

The Road to Kabul Runs Through Kashmir

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By Ahmed Rashid

U.S. President Barack Obama tried hard to avoid saying the "P" word -- Pakistan -- on his recent trip to India. He didn't mention Pakistan once during his brief remarks commemorating the 2008 Mumbai attacks, to the chagrin of Indian pundits. He treaded carefully on the subject during a question-and-answer forum with Indian students. And in his address to the Indian Parliament two days later, he got scant applause for challenging Indian legislators to support a Pakistan "that is stable and prosperous and democratic."

For all Indian commentators may feel that the United States is hopelessly biased toward their northwestern neighbor, they are missing a key development: As the endgame in Afghanistan approaches, relations between the United States and Pakistan have plunged to their worst depths since 2001. At the heart of this crisis are years of American neglect and drift -- and the Pakistani military's determination to outlast U.S. pressure aimed at ending its ties to the Afghan Taliban.

For nearly a decade, there has been no progress in U.S. aims to improve relations between India and Pakistan or U.S. attempts to persuade the Pakistani military to treat all terrorist groups as equally culpable. The military's Inter-Services Intelligence directorate still allows Afghan and Central Asian terrorist groups to operate from Pakistani soil and refuses to clamp down on the anti-Indian terrorist groups operating from Punjab province, including the Lashkar-e-Taiba, which launched the 2008 Mumbai attacks. The Pakistani Army admits that it has not gone after al Qaeda in Pakistan since 2006.

This malign neglect has allowed foreign militants to radicalize Pakistani Pashtun tribes, which have now linked up with militant groups in Punjab -- with the aim of overthrowing the Pakistani state. Yet Pakistani strategists still think they can crush the homegrown militants while maintaining the Afghan Taliban as a proxy force for a final settlement in Afghanistan.

If that sounds delusional, so does the U.S. failure to address this crisis honestly. For seven long years, President George W. Bush treated former Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf as an ally and hero when a much more calibrated -- and realistic -- policy was needed. The United States also denied the Pakistani public's demands for democracy.

Bush's successor acutely recognizes the problem, but he has yet to move Pakistan in a healthier direction. Bob Woodward's book, *Obama's Wars*, demonstrates how early on, Obama saw a "cancer" in Pakistan that was leading to U.S. failure in Afghanistan. But his advisors were at odds with one other as to what to do about it. Two years into Obama's presidency, U.S. thinking on Pakistan is just as muddled as before, despite billions of dollars in new aid and a new determination to acknowledge the problems more openly.

America's biggest mistake is its failure to recognize Pakistan's near-fatal obsession with India. Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, Pakistan's chief of Army staff, and his corps commanders are more consumed with so-called Indian expansion in the region than any of their predecessors. Kayani has frequently voiced his security philosophy as being "India-centric." He has refused to launch an offensive in North Waziristan, where most Afghan Taliban leaders are housed, using the excuse of not wanting to deplete the Pakistani Army's strength on the Indian front. Pointing to the India threat is convenient for Kayani: It allows him to

explain why he cannot do more on the Afghan border and helps him retain the loyalty of junior- and middle-ranking officers who are increasingly angry about being forced to fight America's war. But his fears about India are also deeply rooted in a Pakistani military mindset that will require major Indian overtures before it changes.

Before he was elected, Obama suggested he would try to resolve the India-Pakistan rivalry and the Kashmir dispute that fuels it, telling Time magazine it was one of the "critical tasks" of his presidency. Needless to say, that hasn't happened -- and he didn't mention the "K" word once during his Parliament speech. While the United States has remained silent on Kashmir, a new Indo-Pak rivalry has erupted over the battle for influence in a post-U.S.-withdrawal world, manifested in terrorist attacks on Indian diplomats and road workers in Afghanistan and, Pakistan claims, Indian-sponsored unrest in Baluchistan.

Obama cannot afford to keep ignoring this blood feud. Some blunt public speaking, not just cautious private messages or boilerplate rhetoric about improving relations between India and Pakistan, could serve as a wake-up call. There can be no peace in Afghanistan until these two neighbors sit down and talk about a common approach to both Kabul and Kashmir, rather than negotiating by proxy war.

The real game-changer in the region can only come, however, when the United States gives its full support to negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Merely facilitating talks is not good enough -- only the United States has the power to enforce a deal -- but U.S. generals are resisting deeper involvement. The Taliban have to be weakened first, the generals argue. The danger is that this strategy, if it even works, will bring to the surface a much more bitter, radicalized Taliban leadership with closer ties to al Qaeda, making negotiations next to impossible.

Pakistan will seek to dominate any future settlement. However, over the course of what are likely to be long and painful discussions, Pakistan will come under tremendous pressure to water down its demands -- which, given the weakness of the Pakistani state, if coupled with more realistic thinking in the Army and greater dialogue with India, it is likely to do.

The problem is the Pentagon. If Obama's generals have their way -- and in an eerie parallel of the way things work in Islamabad, they are increasingly calling the shots in the relationship -- the war in Afghanistan could drag on indefinitely. Pakistan will dig in its heels, as will other regional powers. Taliban attacks will multiply, and the U.S. military and the CIA will escalate their actions along (and maybe even across) the Pakistani border. We are at the cusp of either a broader peace in the region or an ever-widening chaos. It's Obama's choice.

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