asia determined to overthrow their governments. It is entirely possible that the Taliban model could spread to Muslims in China and India. The Taliban's religious ideology, its elevation of jihad above all other Islamic teachings, its effective guerrilla war, and its brutal methods of controlling and governing local populations are spreading. Moreover, all of these groups, including al-Qaeda, respect Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar and consider him the regional leader of jihad against America.

Though the Taliban leaders are not global jihadists like al-Qaeda, they have learned that the Islamic revolution they brought about in Afghanistan from 1993 to 2001 cannot be sustained unless neighboring countries undergo the same process and support them. Perversely, it's the Leon Trotsky doctrine—that revolution in one country is insufficient to secure the revolution.

The Taliban and al-Qaeda are working together. And their ranks are expanding. In recent years, the Afghan Taliban has spawned the Pakistan Taliban. Al-Qaeda has forged a close relationship with both groups and their allies, such as the extremist network led by Afghan Jalaluddin Haqqani and central Asian groups based in Pakistan's tribal areas. All these extremists protect al-Qaeda by increasing the Pakistani and Afghan territory under their control, so that al-Qaeda has more room to hide from U.S. drones, while operating and planning for the future.

General McChrystal's report makes it clear that the entire extremist Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership is based in Pakistan:

Afghanistan's insurgency is clearly supported from Pakistan. Senior leaders of the major Afghan insurgent groups are based in Pakistan, are linked with al Qaeda and other violent extremist groups, and are reportedly aided by some elements of Pakistan's ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence].

The threat the United States and the region face is that the Afghan insurgency will continue to grow and that if there is a Western withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan will not allow a vacuum to develop in Afghanistan and instead will abet a Taliban victory. Pakistan has had a risky dual policy of supporting the Americans in combating al-Qaeda and the Pakistan Taliban, while also supporting the Afghan Taliban. This is because the Pakistani army's national-security logic is dominated by the struggle to keep the Indians at bay. For the army, a Taliban regime in Kabul is preferable to any other warlord regime to guarantee that the Indians and their Afghan protégés (of which Karzai is considered one) are forever kept out of having a role—as they were when the Taliban ruled the lands of Afghanistan in the 1990s. Moreover, a pro-Pakistan Taliban regime in Kabul, possibly backed by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and China, would create a new Pakistan-led region of influence that would reduce the role of its two other main rivals—Iran and Russia. This strategy could become more imperative with talk of less U.S. support to Afghanistan, the collapse in credibility of the Karzai government and the growing perception in Pakistan that the Taliban is winning. Every sign of the United States or NATO dithering over strategy only convinces the Pakistani military about keeping its Taliban option open. Pakistan may well be prepared to take the risk of endangering its own stability by supporting a Taliban regime in Kabul, even as it will try unsuccessfully to separate the Pakistan Taliban from its Afghan brothers.

THIS IS why Pakistan is faced with a conundrum. Even as Islamabad tries to secure its interests in Afghanistan, it puts its own security at risk. Several American pundits have warned that any U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan would seriously destabilize Pakistan. That is true.

The Pakistan Taliban now threatens to overrun large parts of northern Pakistan. In the last two years, the Pakistan Taliban has increasingly turned its guns on the Pakistani army and state. Monster turns on creator.

This year the Pakistan Taliban's capture of the Swat Valley north of Islamabad led to outrage from the Pakistani public and the international community. And the army was forced to take action, acknowledging for the first time that the Pakistan Taliban was now a dire threat. In recent months, the army has pushed the

Taliban out of Swat and is fighting to regain control of the Khyber Pass where the Taliban has been attacking the hundreds of NATO supply containers that are trucked through to Afghanistan every day.

The army has also blocked off roads into South Waziristan, where the Pakistan Taliban is based, and is using long-distance shelling and bombing to destabilize the group. The United States has helped these efforts by killing Baitullah Mehsud, the leader of the Pakistan Taliban, in a drone strike. The army has recently said after much American pressure that it may soon attack South Waziristan.

And thus we come to the end of the good news. If the army is now acting responsibly in dealing with the Pakistan Taliban, such is not the case with the Afghan Taliban. Key networks, such as those of Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, are based in North Waziristan, and they launch attacks into Afghanistan. For the past eight years they have never been bothered by the Pakistani army.

Neither have the main Afghan Taliban leaders who live in Quetta in Baluchistan province. From Quetta, the Taliban is able to resupply its forces in Afghanistan with money, ammunition, suicide bombers and materials to make bombs and mines—all under the watchful eye of the ISI. According to intelligence sources, the Taliban leader Mullah Omar is now in a safe house in Karachi because of the fear that the United States may start using drone attacks on Quetta.

Admiral Mullen and Richard Holbrooke have made major efforts to bring the army and Pakistan's weak civilian leadership led by President Asif Ali Zardari onboard to help go after the Afghan Taliban and help stabilize rather than undermine Afghanistan. However, Pakistan's civilian politicians are not strong enough to accept U.S. demands if it means contradicting the army's policies. As the army takes on the Pakistan Taliban and clears Swat, its political influence and power has grown proportionally. The army still has to be won over to the simple and disturbing truth that a Taliban regime in Kabul would, through its Pakistani proxies, pose a major threat to the Pakistani state.

Worse, Pakistan is far less resilient than it was a few years ago. Even as Pakistani officials bluntly criticize Holbrooke for linking Afghanistan and Pakistan in his "AfPak" strategy, some Pakistanis already see a chronic "Afghanization" of their nation. Current realities include a collapse of law and order in parts of the country, state institutions riddled with corruption and ineffectiveness, a justice system that cannot deliver, a crashing economy with severe joblessness, increasing ethnic tensions and a strong separatist movement in Baluchistan province.

However, the real fear is that under such enormous external and internal pressures, there are no guarantees that the army will stay committed to a democratic system. More so, the military may not remain as united as it has been for the past six decades. What many Pakistanis fear and constantly talk about is not a traditional generals' coup that may end democracy, but a colonels' coup that could bring in a pro-Islamist and anti-Western coterie of officers linked to Islamic groups that would then negotiate a compromise with the Pakistan Taliban. That could put Pakistan's nuclear weapons into the wrong hands. Neither a partial U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan nor a strategy of only using drones to target al-Qaeda could hope to handle such a regional catastrophe.

And a complete American departure would seal the region's fate.

SOUTHERN REGIONS of Muslim central Asia are now at risk. The situation will only get worse if the Taliban offensives continue.

The regions bordering Afghanistan, including southern Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and eastern Turkmenistan, are facing pauperization of their populations, the collapse of Soviet-era services like health and education, and growing joblessness. Their regimes remain dictatorial, corrupt, and deny political or economic reforms. Vast numbers of poverty-stricken workers migrate to Russia looking for work.

Uzbekistan is the largest of these states with some 27 million people and a history of Islamic revolt. Harsh policies and vicious crackdowns against anyone overzealously practicing Islam have led to a strong Islamist underground. After the massacre in Andijan in May 2005, when security forces killed up to eight hundred protesting citizens, hundreds of young dissidents have fled to join the two major Islamic groups operating from Pakistan's tribal areas—the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). Both these groups fight for and model themselves on the Taliban, work closely with al-Qaeda and help fund the extremist

terrorist network by transporting drugs through central Asia to Europe. Both the IMU and the IJU recruit widely from central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia, and most recently from Turkey and Turks living in Germany.

This summer, for the first time since 2001, allegedly under the auspices of al-Qaeda, the IMU and the IJU carried out suicide bombings and other small attacks against security forces in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Such attacks will certainly increase; both the Taliban and al-Qaeda would like to see central Asia in turmoil, perhaps eventually offering a safe haven to their leaders.

Until recently, both Russia and the United States have ignored the impending crisis in the broader region. The United States thought of central Asia only in terms of the military bases the states there provided, while Russia put front and center maintaining a sphere of influence in its near abroad.

However in the past few months, for the first time, Russia has started pressing the United States to cooperate with it more closely on Afghan policy, and Moscow has given the United States and NATO permission to transport supplies to Afghanistan by land. Moscow finally appears to understand the threat of Islamic militancy radiating from Afghanistan into central Asia and perhaps even into Russia itself. Any U.S. retreat from Afghanistan at this moment would certainly send an overwhelming message of U.S. weakness to Russia and the central Asian states. It would encourage extremism to grow and persuade the Afghan Taliban to step up support for its allies in central Asia.

A SENIOR NATO officer recently described this as “Year One for Afghanistan”—implying that the last eight years under Bush had largely been a waste of opportunities and resources to rebuild the country. If this is year one, then there has not been the time or opportunity to make progress. And yet, there is a growing impatience in Washington and among the American public for the Obama team to show tangible results in Afghanistan quickly in spite of the well-understood fact that counterinsurgency wars are not won in months but in years.

New U.S. resources, including troops, are still arriving. The Taliban offensive cannot be countered, and space for development cannot be created without them. Protecting population centers and denying people and territory to the Taliban is vital if the public perception in Afghanistan and the region is to change; the United States and NATO have to be seen as committed to winning and strengthening the Kabul government instead of seemingly set on wavering and losing.

It has been difficult for Afghans to accept how quickly their newly gained freedoms have been lost and how the opportunity to rebuild their country was squandered by the lack of Western resources and a corrupt, inefficient Afghan government. Though there have been advances in areas such as education and health, these are insufficient to convince the public about the sincerity of either the government or the international community. Ninety-five percent of the population celebrated its liberation from the Taliban regime in 2001, only to find that they are now helplessly hedging their bets against a Taliban return.

But there is still hope in Afghanistan. Despite being terrified by the Taliban advances and angry at the rigged election, most Afghans don't want the Taliban back. The United States has to impress upon Afghanistan, Pakistan and other regional governments that it is not about to abandon the region to the Taliban. Increased international commitment to Afghanistan will still reap deep local results among the people. The United States also has to win the trust of the next leader in Kabul and demand a better standard of performance, insisting that the lack of good governance is as dangerous a threat as the Taliban.

Pakistan will have to be wooed, cajoled and bribed with aid and support to resist all forms of extremism. There is increasing public resistance to interference from the military and less support for a foreign policy that is dictated by the army's national-security agenda. The Pakistani people want a stable, strong neighborhood and a strengthened Pakistani economy that is not hostage to suicide bombers. Yet the army still has a long way to go before it undertakes a more comprehensive struggle against all extremists.

Dealing with the crisis requires U.S. leadership. Obama has to convince Congress, the American public and NATO governments that succeeding in Afghanistan requires time and patience, but is vital to maintaining stability in the region and to countering the wider regional threat from Islamic extremism. It's an argument he has so far failed to make convincingly.

Above all, Obama has to understand that what is at stake is not just Afghanistan but the stability of the entire

region.

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