

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

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## **“THERE MUST BE TWO AMERICAS”: OBAMA’S AFPAK WAR AND THE PATHOLOGIES OF GLOBAL DISORDER**

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The world is full of ironies. Barack Obama came to power at least in part because of his opposition to his country’s post-9/11 foreign policy. He now finds himself defending and expanding the chaotic and possibly counterproductive presence of the United States in central Asia. There were signs of this coming, but Obama’s musings during the 2008 presidential campaign about expanding the Afghan war could have been read as an effort to protect his right flank from charges of “softness” while capitalizing on discontent with the Iraq War. The latter was seen by a growing majority of Americans as not only a distraction from the real target (al Qaeda) but also a war fought under blatantly false pretenses. Focusing on Afghanistan allowed the Democrats to show their requisite manliness *and* fault the Bush administration for missing the point of 9/11.

It turns out that Obama wasn’t just posturing. There were compelling strategic reasons to shift America’s attention away from Iraq toward the much more complex and potentially dangerous arc of central and south Asia. The administration unveiled its “AfPak” policy on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009, acknowledging that not only was stabilization impossible in Afghanistan without an equally stable and cooperative Pakistan, but that al Qaeda had moved into Pakistan’s Taliban-dominated Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and even North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Swat valley, out of the range of NATO’s military and into the ambivalent face of Pakistan security forces who have both opposed and cultivated radical Islamic elements as needed. There is, in effect, a transborder Taliban—Pakistani and ex-Afghan Pashtuns along with other Punjabi “extremists” who are increasingly dominating the NWFP, although the extent to which they represent what Secretary Clinton calls an “existential threat” to Pakistan’s integrity remains unclear.<sup>1</sup>

At home, AfPak was well-received by the American intelligentsia, even applauded by conservatives, who cheered what the new policy seemed to imply: that Obama conceded the Bush administration’s Iraq War surge worked and could be replicated in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> This was the first premise on which the new policy was ostensibly predicated, although not quite to the degree its neoconservative supporters imagined, since the expansion of American forces in Afghanistan is too modest to achieve anything like a military “victory”. Instead, AfPak has moderated US objectives, striking pragmatic tones consistent with the prosaic grittiness of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, the very man who helped Reagan arm the Mujahedin in equally prosaic terms in the 1980s. Gone is the rhetoric of democratic transformation and

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<sup>1</sup> The outlines of the new policy can be found in “White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group’s Report on US Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan,” March 27, 2009, printed in the *New York Times*.

<sup>2</sup> Abe Greenwald, “The lessons of Iraq applied,” *Commentary*, March 27, 2009; Max Boot, “A new counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,” *Commentarymagazine.com*; “‘All Hail Obama’—Obama’s Afghan Strategy—Wins Neo-conservative Plaudits,” *The Spectator*, March 27, 2009; See coverage of press reaction in Eric Etheridge, “The plan for Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2009.

in its place are a series of strategic benchmarks and commitments to economic and civil infrastructure development.<sup>3</sup> The latter are long overdue, of course, and the vocal multilateralism from Washington might undercut the regional (and global) perception that the United States too often pursues its narrow interests at the expense of local clients. But whether outside forces can reverse the economic and civic collapse of the region, and renovate both states without seeming to dominate them remains an open question. The ratcheting down of goals and rhetoric is also politically telling, an admission that the Bush administration's vision was an almost autistic telling of some domestic narrative of hubris and self-assurance that had no relevance on the ground in central Asia. It also sounds like the final days of the Vietnam War, perhaps even a confession that the object now is merely not to lose.

The other AfPak premise drawn from the Iraq War is that Taliban on both sides of the old British imperial frontier known as the Durand line can be parsed into moderate and radical, reconcilable and irreconcilable, elements. Unquestionably Taliban suicide attacks in Pakistan have cost them support, but these potential gains have been offset by civilian casualties inflicted by US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, and by the clumsy government military offensive into the Swat valley. The deeper question, though, is whether Iraq offers the guidance expected by the administration. Aside from the more complicated ethnic terrain in "Pashtunistan," with which parallels may be difficult, the US achieved a form of stability in Iraq by, among other things, massively aiding former Baathist, Sunni paramilitary (the 100,000 strong Sunni Awakening Movement) who have been unusually effective at attacking al Qaeda but now threaten the nominal Shiite government of Nouri al-Maliki. The result has been a three-way consolidation of Sunni, Shiite and Kurd forces in Iraq with little integration into a single nation. Both Shiite and Sunni forces appear to be waiting for the US to withdraw before resuming their civil war. Neither, in any case, is much interested in American liberal democracy.<sup>4</sup> Only the Kurds remain consistently pro-Western. Even if such a similar truce could be brokered across the Afghan-Pakistan border, there's no reason to believe it would hold without a series of other conditions far more intractable being put in place.

Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid sides with the pessimists here, claiming not merely that his homeland is teetering on the brink of collapse, but that it's all been a function of the Bush administration's post-9/11 intervention in the region: "the US-led war on terrorism has left in its wake a far more unstable world than existed on that momentous day in 2001."<sup>5</sup> The attribution of this crisis to the US is not surprising. There's been a systematic failure in the United States (and Canada for that matter) to take seriously the *causes* of anti-American discontent in the Muslim world because the conflict has been structured in such intellectually and morally Manichean terms.<sup>6</sup> The result has been a policy of solipsistic heavy-handedness which, even if well-intentioned, has fed the fires of anger and discontent that threaten both Pakistan and Afghanistan from within. Rashid does, it is true, lay equal blame at the feet of the Pakistani army and Inter-services Intelligence Agency (ISI), both of whom have long defined

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Herold, "Obama's First 100 Days: The Afghan War is becoming America's War," *Global Research*, May 1, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Galbraith, "Is This a 'Victory'?" *The New York Review of Books*, October 23, 2008. See also Joshua Hammer, "Iraq: Before & After, and Now," *The New York Review of Books*, December 4, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York, 2008); "Pakistan on the brink" forthcoming in *The New York Review of Books*, June 11, 2009, in [http://www.ahmedrashid.com/wp-content/archives/pakistan/articles/pdf/Pakistan\\_on\\_the\\_Brink.pdf](http://www.ahmedrashid.com/wp-content/archives/pakistan/articles/pdf/Pakistan_on_the_Brink.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Melani McAlister, "A cultural history of the war without end," *Journal of American History* 89.2 (September 2002).

their country's security in terms of encouraging Muslim militants in Kashmir and supporting Taliban in Afghanistan. The jihadis are seen as a cost-effective way of keeping foreign powers—including most of all, India—away from Pakistan's frontiers.<sup>7</sup>

The double bind for Washington is undoubtedly a product of America's expansive vision of national security, etched through a century of global interventions which, like Graham Greene's Alden Pyle, are often filled with "worldly innocence"—they do not mean to hurt but often do. It is not that the United States is *always* innocent; greed and mendacity have been at work in carving US foreign policy as they have elsewhere. But it may well be the profession of innocence—the true belief in the promise of "America" as global exemplar—that is most dangerous because it's so bad at understanding its own limits and recognizing when it crosses into willful, blind, counterproductivity. Listening to Dick Cheney defend the malevolence that guided his own hand in Iraq only leaves us wondering: is it worse if he really believes what he says?

But the alternative—a realism in which the United States remains poised to defend the single teleology of world history it represents, but is restrained in its application of power—seems hardly more plausible. Anatol Leiven of the New America Foundation has argued that the US can do more harm than good by meddling too much because it remains wildly unpopular in this part of the world—a lesson propounded in the pages of *The National Interest*, and in Leiven's articulation of a foreign policy he calls "ethical realism".<sup>8</sup> He argues that excessive American intervention will only weaken civil society and support for the "ruling class" in Pakistan which is, in his view, still holding on against the Islamist militants and insurgents. Leiven concedes that no lasting solution to Afghanistan can occur without Pakistan's help; other diplomats opine (and Richard Holbrooke's presence confirms this) that no lasting political solution is possible without negotiating with Taliban. The "dream of splitting the Taliban" may be just that, or it may be the essence of sound diplomacy. But either way, it will not sit well with those who measure success in the region in terms of regime change. It's not at all clear that Canadians and Americans can easily tolerate the persistence of repellent regimes when they have for so long been urged

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<sup>7</sup> India's interest in Afghanistan rests on a number of pillars, ranging from a desire for access to central Asian oil to using Afghanistan as a counterweight to Pakistan. Islamabad has likewise seen Afghanistan as part of its strategic sphere of interest in the event of a war with India. This suspicion of Indian intentions in Afghanistan lies in part at the heart of Pakistan's ambivalence toward the Taliban. See Jayshree Bajoria, "India-Afghanistan relations," Council of Foreign Relations backgrounder, October 23, 2008; Raja Karthikeya Gundu and Teresita C. Schaffer, "India and Pakistan in Afghanistan: Hostile Sports," *South Asia Monitor*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 3, 2008; "The next chapter: the United States and Pakistan," Report of the Pakistan Policy Working Group, September 2008. Note that this working group is sponsored by former US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, the man Musharraf claimed threatened Pakistan in the wake of 9/11, and the man linked to the Valerie Plame leak. Another sponsor is Dyncorp International, a military contractor with a controversial track record in Columbia, Iraq, and Bosnia.

<sup>8</sup> Anatol Leiven, "Do no harm," *The National Interest*, March/April 2008, 16-20; Anatol Leiven and John Hullsman, *Ethical realism: a vision for America's role in the world*, (Pantheon, 2006).

to fight on the high moral ground of making the world safe for liberal democracy.<sup>9</sup> The gap between public rationale (required, for all its rhetorical excess, to get at least part of the *vox populi* behind an overseas war) and material interest remains problematic. But even Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has finally and reluctantly conceded what his critics said long ago: the war against the insurgency probably can't be "won". What then, the families of dead soldiers would say, has been the point?

All of this shouldn't come as news to anyone who has studied American globalism—had the name of William A. Williams not been tarred by the politics of the Cold War in the American academy, we ought to have known long ago that the US has never been able to intervene in the name of self-determination without undermining its own moral and strategic position in the societies it liberates. As Mark Twain famously said of the Philippines: "There must be two Americas: one that sets the captive free, and one that takes a once-captive's new freedom away from him."<sup>10</sup> A host of books (Lawrence Freedman's *A Choice of Enemies* or Robert Jackson and Philip Towle's *Temptations of Power* for instance) have found at the core of America's Middle East and central Asian dilemma not simply naiveté, contradictory objectives or incompetence (what country's diplomacy has avoided these?) but "the superpower's belief that inconvenient realities on the ground can be brushed aside because its own power and influence will determine the outcome."<sup>11</sup> It's this underlying assumption of omnipotence that drives American globalism into a bewildering array of Catch-22s: toppling Iran's government to control oil and keep the Soviets out; arming Iran and bolstering its unpopular government; arming Iraq to fight revolutionary Iran; arming Afghanistan fundamentalists to fight the Soviets; courting the Russians to help fight Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan; arming Pakistan to balance Soviet ally India; worrying about Pakistan's

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<sup>9</sup> I am not the only one to notice the irony in the way that conservatives in the West hold up the treatment of women by Taliban fundamentalists as the litmus test of the conflict's higher moral purpose. That those in the West *least* interested in gender equality at home are more sensitive to it abroad may make some psychological sense to someone, but it's also transparently manipulative. The Taliban wasn't mentioned in the pages of *Commentary*, for instance, until 1998, and not again until after 9/11. More interestingly, the new martial spirit displayed by Canadian and American conservatives in the wake of 9/11 places the defence of Islamic women in very traditional terms. In its most basic form, feminist theorists have seen the war as further evidence of the close relationship between gender constructions and war, as both sides expressed curious symmetry in their passion for equating their cause with the warrior spirit of men. In a sense, they are echoing Zizek's argument that the two sides are not really opposed: that the "choice between Bush and Bin Laden is not our choice; they are both 'Them' against 'Us'." Although Jean Bethke Elshtain came out with a surprisingly anodyne tribute to the principles of just war and the burdens of empire, others have seen 9/11 and the US war against terrorism in terms of the *shared* gender discourses of the Islamic terrorists and those Americans, from Francis Fukuyama to James Kurth, who feared the feminization of American culture in the 1990s, and welcomed the return of the nation's fighting spirit after 9/11. J. Ann Tickner quotes George Patton's claim that "war gives purpose to life," as a view increasingly resonant within the dominant American mood after 9/11, and that such a sense of national purpose is more clearly expressed in the actions and desires of men. Women who had been visible in the military and emergency services of the nation prior to September 11 increasingly became invisible. The only place where they were seen was as victims of Taliban oppression, veiled women whose deplorable condition was to be saved by American military power. See Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the desert of the real* (Verso, 2002), 51; Elshtain, "How to fight a just war," in Booth and Dunne eds., *Worlds in collision* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 263-269; Francis Fukuyama, "Women and the evolution of world politics," *Foreign Affairs* 77, 5 (1998), 24-40; James Kurth, "The real clash," *The National Interest*, 37 (Fall 1994), 3-15. Similar ideas were mentioned, if I recall correctly, by Margaret Wente in the pages of *The Globe and Mail*, in which she thanked heaven that a tough man like George Bush was in the White House instead of the sensitive model of masculinity she apparently found in Clinton and Gore. Sarah Wildman also attacked feminists for not responding more patriotically to the war, thus losing a chance to break out of feminist-pacifist dogma. Wildman, "Arms length: why don't feminists support the war?" *The New Republic*, November 5, 2001, 23.

<sup>10</sup> "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," from a 1901 Anti-Imperialist League publication, reprinted in Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Bell's review of Freedman in *International Journal* (Autumn 2008).

influence in Afghanistan driven—in part—by its fear of India; urging communist China to influence Pakistan. And so on.

The contradiction here is between instantiating American security in the world based on a single ethico-political worldview, *and at the same time* promoting the belief that national interests can only be determined by local conditions. For Pakistan the political price for its support of the US in Afghanistan will be the permanent influence of Pakistan in Kabul, not simply because this is historically perceived to be Pakistan's sphere of influence, but to offset growing Indian (and possibly Russian) influence, especially among their allies in the Northern Alliance. And yet as Obama seeks to internationalize the AfPak conflict by drawing regional and global partners into the mix, he ironically runs the risk of provoking the insecurity that drove Pakistan to depend so heavily on Taliban elements along its frontiers in the first place. The point is that there can be no Afghanistan solution without a comprehensive improvement in Indian-Pakistan relations, which is itself impossible without Russia and, most importantly, China.

Historically Pakistan's most reliable ally, China probably commands more influence in Islamabad than most, but faces a series of intractable options (one China expert referred to Pakistan as China's Israel): it fears a loss of access to the energy corridor linking China to the Gulf, and the possibility that nuclear weapons (that it helped build) might fall into the hands of militants. In other words, it unquestionably shares with the West an interest in preventing Pakistan's collapse. But close cooperation with the US might jeopardize Beijing's influence with the Pakistani elite; and front-line military cooperation would raise the prospect of inflaming militant Islamic forces inside China and along other parts of its frontier. Beijing is suspicious of both Indian and—in some Chinese circles—American long-term intentions, namely the prospect of a permanent US presence around China's frontier. In the words of one analyst, China "may not want the West to fail in Afghanistan but it is far from sure that it wants too convincing a success either." Its "special relationship" with Islamabad might actually be more effective alone than in the context of AfPak multilateralism.<sup>12</sup>

In this heady mix of great-power-rivalry and the violent mosaic of the "Pashtunistan" borderlands, Canada is a minor player at best. That said, the war in Afghanistan is the one foreign policy issue most likely to accentuate latent regional and ideological divisions that afflict the country. Canada has been shouldering a disproportionately large military burden in Afghanistan, especially since 2005 when it assumed command of the dangerous, Taliban-dominated region around Kandahar. Its mission is scheduled to end in 2011, a promise the Liberal Party extracted from the Conservative minority government no doubt because Prime Minister Stephen Harper knew that the deadline would be faced by a new government anyway—and if it were a Conservative majority, then the deadline could be ignored. Canada's involvement in Afghanistan began under the Liberals in the wake of 9/11, and was, at the time, widely supported as part of the nation's participation in NATO and shared opposition to al Qaeda. The heightened military burden and growing list of casualties has led to increased demands for NATO support of the Canadian mission. In this respect, Obama's AfPak policy has been welcomed in Ottawa as recognition of the important job Canada has been doing. The administration's new multilateralism also fits better with Canadian foreign policy traditions, and has made the Harper government's domestic defense of the Afghan mission considerably easier.

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Small, "China's AfPak moment," Policy Brief, May 20, 2009, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington, DC; Paul Richter, "US appeals to China to help stabilize Pakistan," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2009.

For Canadians, though, the Afghanistan War is more important for another reason. It has assumed a serious internal dimension that might be lost to anyone outside the country. Backed by some elements in the Canadian military, the Conservative Party has been keen to reverse a self-image many Canadians have that their armed forces are primarily for peacekeeping. Along with some prominent Canadian intellectuals (notably nationalist historian Jack Granatstein), the Conservatives have been using the Afghan mission to revive what they call Canada's "warrior image".<sup>13</sup> The war, in other words, is part of a wider campaign to alter Canada's global image and strategic culture writ large, to reverse what conservative Canadians see as an emasculation of a once proud military tradition, and to align the country more closely with the United States. The policy reflects the ascendancy of the Alberta wing of Canadian conservatism, widely self-labeled as "pro-American" and free trade. The implicit target is the alleged influence exerted by a more anti-militarist Québec on Canadian national policy over the last 30 years. Canada, conservatives argue, became too devoted to soft power, and too keen to argue sanctimoniously with its number one trading partner to the south. Harper and his allies had wanted the country to participate in the Iraq War too, but that decision fell to liberal Prime Minister (and Québecer) Jean Chrétien. The current Liberal leader, Michael Ignatieff, had, of course, supported the Iraq War when he was a public intellectual outside the country but his party's position, needing to distance itself from the Conservatives', is more ambivalent precisely because winning a Parliamentary majority depends on finding policies that bridge these regional divisions. As Québec remains politically important, anti-militarism is hard to dislodge from the nation's strategic culture.

Sociologists have long debated the effect of regionalism on the policy culture of the country. The ideological chasm between Alberta and Québec is often exaggerated but it is measurable: Québec is the least supportive of the war effort and Alberta the most, although a majority in both provinces approved the initial decision in 2001.<sup>14</sup> The growing human cost makes the Canadian public reluctant to end its engagement with Afghanistan (only the left-leaning NDP and the separatist Bloc Québécois openly urge full withdrawal) without some substantial sense of accomplishment, or that the mission is consistent with developmental ideals. That said, as the body count grows (it currently stands at 118) support for the war is slowly slipping, whatever the perceived virtues of Obama's new orientation.<sup>15</sup>

The point is that the merits of the war itself—whether it is winnable in any sense that the public or military might understand the term, whether any party understands the internal politics of Pakistan—enters into the debate only as a weapon in the battle to define Canada's new global identity. Those who defend the virtues of a new martial spirit—and my sense is that, as in the United States, the appeal here is largely cultural and internal to the ideological wars conservative Canadians are waging against liberal secularism and feminism—fall into line with any hope that AfPak offers. Alexander Moens, for example, has written: "For NATO member countries, including Canada, this objective means providing enough military strength on the ground until insurgents and ethnic factions realize that the movement towards a stable central government in Kabul is irreversible. The daunting challenge of subsuming the political

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Foot, "Mission changes Canada's modern image of itself," *National Post*, 9 April 2007, 8; see also Alexander Moens, "Afghanistan and the revolution in Canadian foreign policy," *International Journal* (Summer 2008), 569-586.

<sup>14</sup> Justin Massie, "Regional strategic subcultures: Canadian and the use of force in Afghanistan," *Canadian Foreign Policy* (spring 2008), 19-48.

<sup>15</sup> **Editor's note:** at the time of copy-editing, the body count had grown to 129.

culture of warlords and tribal leaders into democratic institutions, including police and army, may require negotiations with moderate Taliban factions, if any emerge.”<sup>16</sup> Canadian supporters of the Afghan war thus cling to the same dreams and contradictions that animate Obama’s new policy. The suggestion that political factions might be dissuaded from pursuing their causes in the face of Western force, and without a profound and rapid rebuilding of their economies, is perhaps the most historically naïve position one *could* take. I hesitate to glibly revive the specter of Vietnam (or Algeria), but the 20<sup>th</sup> century offers few examples of states whose identity is so indelibly linked to colonial and imperial histories successfully staunching indigenous resistance to their ideological desires.

And it’s not that such indigenous democratic or feminist liberation is impossible in the region. The deeper challenge for progressive elements in the West is to support those who are globally repressed by fundamentalist religions and cultures without falling into Orientalist traps. Our response must be to try to step outside the universalism/relativism dichotomy to argue for what Yuval-Davis calls “transversal politics,” or the politics of “mutual support.” Women and democrats must form transnational, non-state coalitions across borders to provide oppressed people with an opportunity to advocate for better conditions without necessarily being accused of failing to represent their “authentic” culture.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, we might all take hope in Obama’s historic speech in Cairo on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, a speech that, while inevitably failing to satisfy the divergent demands of a deeply conflicted region, struck Jordanian observer Mustafa Hamarneh as “very unlike the neocolonial and condescending approach of the previous administration.” That, in the end, might be more than anything AfPak can do.

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<sup>16</sup> Moens, “Afghanistan and the revolution in Canadian foreign policy,” 584.

<sup>17</sup> Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997); Vuola, “Remaking universals? Transnational feminism(s) challenging fundamentalist ecumenism,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 19, 1-2 (February-April 2002), 175-196.