

A Round Table on the Obama Administration and the 'AfPak' Question

MR OBAMA'S WARS: PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN

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The analysis was so much simpler with the Bush Administration and its ambitions in Iraq. From the first meeting of the first National Security Council, the President and his advisors identified a strategic goal, namely the extension and maintenance of an American predominance, supported by the demonstration case of regime change in Baghdad.¹ While aspects of the plan would be refined between January 2001 and March 2003, moving toward the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by direct military action rather than covert support of an indigenous challenge, the general aspiration remained. The tragedy of 9/11 would be deployed through the move from al Qaeda to the Iraqi menace of weapons of mass destruction. Strategic doctrine, such as the proposal of an Unholy Trinity of terrorism, tyranny, and technology, would underpin the plans; intelligence and analysis would be framed to justify the removal of a dictator who posed an imminent threat to the US and its allies.²

The strategic ambition collapsed quickly amidst Iraqi insurgency and the exposure of the deceptions that led to war, but it had a clarity that could not be asserted in the case of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Bush Administration, after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, achieved its immediate goals within four months with the toppling of the Taliban and the installation of a suitable Government in Kabul, but as early as March 2002 it had turned its sights to the Iraqi campaign. The Karzai regime maintained a limited authority, while the Pakistani leader, General Pervez Musharraf, could rely—until the rise of domestic opposition finally forced him from power in August 2008—on billions of dollars in American aid. Violence continued in both countries, but in both symbolism and cost it was dwarfed for Washington by the chaos in Iraq.

As I write this in May 2009, however, Afghanistan and Pakistan are now the central crises for US foreign policy. The Taliban has expanded its area of influence, now operating in 75 percent of the country.³ The Obama Administration has fired the commander of NATO and US forces in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, with promises of a “new strategy and a new mission” under his replacement, General Stanley McChrystal.⁴ Obama’s promises of economic aid and civilian involvement, accompanying a doubling of US troops in the country, have already been eclipsed by the military dimension of counter-insurgency; more than 100 civilians died in a single attack by American aircraft in early May.⁵ President Karzai, whose removal was being sought by Washington only months ago, has out-manoeuvred Washington: making new domestic political alliances, he appears to have secured his re-election in

¹ Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill*

² <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/national/nss-020920.pdf>

³ [http://www.americansecurityproject.org/files/AWW%20Six%20Month%20Update%202009%20\(FINAL\)A.pdf](http://www.americansecurityproject.org/files/AWW%20Six%20Month%20Update%202009%20(FINAL)A.pdf)

⁴ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/12/transcript-gates-mullen-briefing-on-us-command-change-in-afghanistan/>

⁵ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/06/tuesdays-mass-killing-in-afghanistan-us-military-begins-the-lying/>

August.⁶

In Pakistan, the immediate Washington-supported replacement for President Musharraf, Asif Ali Zardari, has been reduced to a figurehead. Obama's officials are pressing for the abrogation of political agreements with local groups, and a military offensive against the "Pakistani Taliban", who have expanded their operations beyond the Northwest Frontier Provinces and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Missile attacks by American drone aircraft, and the casualties from them, have escalated. Obama's envoy, Richard Holbrooke, travels regularly to Islamabad for meetings without any apparent resolution. Zardari and Karzai visit the US for a summit that is more for the securing of financial aid and of domestic political advantage than for a unifying effort against "insurgents".

Yet it is far from clear that Washington has a strategy, for Afghanistan, Pakistan, or for an "AfPak" combination. The Administration, from the President to General Petraeus, invoke the threat of al Qaeda and "extremists", folding the opposition of local political groups into that formula or setting it aside. Schemes are launched to undermine and possibly even remove national leaders, without any apparent consideration of political alternatives, let alone long-term stability.



In his Inaugural speech in January 2009, President Obama referred to only two countries outside the United States: "We will begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people, and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan."⁷ The juxtaposition indicated that the new Administration would not only make the Afghan situation a priority; the latter would supplant Iraq as *the* priority for US foreign policy. The next day Obama's National Security Council took up the issue, and the day after that, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, a holdover from the Bush Administration, indicated that there would be a significant change in approach: the US Government would now pursue "very concrete things" such as establishing control in parts of the country, pursuing al Qaeda, and delivering services and security for the Afghan people.⁸

However, the statements did not herald a new, unifying strategy. For the next month, there was a protracted battle within the Executive Branch between Obama's White House staff and US military commanders, with Gates in the middle. The generals pressed for their request for 30,000 extra troops, raising the total American commitment to 68,000, to be met in full "as the foundation on whatever the president decides to develop in terms of a further strategy".⁹ The President played for time, setting aside the military studies that had been prepared for his first day in office for an interagency review led by his envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, and former CIA operative Bruce Riedel.

Meanwhile some Obama advisors were considering a replacement for the Afghanistan President. A White House official told *The New York Times*, "Mr. Karzai is now seen as a potential impediment to American goals in Afghanistan, the officials said, because corruption has become rampant in his government, contributing to a flourishing drug trade and the resurgence of the Taliban." Among those

⁶ **Editor's note:** at the time of publication, election results showing a Karzai majority were contested with accusations of voter and electoral fraud.

⁷ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/01/20/the-prepared-script-of-barack-obamas-inaugural-speech/>

⁸ http://www.thenation.com/blogs/dreyfuss/400748/afghan_escalation_no_decision_yet_says_gates

⁹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSTRE51279P20090203>

supposedly supporting a change were Vice President Joe Biden and Holbrooke.¹⁰

Beyond these immediate battles, the question remained: what was the Obama Administration's strategy to stabilise Afghanistan? The President's unease was evident in his first meeting with Gates and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when he asked, "What's the endgame?" According to his staff, he "did not receive a convincing answer", either from his advisors or from General David McKiernan, the commander of US forces in Afghanistan.¹¹

Confusion was soon evident within the Administration. Obama's decision to appoint a special envoy, while checking the military push for quick decisions, had muddled lines of authority. Gates was still involved as a broker, but Secretary of State Hillary Clinton appeared to have an ill-defined role, if she had one at all. While some officials were leaking one message to the media—" [We will] leave economic development and nation-building increasingly to European allies, so that American forces [can] focus on the fight against insurgents,"—other White House staffers were jumping in with another—"There is no purely military solution to the challenge in Afghanistan so there will be a significant non-military component to anything that we seek to undertake."¹²

In mid-February, Obama offered a compromise on the military front, approving about two-thirds of the military's demands while holding the line that a longer-term decision would await the completion of the Holbrooke-Riedel study. Yet even in this supposed resolution, methods and specific objectives remained vague. General Petraeus's acolytes grumbled, "You had people from the Department of Agriculture weighing in. There were too many cooks. The end result was lowest-common-denominator stuff. The usual Petraeus acuity wasn't there."¹³ Instead, the unifying rationale was in the rhetorical presentation of "al Qaeda" and "extremists". The President's imagery merely reinforced the message put out by his staff within a week of the Inauguration: "What we're trying to do is to focus on the al Qaeda problem. That has to be our first priority."¹⁴

Instead of bringing strategic clarity, the significance of the invocation of a bin Laden-led threat lay beyond Afghanistan, for in that portrayal lurked the expansion of crisis, and thus US intervention, in Pakistan. Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made the link at the start of February: "We cannot accept that [an] Al Qaeda leadership which continues to plan against us every single day—and I mean us, here in America—[could] have [a] safe haven in Pakistan nor could resume one in Afghanistan."¹⁵

Initially the White House balked at Mullen's extension and tried to keep Afghanistan and Pakistan as separate issues. According to The Washington Post, "Senior administration officials described their approach to Pakistan—as a major U.S. partner under serious threat of internal collapse—as fundamentally different from the Bush administration's focus on the country as a Taliban and al-Qaeda 'platform' for

¹⁰ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/28/us/politics/28policy.html?_r=1

¹¹ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/08/update-on-obama-v-the-military-where-next-in-afghanistan/>;
http://www.alternet.org/waroniraq/128870/%27what_is_the_end_game%27%3A_why_obama_rejected_a_bigger_surge_in_afghanistan/

¹² <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE50R55820090128?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>

¹³ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/06/mr-obamas-war-the-spin-isits-not-afghanistan-its-pakistan/>

¹⁴ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/01/28/the-other-shoe-drops-obama-prepares-for-war-in-afghanistan/>

¹⁵ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/03/why-the-us-surge-will-fail-in-afghanistan-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-leave-clues/>

attacks in Afghanistan and beyond.”¹⁶ Less than a week later, however, the President embraced the “AfPak” connection, saying that his “bottom line is that we cannot allow al Qaeda to operate. We cannot have those safe havens in that region. And we’re going to have to work both smartly and effectively, but with consistency, in order to make sure that those safe havens don’t exist.”¹⁷

Obama did not specify why he had suddenly connected the conflict in Afghanistan to “extremism” in Pakistan; one possibility is that he was increasingly influenced by the process led by Holbrooke and Riedel, who was setting out the notion of “an existential threat from within” in the latter country. The review, completed in late March, asserted:

Afghanistan pales in comparison to the problems in Pakistan. Our primary goal has to be to shut down the al-Qaeda and Taliban safe havens on the Pakistan side of the border. If that can be accomplished, then the insurgency in Afghanistan becomes manageable.¹⁸

Secretary of Defense Gates and Obama reiterated the connection throughout March: “At the heart of a new Afghanistan policy is going to be a smarter Pakistan policy. As long as you’ve got safe havens in these border regions that the Pakistani government can’t control or reach, in effective ways, we’re going to continue to see vulnerability on the Afghan side of the border.”¹⁹ Despite public opposition from the Pakistani Government and military, the US expanded missile strikes from its secret base in northwest Pakistan.²⁰ US Special Forces advised Pakistan units while Washington pressed for an offensive against local insurgents.²¹

Thus, as he stepped to the podium on 27 March 2009, announcing the Administration’s conclusions from the Riedel review, President Obama was committing his Administration to two, linked (at least in the American conception) wars: “This is not simply an American problem: far from it. This is an international security challenge of the highest order. Terrorist attacks in London, in Bali, were tied to al Qaeda and its allies in Pakistan, as were attacks in North Africa and the Middle East and Islamabad and in Kabul. If there is a major attack on an Asian, European, or Africa [sic], it too is likely to have ties to Al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan.”²² Even as his Administration was declaring that it was putting away its predecessor’s framework of the “War on Terror”, Obama was invoking it: “[This is] the same war that we initiated after 9/11 as a consequence of those attacks on 3,000 Americans, who were just going about their

¹⁶ http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/03/AR2009020302858_2.html?sid=ST2009020401461

¹⁷ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/10/foreign-policy-highlights-of-the-first-obama-press-conference-thumbs-up-for-iran-and-russia-slapdowns-for-petraeus-and-pakistan/>

¹⁸ http://www.cfr.org/publication/19321/pakistans_existential_threat_comes_from_within.html?breadcrumb=%2Fpublication%2Fby_type%2Finterview; http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/06/mr-obamas-war-the-spin-isits-not-afghanistan-its-pakistan/

¹⁹ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/us/politics/08obama-text.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all

²⁰ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/12/pakistan-to-obama-change-us-policy-on-missile-strikes-join-us-in-ground-operations> and <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/22/mr-obamas-war-expanding-the-enemies-in-pakistan/> and <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/15/the-shock-of-hypocrisy-us-operating-from-within-pakistan/>

²¹ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/23/mr-obamas-war-us-special-forces-training-pakistani-units-us-military-pressing-pakistani-allies/>

²² <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/27/breaking-news-obama-announces-pakistan-afghanistan-strategy/>

daily round.”²³

In the two conflicts, Pakistan had overtaken Afghanistan as the Administration’s primary concern. Holbrooke told the press, “We have to deal with the western Pakistan problem....Our superiors would all freely admit that of all the dilemmas and challenges we face, that is going to be the most daunting... because it’s a sovereign country and there is a red line.”²⁴ Yet the identification of crisis did not amount to a strategy. To the contrary, it seemed to undermine Obama’s general proclamation of “a comprehensive strategy that doesn’t just rely on bullets or bombs, but also relies on agricultural specialists, on doctors, on engineers, to help create an environment in which people recognize that they have much more at stake...than giving in to some of these extremist ideologies”; the non-military promises would soon be overshadowed by the military tactics proposed for the immediate emergency.²⁵

Moreover, the rhetoric about striking al Qaeda/extremist enemies and the shift to hitting the Pakistani safe havens obscured the “hole in the middle” of the US approach. Where were the political complement, and specifically the Afghan or Pakistani political partner, for this initiative?

Far from giving in to Washington’s demands or accepting his overthrow, President Karzai fought back, both in the American media and in domestic politics. He publicly criticised US airstrikes, which were killing more and more Afghan civilians, and opened up secret discussions with Taliban representatives.²⁶ While his effort to schedule Presidential elections in April was challenged by the US and blocked by local electoral officials, who postponed the vote to August, Karzai established new domestic alliances and bolstered old ones.²⁷ Meanwhile, candidates favoured by the US have fallen far behind, undercut by political in-fighting, their weaknesses, or their too-close relationship with Washington.

US officials have continued to hint not-so-subtly that Afghans should remove their President in August. Both Clinton and Holbrooke said at the start of April, “We do think [corruption] is a cancer. President Karzai says publicly that he agrees with that. And now it’s up to his government to take action. But I would stress...that there is an election coming up on August 20th....And that election will be a chance for the people to vote on these issues.”²⁸

Pakistan offers the different dynamic of a weak President. Asif Ali Zardari’s primary aim has been to maintain his domestic position, particularly in the face of public demonstrations demanding significant political and judicial reforms and an escalating economic crisis.²⁹ To that end, he endorsed an agreement with local tribes in northwest Pakistan, accepting a Sharia system in exchange for a cease-fire.³⁰

²³ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/30/full-video-and-transcript-president-obama-on-pakistan-afghanistan-on-face-the-nation-29-march-2009/>

²⁴ <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/world/pakistan-most-daunting-in-new-plan-holbrooke--bi>

²⁵ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/30/full-video-and-transcript-president-obama-on-pakistan-afghanistan-on-face-the-nation-29-march-2009/>

²⁶ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/12/pakistan-to-obama-change-us-policy-on-missile-strikes-join-us-in-ground-operations/>

²⁷ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/03/karzais-pre-emptive-political-strike/>

²⁸ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/30/transcript-david-petraeus-and-richard-holbrooke-on-cnn-29-march/>

²⁹ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/04/pakistan-zardari-maintains-his-wiggle-room-against-washington-domestic-rivals/>

³⁰ An alternative explanation is that the Pakistani military pursued a political agreement so that, in the likelihood it broke down, they would have legitimacy in strikes against opposition groups. <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/02/23/analysis-josh-mull-on-mr-obamas-war-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan/>

That step, in combination with Zardari's political weaknesses and history of corruption, put him beyond the acceptable for American steps in Pakistan. So Washington, on the political front, opened up talks with alternative leaders like the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. More importantly, the US sought a direct channel with the leader of Pakistan's armed forces, Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. A senior Administration official said in early March: "We have to re-establish close personal relationships with the army. We have to be sure they're on the same page as we are. Based on what I saw, they aren't yet."

Within days, the connection with Kayani set out that same page to limit any violence from public demonstrations in the Long March against Zardari's government.³¹ *The Washington Post*, using Administration sources, then outlined, "The Administration is putting the finishing touches on a plan to greatly increase economic and development assistance to Pakistan, and to expand a military partnership considered crucial to striking a mortal blow against al-Qaeda's leadership and breaking the Pakistani-based extremist networks that sustain the war in Afghanistan....But the weakness of Pakistan's elected government—backed into a corner by weekend demonstrations that left its political opposition strengthened—has called into question one of the basic pillars of that plan."³²

Those "holes in the middle" in turn point to the superficial nature, and ultimately the weakness, of the Obama plan. Not trusting Zardari to oversee either the military campaign or the programme of economic development, the US began talks with former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif; while Sharif, deposed by the Musharraf coup of 1999, had been seen as too "Islamist" in his politics by Washington, now he was the alternative to the ineffective President.³³ The promises of economic advance were eclipsed by political worries: "[The situation] had gotten significantly worse than I expected as the Swat deal [with local tribes] unravelled," said Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.³⁴

Within six weeks, those assurances of the non-military dimension have been eclipsed or have fallen by the wayside. Washington pressed Zardari to abrogate the Swat Valley agreements with local tribes, and when the Taliban responded by expanding operations beyond the northwest, the Pakistani military launched an offensive which continues as I write.³⁵ So far from "growing" the economy and social services, at the time of writing the US-backed drive on the safe havens has generated up to one million refugees, out of a local population of 1.3 million, in and beyond the Swat Valley.

Meanwhile, General Petraeus—having been initially rebuffed by Obama—is reasserting his conception of a military-first counter-insurgency in Afghanistan. Less than a week after Obama said, "What I will not do is to simply assume that more troops always result in an improved situation," Petraeus was putting forth the request for another 10,000 troops.³⁶ In early May, Petraeus pushed for the firing of General McKiernan and his replacement by General McChrystal, a Petraeus ally whose background is

³¹ http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/KC07Df01.html; <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/18/the-us-and-pakistan-bye-bye-president-zardari-but-hello-to-whom/>

³² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/16/AR2009031603254.html>

³³ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/03/bye-bye-zardari-washington-considers-the-political-alternative-in-pakistan/>

³⁴ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/01/AR2009050102824.html>

³⁵ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/03/video-secretary-of-defense-gates-on-cnn-3-may/>; <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/05/video-admiral-mullen-briefing-on-pakistan-afghanistan-4-may/>

³⁶ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/04/07/afghanistan-the-problem-of-military-led-development/>; <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/10/transcript-david-petraeus-on-fox-news-sunday/>

in Special Operations. He got this wish from the president.³⁷ The change came less than a week after US bombs killed more than 100 people in Farah province, the largest civilian death toll in a single incident since 2001.³⁸ In two major interviews with US broadcasters days later, Petraeus made no reference to non-military activities in Afghanistan.³⁹

The irony is not that Obama's promise of a strategy led by politics rather than boots on the ground rings hollow, but that the military approach may be eclipsed by Afghan politics. Manoeuvring to strengthen his own position, Karzai has advocated talks with former foes. By May, his persistence was being met by cautious but clear welcome from former Taliban officials, and it may have even led to a cautious American embrace, as US officials were allegedly in discussions with a California-based representative of the former Afghan leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.⁴⁰

There were still public warnings to Karzai, as in Secretary of State Clinton's testimony to a Senate hearing at the end of April: "With respect to the Government, its capacity, its problems providing services, its perception of being less than transparent, straightforward, honest: it's a problem, I'm not going to tell you it's not." This was followed by her omission of Karzai's name when she added, "Several members of the Cabinet are doing an excellent job."⁴¹ On the day of the Afghan President's visit to Washington, *Washington Post* reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran resurrected the line, "Senior members of Obama's national security team say Karzai has not done enough to address the grave challenges facing his nation. They deem him to be a mercurial and vacillating chieftain who has tolerated corruption and failed to project his authority beyond the gates of Kabul."⁴²

However, as Karzai visited President Obama in May, he did so with the assurances that he had struck political deals to lock down voting blocs, notably through the naming of his two Vice Presidential running mates, while potential threats had withdrawn from the electoral campaign.⁴³ So it was he who could take the high ground, lecturing the US about the civilian casualties of bombing: "It's the standard of morality that we are seeking which is also one that is being desired and spoken about in America."⁴⁴



In an interview with *Newsweek* magazine, published in mid-May, President Obama was asked, "What's the hardest thing you have had to do?" He replied:

Order 17,000 additional troops into Afghanistan. There is a sobriety that comes with a decision

³⁷ <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/05/11/afghanistan.replacement/index.html>

³⁸ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/06/tuesdays-mass-killing-in-afghanistan-us-military-begins-the-lying/>

³⁹ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/10/transcript-david-petraeus-on-fox-news-sunday/>; PETRAEUS ON CNN

⁴⁰ http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/KD10Ak04.html

⁴¹ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/01/aid-and-warning-clinton-backs-palestines-abbas-puts-afghanistans-karzai-on-notice/>

⁴² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/05/AR2009050504048.html?nav=hcmodule>

⁴³ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/05/afghanistan-karzai-out-manoevres-the-united-states/>

⁴⁴ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/10/video-and-transcript-pakistans-zardari-and-afghanistans-karzai-on-meet-the-press-10-may/>

like that because you have to expect that some of those young men and women are going to be harmed in the theater of war. And making sure that you have thought through every angle and have put together the best possible strategy, but still understanding that in a situation like Afghanistan the task is extraordinarily difficult and there are no guarantees; that makes it a very complicated and difficult decision.

Significantly, however, as Obama went through the narrative of the decision to increase military forces in Afghanistan, his lengthy reply did not address strategy. Instead, he offered empathy (“meeting with young men and women who’ve served, and their families, and the families of soldiers who never came back”) and context (“a recognition that the existing trajectory was not working, that the Taliban had made advances, that our presence in Afghanistan was declining in popularity, that the instability along the border region was destabilizing Pakistan as well”) before ending in a vague description of process and bureaucracy:

Once that strategic review had been completed, then I sat in a room with the principals and argued about it, and listened to various perspectives, saw a range of options in terms of how we could move forward; asked them to go back and rework their numbers and reconsider certain positions based on the fact that some of the questions I asked could not be answered. And when I finally felt that every approach—every possible approach—had been aired, that all the questions had either been answered or were unanswerable, at that point I had to make a decision and I did.⁴⁵

Even at the level of tactics, Obama’s “decision” seems muddled. The Administration adopted the position of ostensibly supporting the Pakistani Government, while undermining its President. US officials told favoured journalists, “On some major security and intelligence issues, [Zardari] claimed no knowledge or sought to shift blame to others, and the overall impression was of an accidental president who still has an uncertain grasp on power.”⁴⁶

Obama himself blasted the civilian leadership, to the point where he threatened overruling them:

I am gravely concerned about the situation in Pakistan....The civilian government there right now is very fragile and don’t [sic] seem to have the capacity to deliver basic services: schools, health care, rule of law, a judicial system that works for the majority of the people. We will provide them all of the cooperation that we can. We want to respect their sovereignty, but we also recognize that we have huge strategic interests, huge national security interests in making sure that Pakistan is stable and that you don’t end up having a nuclear-armed militant state.⁴⁷

In May, President Zardari was on an extended tour outside Pakistan when the long-awaited (from

⁴⁵ <http://www.newsweek.com/id/197891/page/1>

⁴⁶ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/04/20/pakistan-whos-in-charge-clue-from-washington-general-kiyani/>

⁴⁷ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/04/30/obama-press-conference-nailing-torture-trashing-the-pakistani-government/>

Washington's viewpoint) military offensive against the Taliban was launched. The public face on the campaign was instead Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.⁴⁸

In Afghanistan, the political machinations of the US government, far from getting the 'right' leadership, had merely strengthened the President it hoped to depose. Outside Kabul, the collateral damage of US air attacks alienated civilians, working to the advantage of insurgents. The replacement of the American commander in Afghanistan, far from promising a re-consideration with 'fresh eyes', offered the assurance that the military tactics—without any apparent consideration of their political counterpart—simply needed to be refined and "targeted". In their rhetoric, Obama officials, for all their invocations of "existential threat",⁴⁹ risked making Pakistan an (expendable) frontline in US homeland security. As one critic cogently assessed, "In short, it's not the responsibility of the Secretary of Defense to keep Pakistan stable, it is his responsibility to attack extremist safe havens in Pakistan in order to prevent a catastrophic terrorist attack against the US, Canada, or the European Union."⁵⁰

On 19 May, Secretary of State Clinton, in the midst of announcing \$110 million in emergency aid (part of which, she hoped, would be donated by benevolent viewers), declared, "Our policy toward Pakistan over the last 30 years has been incoherent." She did not pause to consider the possible irony of coherence in her own statement: having initially promised aid for the "progress" and development of Pakistani communities, Clinton was now offering the money for their sacrifice, with because 2 million of them had been internally displaced by US-backed military operations.⁵¹

And perhaps she did not need to pause for consideration. The geographic focus of the Obama Administration may differ from that of its predecessor, but its rhetoric of the battle against al Qaeda and extremists, transcending the reality of the local situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, holds forth Marilyn Young's notion of the "limited unlimited war".⁵² In such a war, the strategic ends of not only a military "victory" for US forces, but also political, economic, and social resolution for the populaces in those countries, are peripheral; the ongoing battle is an end in itself. 'War' and 'national security' take over, rationalised by a permanent fear.⁵³

Which is why, when asked in the *Newsweek* interview, "Can anything get you ready to be a war president?", Obama could reduce "strategic issues" to an 18-word question:

⁴⁸ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/07/AR2009050703130.html>

⁴⁹ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/04/23/text-hillary-clinton-remarks-to-house-foreign-affairs-committee-22-april-2009/>

⁵⁰ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/03/03/mr-obamas-doctrine-josh-mull-on-us-grand-strategy-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan/>

⁵¹ <http://enduringamerica.com/2009/05/20/that-us-strategy-in-pakistan-a-bit-of-money-for-two-million-refugees/>

⁵² <http://www.libertas.bham.ac.uk/analysis/YOUNG.MP3>

⁵³ As I was finishing this paragraph, I was sent a blog by Steve Coll which, in support of continued US airstrikes in Pakistan, set forth "permanent fear" more eloquently than I could ever hope to:

"Suppose the following: Obama overrules his generals and intelligence advisers and ends the drone attacks immediately because of some generalized intuition that the attacks are destabilizing Pakistan. His generals write memos arguing that he is wrong to do so. Six weeks later, a manic-depressive Pakistani-American living in New York City, who happened to visit his cousins in Karachi earlier this year, decides on his own volition to walk into a New Jersey shopping mall with an automatic rifle and kills a dozen shoppers. The advisers opposed to Obama's drone decision leak their memos; the Republican Party follows the path Cheney has blazed and opens a years-long campaign against Obama on the grounds that he and the Democrats are weak, defeatist, etc. Perhaps Obama, with his extraordinary political and rhetorical skills, could overcome such a campaign. But it is easy to imagine why he might wish to avoid the risk." [<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/stevecoll/>]

I think that it certainly helps to know the broader strategic issues involved. I think that's more important than understanding the tactics involved....The president has to make a decision: will the application of military force in this circumstance meet the broader national-security goals of the United States?⁵⁴

⁵⁴ <http://www.newsweek.com/id/197891/page/1>