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Afghanistan, Pakistan and the War on Terror

Our overarching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future.

—President Barack Obama, West Point speech,
December 1, 2009¹

The US can no longer tolerate Pakistan's a la carte approach to going after some terrorist groups and supporting, if not owning, others. You are playing Russian roulette. The chamber has turned out empty the past several times, but there will be a round in that chamber someday.

—US National Security Advisor Jim Jones to President Zardari of Pakistan, May 19, 2010²

We will have to see whether we are allies or enemies.

—Rehman Malik, Pakistani Interior Minister, September 2010³

Introduction

While it was far from Washington's only serious problem in international affairs, the most immediate foreign policy priority facing the Obama administration on entering office in 2009 was South Asia – specifically, the distinct but related national security challenges of Afghanistan and Pakistan. In June 2010, almost nine years after its launch, Afghanistan succeeded Vietnam as the longest war in American history. After the George W. Bush administration's initial success in 2001 at removing the Taliban government that had provided a safe haven to al Qaeda and a base of operation for anti-Western terrorist activities, including those resulting in the devastating 9/11 attacks, over time the insurgency became increasingly threatening as American attentions became focused on Iraq and the Taliban regained strength, arms and personnel. Candidate Obama had repeatedly labeled the Afghan war a necessary and a just one, in stark contrast to the “dumb” Iraqi “war of choice.” As Commander-in-Chief, the task of winning – and/or ending – the “good” war therefore fell directly to him.

But Obama's presidency saw the situation in Afghanistan grow increasingly grim. Despite two "surges" in US troop levels over 2009–11, three changes of military leadership in theater, and a shift from a counter-terrorism to a hybrid counter-insurgency approach, the war remained unresolved and deeply unpopular at home and abroad by 2012. American combat fatalities increased from 155 in 2008 to 317 in 2009 and 499 in 2010. Moreover, fighting became more intense and the Taliban grew increasingly confident of ultimately prevailing in its struggle to oust coalition forces and regain control of Kabul. At least 711 members of the NATO-led force were killed in 2010, the year of the US "surge" and the deadliest year of the war both for foreign troops and for Afghan civilians. An insurgent attack on a US helicopter in August 2011 caused America's worst single-day loss, killing thirty special operations troops and taking to 374 the number of foreign troops killed in Afghanistan in 2011.⁴ Compared to the 2,976 killed in the 9/11 attacks, the US military had suffered 6,234 fatalities in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001.⁵ Against the preferences of the Pentagon civil and military leadership, Obama announced on June 21, 2011 that 33,000 US troops would be withdrawn by September 2012, 10,000 of whom would leave before the end of 2011. The expectation was that a more or less complete US and NATO withdrawal and transition of responsibility for national security to Afghan security forces would be complete, for better or worse, by the end of 2014.

As president, Obama confronted the profound dilemma of waging a difficult, unpopular military campaign that he had inherited and that – especially after December 2009 – he owned in full. Compounding the problem was a paranoid and corrupt Pakistani state, one dominated by the military rather than the elected government. Islamabad remained only notionally an "ally" of the US and the West, selectively cooperative under extraordinary American pressure but enduringly obdurate in its India-centric focus and unwilling to fully abandon the various terrorist proxies that served useful strategic purposes for Pakistan in the region. The killing of Osama Bin Laden by Navy SEALs in an audacious raid on his compound in a military town, Abbottabad, on May 2, 2011 appeared only to confirm the Faustian nature of America's post-9/11 pact with Pakistan. The symbolism of Bin Laden's demise, and the treasure-trove of information accompanying it, were powerful boosts for Obama's standing as Commander-in-Chief.⁶ Simultaneously, however, they served only to humiliate Islamabad, to deepen the gulf between US and Pakistani interests in fighting the war on terror, and to strengthen the fears of some observers that America's "frenemy," Pakistan, could yet become the world's second nuclear-armed failed state (after North Korea). Moreover, Bin Laden's passing did nothing to dampen Pakistan's Frankenstein nurturing of terrorist groups such as the Haqqani network and Lashkar-e-Tayiba, or US concerns about nuclear proliferation, the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons or the country's command-and-control arrangements.⁷

As a presidential candidate, Obama had caused considerable international controversy when he suggested that he might, as Commander-in-Chief, contemplate bombing Pakistan, seeming to concur with his predecessor in the White House that Islamabad's cooperation with Washington was more extensive when threatened with "stone-age" status than when induced by offers of financial assistance.⁸ But, as president, the limited options Obama faced in resolving this excruciating strategic problem became ever more stark and frustrating. Despite extensive internal administration deliberations, forward-leaning diplomatic efforts, and occasional threats, Obama's "Af-Pak" predicament remained a serious and unresolved problem with deeply worrying international implications by the latter stages of his first term in office. Some 3,519 days after the 9/11 attacks, Bin Laden's long overdue demise was welcome, allowing Americans some "closure" and the potential finally to reconsider the threat of terrorism as no longer existential. But it did not represent the death of al Qaeda, as an organization, brand or ideology. Moreover, the nature of the covert operation – undertaken without notifying, much less attempting to cooperate with, Pakistan's government, military and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) spy agency – graphically exposed the long-standing duplicity of a supposed US ally. While, for some critics, Bin Laden's death represented a form of finality for the 9/11 attacks, and eased the administration's opportunity for drawing down from the theater, the strategic dilemma of how to deal with Pakistan remained acute. Moreover, the prospect of the US effectively having to accept a *de facto* partition of Afghanistan as the price of its exit – with Russia and India reconstituting the Northern Alliance while Pakistan invested its strategic reserve, the Taliban, to prevent their own encirclement – threatened not to end, but rather to extend, a deeply troubling geo-political sore.

Un-declaring the war on terror

One of the most conspicuous, consequential and problematic changes from the Bush administration's approach to counter-terrorism initiated by Obama was the effective abandonment of the term "war on terror" and its various associated formulations (the "global war on terror," the "war against Islamofascism," the "long war," "World War IV"). As noted in Chapter 3, a key aspect of Obama's strategy of engagement for the post-American world was predicated on minimizing the focus on terrorism that had been such a prominent – indeed, defining – feature of the Bush era. Not only did such a focus elevate terrorism to an unduly high and all-defining perch among the plethora of foreign policy problems facing Washington, but the widespread perception among Muslims that the US was waging a war on multiple fronts not against terror, but against their religion, deeply compromised US efforts, in Obama's view. Moreover, the

panoply of associated controversies surrounding the war's prosecution and implementation – from Guantanamo Bay and enemy detainees held without trial to military tribunals, extraordinary renditions, Abu Ghraib, CIA “black site” prisons, and enhanced interrogation techniques – strongly undermined America's claims to adhere to its own ideals in terms of respect for human rights and the rule of law, opening it once again to accusations of double standards and hypocrisy when it came to foreign policy.

A key theme of Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 was that the very real threat posed by al Qaeda and its affiliates did not necessitate or justify the Bush administration's departure from US commitment to uphold basic international norms on torture and the humane treatment of prisoners, which he emphasized directly in his inaugural address when rejecting “as false the choice between our safety and our ideals.” On his first full day in office, Obama issued four executive orders intended to convey a clear symbolic and substantive break from the Bush policies: suspending the operations of military tribunals at Guantanamo; undertaking to close the facility within one year; outlawing torture and requiring the closure of secret prisons operated by the CIA; and setting up an internal administration review of US detention policies. To underscore this new approach, the administration ceased reference to a war on terror. A memorandum circulated within the administration in March 2009 recommended, in place of “Global War on Terror,” the use of the term “global contingency operations.” In systematically avoiding military frames and language, the Obama administration viewed the *de facto* “un-declaration” of the war on terror as part of its multi-pronged effort at outreach to the world's 1.5 billion Muslims and a new beginning centered on mutual interests and mutual respect.

At an abstract level, such an approach no doubt had much to commend it. The failure to locate an appropriate terminology that adequately and precisely captured what the US was seeking to achieve in its efforts to defeat al Qaeda had been a running theme of the Bush years, attracting extensive academic and popular criticism, even derision. In seeking more precision and giving up on the global breadth that the term “war on terror” had implied, the administration could credibly claim to be focusing on the core substantive threat to US national security while assuaging wider Muslim fears of malign American motivations. In conjunction with Obama's outreach efforts to Islam as a civilization and to individual Muslim states and peoples, the more toxic elements of the Bush era could plausibly be mitigated, if neither forgiven nor forgotten. In addition, such an approach seemed well geared to domestic American opinion, since it expressly conceded that at a moment of national economic limits, an expansive US foreign policy dedicated to an unending war simply represented too expensive and excessive an undertaking. Most estimates placed the cost of the war on terror anywhere from \$3–5 trillion.

But for all its virtues, the Obama administration's engagement approach had some highly problematic features of its own. Abroad, as the next sections

Table 4.1 International support for US-led efforts to fight terrorism

Country	Favor	Oppose	Don't Know
Indonesia	55	33	12
Lebanon	35	61	5
Egypt	21	68	11
Turkey	14	67	19
Pakistan	14	65	21
Jordan	9	80	11

Source: Pew Global Attitudes Survey, "Arab Spring fails to improve US image," May 17, 2011, Q52.

detail at length, it failed convincingly to account for US actions in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the "epicenter" of the Islamist terror threat (as Obama described it, in "rhetoric scarcely less reductionist than that of his predecessor"⁹). Not only was the continuation of the US presence a conspicuous exception to the more soft-toned and conciliatory engagement strategy elsewhere in the world, but the substantial increase in US troops in theater, the expansion of Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Predator and Reaper drone attacks, and the greater use of CIA and special forces within Pakistan as well as Afghanistan belied – to many Muslims both within and outside those nations – the notion that US policy had become even marginally more benign, narrowly focused and carefully targeted. As Table 4.1 indicates, opposition to US counter-terrorism among Arabs and Muslims remained broad-based under Obama, as previously under Bush.

At the same time – at least until the killing of Bin Laden – Obama left himself open to charges within the US that he was not taking the military dimensions of counter-terrorism sufficiently seriously. Some of his administration officials' convoluted formulations seemed to be euphemisms culled straight from satirical shows such as *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* ("global contingency operations against man-caused disasters" being perhaps the most notable), combined with occasional errors of fact and interpretation (such as Homeland Security Secretary, Janet Napolitano, insisting after the foiled attack of the Christmas Day, 2009 "underwear bomber" that the system had worked, and the president claiming that the bomber was an isolated individual, when in fact he had enjoyed extensive contacts with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen), suggested that the downplaying of the Bush-era language was now substantively in error. The shooting by Major Nidal Malik Hasan of thirteen Americans and wounding of thirty others on November 5, 2009 at the Fort Hood army base in Texas and the attempted bombing of the Detroit-bound flight both caused the administration serious political problems. Both had been

linked to al Qaeda and radical Islamist preachers abroad, despite initial attempts to depict them as “lone wolves.” For conservatives, who mostly supported the Obama administration’s increase of military presence and counter-terrorist activity, its linguistic emphasis on avoiding offense to Muslims at all costs was at once misguided and ineffective, while these attempted killings (and the attempted Times Square bombing in New York of May 1, 2010) illustrated precisely why the Bush administration had been so aggressive in its relentless assertion that America was “at war.” As Victor Davis Hanson argued:

As president, Obama has now grasped that at least some of these once constitutionally suspect policies were, in fact, essential tools in ensuring the ongoing absence of terrorist attacks on the American homeland since September 11, 2001, and therefore must be continued. He likewise assumes that most of his supporters will be content with the symbolism of soaring civil libertarian rhetoric and forget the demand for changes in the Bush antiterrorism protocols that has kept them safe – especially given the multiple terrorist plots foiled by existing Patriot Act protocols in his first year administration. Thus, the war on terrorism has undergone a cosmetic surgery of euphemism (“overseas contingency operations” aimed at “man-caused disasters”) that will end “the politics of fear” without fundamentally altering existing antiterrorism methods.¹⁰

Nor did the shifts in language win substantial approbation from the activist base of the Democratic Party, whose hopes and expectations for a complete reversal of Bush-era policies were only partially realized under Obama. On key aspects of counter-terrorism policy and homeland security, the denunciations of Bush’s alleged constitutional illiteracy and the ringing and lofty declaration of Obama’s inaugural address that the choice between Americans’ safety and their ideals was a “false” one¹¹ met with a much harsher reality. As president, Obama made precisely those necessary choices and inevitable tradeoffs. In addition, although his administration abandoned the assertive language of the war on terror as counter-productive, its reversal of the policies that many of its members had decried as constitutionally suspect when they were out of office was decidedly partial.

Thus – ironically – while former Vice-President Dick Cheney, other members of the Bush administration, and many conservatives castigated the president’s alleged “softness” on national security, many on the left instead condemned Obama’s “neo-imperialist presidency”¹² for continuing Bush policies and, in the words of the American Civil Liberties Union, “establishing a new normal”: escalating the Afghan war; vastly expanding the use of Predator and Reaper UAV drones there and in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia; continuing indefinite detention, military commissions, and the Bagram Air Base prison; citing “state secrets” privileges to block judicial review of counter-terrorism policies; continuing intrusive domestic surveillance programs; and authorizing the CIA and US military to execute extra-judicial targeted assassinations.¹³ Even on rendition, one of the more controversial aspects of Bush’s war on terror, as

James Boys argues, "... the policy has not ended with Obama's election, but has been scaled back to a level at which it was believed to have been initiated prior to the Bush presidency."¹⁴

For many on the left, the stark continuity of policy under Obama demonstrated just how far the war on terror had not only become institutionalized; more subtly, according to some academics, it had also become normalized and embedded in American popular culture, linked by the national narratives surrounding 9/11 and the negative ideograph of "terrorism" to American identity. Given the degree to which counter-terrorism policy accords with the "deep cultural grammar of American identity," its institutionalization in American political practice and culture, and the ways in which it is rooted in the political-economic interests of the American polity and liberal empire, the extent to which Obama could have altered counter-terrorism policy was strictly circumscribed.¹⁵

Echoing the continuity theme (albeit without the arcane social science jargon), former Office of Legal Counsel official Jack Goldsmith trenchantly dismissed the "Cheney fallacy" that Obama had reversed Bush precedents when:

The truth is closer to the opposite: The new administration has copied most of the Bush program, has expanded some of it, and has narrowed only a bit. Almost all of the Obama changes have been at the level of packaging, argumentation, symbol, and rhetoric ... The main difference between the Obama and Bush administrations concerns not the substance of terrorism policy, but rather its packaging.¹⁶

None of this is to deny the important changes that the Obama administration undertook, which resulted in some consequential policy shifts. But, even in symbolic terms, the distance between Bush and Obama can easily be exaggerated. Where Bush spoke of a single "axis of evil, arming to threaten the world,"¹⁷ Obama described a "far-reaching network of violence and hatred."¹⁸ Where Bush described terrorists as "the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century," destined to inexorably follow a similar path to "history's unmarked grave of discarded lies,"¹⁹ Obama steadfastly declared on succeeding him that:

We will not apologize for our way of life nor will we waver in its defense. And for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that "our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken. You cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you."²⁰

The key failure of Bush was not to identify a serious terrorist threat of global reach to the US, in Obama's view, but rather to fail to deal with it effectively where it was most manifest and ominous: in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Obama would, then, remedy that critical deficiency by directing a new urgency against the central production lines of jihadist terror, located along Pakistan's lawless frontier provinces – "the most dangerous place" in the world.²¹

From the team of rivals to rival teams

Anticipating that the Afghanistan conflict he inherited would inevitably be portrayed as “Obama’s war,” the president approved the sending of 17,000 additional US troops in March 2009. That represented the largest increase of troops since the war had begun in 2001. In May 2009, Secretary Gates dismissed General David McKiernan, the top US and NATO commander in Afghanistan, after less than a year in post (an extremely rare occurrence in the US military during wartime). McKiernan’s replacement was a man Obama barely knew, General Stanley McChrystal, the former head of special operations forces in Iraq. The same month, Obama hosted a trilateral meeting with Presidents Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan and Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan where they agreed a common trilateral objective: “to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda.” After General McChrystal conducted an extensive strategy review – deliberately leaked to the media to pressure the White House – that requested some 40,000–80,000 additional troops, in August 2009 Obama launched the most detailed three-month presidential review of a national security decision since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, with no fewer than twenty-five meetings to reappraise strategy.

Derided by former Bush officials as another instance of unnecessary and dangerous “dithering,”²² the protracted deliberations reflected the acute difficulties posed by the war and profound divisions within Obama’s foreign policy team. The more hawkish principals supporting a counter-insurgency strategy (especially Clinton, Gates and Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) were opposed by several officials favoring a narrower and more limited counter-terrorism approach (most notably, Biden, Jones, Emanuel, Holbrooke and US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry). Advocates of a population-based counter-insurgency strategy cited the success of the Iraqi “surge” of 2007–09 and the logic of building a credible government in Kabul as necessary (albeit insufficient) to deter al Qaeda’s return and prevent the restoration of Afghanistan as a terrorist training base. Proponents of a more limited strategy recommended concentrating on targeting al Qaeda operatives via special operations units and UAVs – “Counter-Terrorism-plus” – as well as the difficulties plaguing a counter-insurgency approach: the partial reach of the Kabul government in Afghanistan; Karzai’s rigged re-election in August 2009; endemic corruption; and insufficient Afghan army and police forces to assure order in a notoriously ungovernable, tribal nation. Since it was estimated that only some 150–400 of “core” al Qaeda remained in Afghanistan, a narrowly framed counter-terrorism strategy could plausibly ensure the exit of most US forces within a limited time-frame.

Obama’s political pressures, the major divisions among administration principals, and the risk that a weak Karzai government could succumb to a resurgent Taliban without external support ultimately resulted in a political

compromise, announced at the US Military Academy at West Point on December 9, 2009. In line with his commitment to remedying America's strategic over-extension, the president noted that some critics had called "for a more dramatic and open-ended escalation of our war effort – one that would commit us to a nation building project of up to a decade." But Obama emphatically rejected such a "win at any cost" mentality, since:

It sets goals that are beyond what can be achieved at a reasonable cost, and what we need to achieve to secure our interests. As President, I refuse to set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means, or our interests. And I must weigh all the challenges that our nation faces.²³

While signaling to Kabul that America's patience was not unlimited, and that a long and costly project of nation-building was off-limits, the president nonetheless recommitted the US and its allies in ISAF to an expanded military presence with a more reduced goal and limited time-frame:

We must deny al Qaeda a safe haven. We must reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government. And we must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future.²⁴

The additional increase of 30,000 troops was – in a rare outbreak of bipartisanship on Capitol Hill – strongly endorsed by congressional Republicans, for whom "victory" in Afghanistan remained an urgent, if not clearly defined, strategic necessity. But the Democratic Party base, and important elements of the congressional party, remained unconvinced. By offering a strategy review in December 2010 to determine its efficacy and the subsequent beginning of a troop drawdown from July 2011, Obama sought to reassure his supporters and set a favorable political framework for his 2012 re-election campaign.

The Obama compromise was, at one level, eminently rational. McChrystal had been granted more troops, but Obama and Biden had narrowed the mission from defeating al Qaeda to denying al Qaeda a safe haven and "degrading" the Taliban, effectively mandating both a rapid escalation and prompt withdrawal. But the distinctly un-Churchillian West Point presidential speech – explicit about the financial as well as the human costs entailed, deliberately echoing President Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1961 farewell calls for budgetary prudence and balance among competing national priorities, and directly contesting popular parallels with Vietnam – made one deliberate but telling omission: "any definition of victory."²⁵

Moreover, the Obama compromise was not entirely coherent. As one commentary scathingly observed, "Dispatching 150,000 troops to build new schools, roads, mosques, and water-treatment facilities around Kandahar is like trying to stop the drug war in Mexico by occupying Arkansas and building Baptist churches in Little Rock."²⁶ Symbolically, the "surge" raised the US

military presence in Afghanistan over 100,000 forces, the same threshold that Lyndon B. Johnson had reached in Vietnam one year after his election as president in 1964. Such considerations inevitably weighed heavily on the president. But, as one Obama advisor explained, “Our Afghan policy was focused as much as anything on domestic politics. He would not risk losing the moderate to centrist Democrats in the middle of health care reform and he viewed that legislation as the make-or-break legislation for his administration.”²⁷

As Michael O’Hanlon observed, the message that Obama most wanted to emphasize to the US Congress and the American public was a fairly rapid end to a war that both were fatigued by, through trying simultaneously to “be muscular enough to create a chance to win the war while at the same time keeping the war’s critics acquiescent.”²⁸ But the geo-political price of preserving political capital for domestic ends was substantial and dangerous, in signaling to key regional players (the remnants of al Qaeda, the waiting Taliban, the dysfunctional Afghan government, the Pakistanis eagerly anticipating America’s strategic departure, and an Iran as eager to inflict fatalities on the US in Afghanistan as in Iraq) that a US exit was now on the horizon. As one US Marine recalled, the most popular saying among Afghan tribesmen was “The Americans have the watches, but we have the time.”²⁹

Obama’s new “surge and drawdown” strategy effectively echoed Richard Nixon’s “Vietnamization” approach from 1969–74. “Afghanization” of the conflict was designed to allow US forces to ultimately exit completely by 2014, job done. But, while pointedly abandoning the language of a global war on terror, Obama proved no more able than his predecessor at resolving the central strategic problem that al Qaeda was no longer a major force in Afghanistan, but was increasingly active in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. As Gideon Rachman put it, “The west is fighting a war on terrorism in Afghanistan. But the terrorists are somewhere else. Meanwhile, our ability to combat threats around the world is sapped by the huge drain on resources caused by the Afghan war.”³⁰ Expending hundreds of billions of dollars on the fifth-poorest nation on earth had not won over civilian Afghan hearts and minds. Attitudes to US forces ranged from wary to hostile inside Afghanistan, while al Qaeda’s ultimate target – nuclear armed Pakistan – remained anything but a stable and reliable US ally.

Nor were hearts and minds in America convinced, 57 percent disapproving of Obama’s handling of Afghanistan by August 2010.³¹ Perhaps reflective of the relative lack of direct presidential attention accorded the war in public, and the competing views of the foreign policy principals, most Americans simply did not regard Afghanistan as “very important” to the US. In the Chicago Council on Global Affairs national survey of public opinion,³² released in September 2010, only 21 percent of Americans thought it so, while 39 percent viewed it as “somewhat important.” Nonetheless, 55 percent of Americans considered violent Islamist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan a “critical” threat to US vital interests, and a fairly large majority (59 percent) held the

Table 4.2 Battlefield Trends in Afghanistan, 2005–10

	2005	2009	2010
US troops	18,000	57,000	95,000
US civilian officials	200	415	1,050
Other foreign troops	8,000	32,300	41,000
Afghan security forces	50,000*	170,000	230,000
Estimated size of insurgency	5,000	25,000	30,000
Reported weekly insurgent attacks	60	80	120
US troop fatalities [#]	58	86	202
Other foreign troop fatalities [#]	5	70	121
Afghan security forces fatalities [#]	200*	485*	500*
Afghan civilian fatalities [#]	300	580	700

*Approximate

[#]January-June of year

Source: Brookings Institution, Afghanistan Index, Michael O'Hanlon, "Staying Power: The US Mission in Afghanistan Beyond 2011," *Foreign Affairs* 89 (5) 2010, pp. 63–79, at 69.

Note: Data are for June of each year, unless otherwise indicated.

threat a worthwhile goal for American troops to fight and die for. Despite that, 53 percent believed the war was either going not too well (43 percent) or not well at all (10 percent). A large majority (75 percent) supported withdrawing forces within two years (44 percent) or an even longer commitment – “as long as it takes to build a stable and secure state” (31 percent). A non-binding resolution to end the war, sponsored by Dennis Kucinich (D-OH), was easily defeated in the House of Representatives on March 17, 2011. Nonetheless, despite the lopsided margin of 321–93, while only eight Republicans voted for the resolution (222 opposing it), almost half the congressional Democratic Party voted in favor of withdrawal. How far the Obama administration could sustain public support in the face of increasing battlefield fatalities and casualties (see Table 4.2) and an apparent lack of progress either militarily or in achieving better governance was increasingly unclear.

According to the US Army Counterinsurgency Manual, the US should have roughly one trained counterinsurgent for every fifty members of the population. That equates, in Afghanistan, to approximately 600,000 troops in order to provide security across the country. Even with the more optimistic recruitment estimates of Afghan National Army and police – which, given problems in training, corruption, and retention, remained deeply problematic – considered during the 2009 strategy review, the completed surge of US troops in 2010 would reach nowhere near these numbers. Even with General

David Petraeus in charge from the summer of 2010 through to the fall of 2011, Afghanistan was not Iraq: the former is 647,500 square kilometres in size with a population of 33 million; the latter an area two-thirds as large with 28 million. With Pakistan, a nation of 796,000 square kilometres and a population of 176 million, sharing a disputed 2,430 km border, the prospects of successfully stabilizing Afghanistan were never bright. Even with the extra 30,000 troops, the president gained force strength – albeit insufficient force strength – but lost vital time.

The beginning of a drawdown therefore made good sense primarily in terms of Obama's domestic political calculations. But, as Henry Kissinger cautioned in reference to the beginning of a similar drawdown in Vietnam:

... once you start a drawdown, the road from there is inexorable. I never found an answer when Le Duc Tho was taunting me in the negotiations that if you could not handle Vietnam with half-a-million people, what makes you think you can end it with progressively fewer? We found ourselves in a position where ... to maintain a free choice for the population in South Vietnam ... we had to keep withdrawing troops, thereby reducing the incentive for the very negotiations in which I was engaged. We will find the same challenge in Afghanistan. I wrote a memorandum to Nixon which said that in the beginning of the withdrawal it will be like salted peanuts; the more you eat, the more you want.³³

Such a calculation was made even more pressing because of Washington's parlous relationship with Afghanistan's duplicitous and dysfunctional neighboring state: Pakistan.

Pakistan: failing state of terror

As Ahmed Rashid observes of central and south Asia, "The key to peace for the entire region lies with Pakistan. Pakistan's strategic goals in Afghanistan place it at odds not just with Afghanistan, India, and the United States, but with the entire international community."³⁴

Because of the potentially terrifying prospect represented by the nexus of nuclear weapons and the export of radical Islamist terror, Pakistan rapidly became central to the Obama grand strategy. As the president – not entirely accurately, as we now know – described it in his March 27, 2009 speech:

In the nearly eight years since 9/11, al Qaeda and its extremist allies have moved across the border to the remote areas of the Pakistani frontier. This almost certainly includes al Qaeda's leadership: Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. They have used this mountainous terrain as a safe haven to hide, train terrorists, communicate with followers, plot attacks, and send fighters to support the insurgency in Afghanistan. For the American people, this border region has become the most dangerous place in the world.³⁵

Possessing an offensive nuclear capacity from 1998, in part due to prior US administrations' strategic and tactical errors in dealing with Islamabad, the possible collapse of the state or its capture by insurgent Islamist forces represents a potential horror story to dwarf the 9/11 attacks. As Obama described it to his former Senate colleague and friend, fellow Illinois senator Dick Durbin (D-Ill), while his plate as president was full of pressing issues, "there's only one that keeps me awake at night. That's Pakistan."³⁶

Recognizing that the \$10 billion provided Pakistan in military assistance under Bush from 2001 had not produced the desired results, the Obama administration rightly refocused US strategy to embrace Pakistan as the key to stabilizing Afghanistan. The Kerry-Lugar-Berman Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009 provided \$7.5 billion in aid over five years, tripling economic aid and rebalancing military and civil-society contributions. The aid package was designed to signal a new era in the US relationship. In itself, though, this increased priority did little to extend US leverage or accelerate a definitive and lasting resolution. Not only was Washington spending only one dollar in Pakistan for every thirty in Afghanistan, but Islamabad resented being lumped together with Afghanistan as "Af-Pak" (relegating the importance of Pakistan as well as tying it to a culturally quite distinct entity) and resented suggestions from the Obama administration that it reformulate the designation as "Pak-Af" (implying, not unreasonably, that Pakistan was the actual threat, not Afghanistan).

Continued military aid had also been initially tied to a yearly certification by the US Secretary of State that the Pakistani military had refrained from interfering in politics and was subject to civilian control over budgetary allocations, office promotions and strategic planning. In response to opposition from the Pakistani military and opposition political parties, the bill's sponsors "defanged the conditionality" measures, the US reassuring the generals that it would not interfere in their affairs, leaving most contact between the two countries "behind closed doors between the two militaries or between the CIA and the ISI."³⁷ Moreover, with the rampant corruption of Pakistani civil and military structures siphoning-off large amounts of money intended for discrete purposes, in a nation in which only 9 percent of GDP is derived from tax receipts, the US taxpayer was in the invidious position of effectively subsidizing forces that were targeting US and coalition personnel while harboring al Qaeda leaders, other terror networks and Afghan Taliban operatives.

The internal pressures that the US campaign fueled caused consternation within Pakistani society and the military. When asked in a July 2009 *Al Jazeera*-Gallup poll, "Some people believe that the (Pakistan) Taliban are the greatest threat to the country, some believe India is the greatest threat, whereas some believe US is the greatest threat. Who do you think is the greatest threat for Pakistan?," only 11 percent cited the Pakistan Taliban. 18 percent suggested India but 59 percent identified the US.³⁸ Although such attitudes reflected

longer-term trends, Obama's increased assertiveness was responsible for much of the adverse reaction. Conscious of the need to establish his national security credentials, Obama had authorized his first drone strike attacks just two days after his inauguration. In a dedicated attempt to decapitate the al Qaeda leadership, a senior US official claimed in June 2010 that some 650 extremists had been killed by drone strikes in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas since Obama took office. In the FATA, according to one account:

... strikes have intensified sharply since the December 2009 suicide attack on the CIA station in Khost, Afghanistan, in which seven CIA personnel were killed. There were 53 strikes in 2009, and 85 have taken place so far in 2010. A measure of the increased intensity is that as of 6 October 2010 there had been 27 attacks in the FATA since early September, most in North Waziristan, the one part of the FATA the Pakistani army has not attempted to enter. Strikes are targeted at specific individuals in line with well-honed targeting procedures and authorities delegated by the White House. Sometimes the CIA launches multiple or successive strikes, adopting an al Qaeda tactic of targeting associates coming to assist victims of the first strike. Generally, the program is directed at leadership, training and planning elements, not foot soldiers, unless they are in training for overseas terrorist operations.³⁹

But US drone strikes on border areas, CIA and special operations incursions within Pakistani sovereign territory, and the relocation of al Qaeda leaders to Pakistani cities and towns abetted the rise of a radicalized Pakistani Taliban and associate groups that, while prioritizing national and regional goals, increasingly harbored international ambitions to attack the West.

Certainly, the Obama administration's cajoling and persuading realized some important steps from Islamabad. Towards the outset of the administration, Secretary Clinton had declared there to be an "existential threat" to Pakistan when the Taliban occupied the Swat valley and imposed sharia law just one hundred miles from Islamabad. The Pakistani army killed several hundred militants in Swat, resulting in the biggest internal displacement of refugees – some two million persons – since the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Subsequently, the army focused on South Waziristan and the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, a major step given the links between the ISI and tribal militants. In virtue of such cooperation, not only has the Pakistani military suffered far greater casualties and fatalities than ISAF, but Pakistani civilians have died in their thousands thanks to the wave of attacks unleashed by the Pakistani Taliban and other Islamist groups: on mosques, hotels, police stations and even – in October 2009 – the headquarters of the 500,000-strong army. Some 34,000 Pakistanis are estimated to have lost their lives to terrorism since 2001.

But while elements of the state, especially within the military and the ISI, were willing – albeit under heavy US pressure – to deal coercively with insurgent forces in the FATA and some border provinces, along with the Pakistani Taliban and those al Qaeda forces targeting the Pakistani government, they

were markedly less so in relation to the Afghan Taliban. Arguably, part of the problem with Obama's public diplomacy was an unwillingness or inability to explain to the American public the complex dimensions of the Pakistani challenge: the exact groups caught in the overlapping spirals of terror within Pakistan and Afghanistan. Faisal Shahzad, a thirty-year-old US citizen born in Pakistan, whose attempt to blow up a car bomb in Times Square in New York City failed on May 1, 2010 (and who was sentenced to life imprisonment in the US on October 5, 2010, for the attempt), had been trained by the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP), the Taliban branch fighting against the Pakistani government. Shahzad had only become a naturalized US citizen one year prior to the attack, a disturbing indication of the ability not just of al Qaeda but also of previously localized terror groups to recruit "clean skin" indigenous Westerners who could operate more easily in the US and Europe to execute mass fatality acts of terror.

Yet while Islamabad had claimed that it had prioritized the fight against the TTP, evidence suggested that it was simultaneously assisting the two Taliban groups killing US and coalition soldiers in Afghanistan: Mullah Omar's Quetta Shura, based in the south-western province of Baluchistan, and the Haqqani network. Moreover, there was also convincing evidence that the ISI, in particular, was continuing to help Lashka-e-Taiba, the group which carried out the brutal attacks that killed more than 190 in Mumbai, India in November 2008, and which both US and Indian intelligence firmly believed was directly assisted by Pakistan's ISI.

While collaborating with terrorists amounted to "a policy of almost lunatic recklessness," as one account noted, "high-risk duplicity has long been the hallmark of Pakistani foreign policy."⁴⁰ With the sixty-year-long conflict with its existential enemy, India, still Islamabad's most urgent geo-political priority, and the perceived security need to maintain "strategic depth" in Afghanistan as and when the US withdrew to prevent either chaos or enhanced Indian influence, Pakistan continued to play a decades-long double game with Washington, regardless of the party or individual occupying the White House.⁴¹ Lacking incentives to induce Pakistan's compliance, and unwilling to use sufficiently coercive sanctions that might conceivably force cooperation, Washington under Obama has remained effectively in a state of strategic and tactical limbo – exasperated but unwilling to abandon a state "too nuclear to fail."

Whatever temporary successes democratic politics have known from time to time there, Pakistan's security policy remains firmly the domain of the army; indeed, it has often been said of Pakistan that while most states own an army, in Pakistan's case, an army owns a state. As the state's strongest and best-run institution, that – along with a sizeable middle class – provides at least some comfort to those fearing a collapse of the state. But, as with prior administrations, it has also left Washington's strategic default position as – in effect – bribing the Pakistani army leadership to commit sufficient resources

to staving-off either an internal coup or an insurgent capture of the state. Admittedly, that is far better than the alternative but, as David Pilling observed of the peculiar case of the “state that has refused to fail” thus far:

A partial explanation for Pakistan’s staying power is that it has become an extortionary state that thrives on crisis. Islamabad is well versed in the art of prising cash out of panicked donors by sliding ever-more convincingly towards the abyss ... the state has long maintained a deeply ambiguous relationship with the very elements threatening to tear it apart.⁴²

Nor, even prior to the Bin Laden assassination, was the deeply problematic status of Pakistan lost on the American public. Despite the substantial military and economic aid Islamabad received from the US after 2001 to assist in the war on terror, the nation’s fragile economy, double digit inflation, dwindling energy supplies, febrile political situation and widespread corruption undermined what efforts existed within the state to crack down on terror groups. The unprecedented monsoon floods of the summer of 2010 – encompassing one-fifth of the entire country, with crops failing, disease spreading and millions rendered homeless – exacerbated the Pakistani socio-economic crisis still further. Moreover, while the US public responded with remarkable generosity to the floods, making the States the leading foreign donor within days, the international response more generally was notably lax compared to that for the Haiti earthquake of January 2010.⁴³

Whatever “sticks” the US possessed to prod Pakistani officials into concerted action with Washington remained limited. While administration officials made clear that, should a terror attack in the US be traced to Pakistan, domestic political pressures would mandate a response, what this meant in practice was unclear. The most obvious response was to take action against the 150 or so safe havens that US intelligence held to be operative in Pakistan for al Qaeda and other terror groups. Yet such a response begged the question of how the tenuous “strategic partnership” between Washington and Islamabad could survive in such circumstances, not least since Pakistani opinion – already deeply hostile to the US – would harden ever more irrevocably.

To understate the matter, this series of dilemmas seriously complicated relations with Washington. Among Americans as a whole, feelings toward Pakistan were decidedly cool, at 35 on a scale of 0 to 100, placing it near the bottom of countries surveyed, alongside Iraq and the Palestinian Authority (and this prior to Bin Laden’s demise). While only 19 percent of Americans rate Pakistan as “very important” to the US, with 40 percent considering it “somewhat important,” Americans are very aware of the threat emanating from Pakistan. Not only do 55 percent consider Islamist groups a critical threat, but when asked if the US should take military action to capture or kill terrorists if it locates them operating in Pakistan, even if the government in Islamabad does not give the US permission to do so, 71 percent agreed that it should.⁴⁴

By 2012, Obama's evolving South Asia strategy was therefore mired in a triple bind. First, Obama's engagement strategy was premised on the notion that terrorism had been wrongly elevated by the Bush administration to a defining and existential threat, when it was merely one of several pressing global challenges for America. But:

Obama was acutely conscious that protecting the country was his first responsibility, and he devoted more time to confronting al Qaeda and other terrorist groups than to any other challenge of his presidency. That was the main focus of his daily National Security Sessions, his deliberations on Afghanistan and Pakistan, and, in a longer time frame, his attention to nuclear non-proliferation and public diplomacy.⁴⁵

At the same time, Obama was also an obviously reluctant warrior, unwilling to be defined as a war president, experiencing "troubled" civil-military relations, and regarding military conflicts as "problems that need managing."⁴⁶ Psychologically, moreover, Obama was anything but invested in either Afghanistan or Pakistan, his rhetoric about long-term commitments notwithstanding: as he noted during his West Point speech of 2009, the nation he was truly focused on building was at home, not in South Asia. On the tenth anniversary commemorations of 9/11 in New York City, Obama barely mentioned Afghanistan.

The second problem was the continuing and deep divisions within the administration over Afghanistan. As Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars* clearly demonstrated, far from his supposed team of rivals creatively debating and re-crafting foreign policies, on Afghanistan and Pakistan, his foreign policy principals more resembled the feuding rival camps that had historically ill-served US presidents at times of crisis. In July 2010, *Rolling Stone's* expose of General McChrystal's team and their contempt for the administration's leadership posed a crucial test for civil-military relations.⁴⁷ With no real choice, Obama exercised the most direct assertion of presidential authority over the military since Harry Truman had sacked General Douglas MacArthur in 1951, firing McChrystal and replacing him with the only credible alternative, General Petraeus, then head of CENTCOM and architect of the turnaround in Iraq after 2007 that Obama had opposed as a US senator. The president thereby effectively tied his most pressing security concern to the assessments of Petraeus, the most outstanding soldier-scholar of his generation, a registered Republican and someone often mentioned – despite his repeated denials of interest – as a potential Republican presidential candidate in 2016. As David Ignatius noted of Petraeus:

His discomfort with Obama's July 2011 timetable for the beginning of the withdrawal of US troops was obvious from the start. It wasn't the planned drawdown that seemed to worry Petraeus so much as the signal it would send to the Taliban – and the way it might undercut his political-military strategy. What tribal enemy would bargain with a superpower that advertized its departure?⁴⁸

Petraeus's appointment as CIA Director from September 1, 2011, replacing Leon Panetta as he in turn moved to the Pentagon, partly resolved this dilemma and aimed to limit the potential damage that such a prestigious figure could cause Obama. But it made little difference to the broader dilemma of whether, when, and how to depart the Afghan nation.

If the fact that the general clearly did not support the speedy departure that Obama sought was bad enough, such disarray became even more vividly apparent when Ryan Crocker, who took over as US Ambassador in June 2011, also argued that the conflict should continue until more Taliban were killed: "The Taliban need to feel more pain before you get to a real readiness to reconcile them ..."⁴⁹ To issue such a statement – even though it accorded with other senior diplomats' and Pentagon officials' views – when the US, Afghan government and Taliban were in the midst of peace talks that Taliban insurgents were seeking to sabotage illustrated the deep divisions within the administration. According to Ahmed Rashid, the failure of either the president or Secretary Clinton to discipline their officials left Europeans fulminating "at what they see as chaos in Washington where foreign policy appears to be set by an ambassador – while a president cannot decide which side to back."⁵⁰

Superficially, Obama had appeared in his December 2009 West Point speech to promise an early end to the war but, given subsequent qualifications about "conditions on the ground" and the acute problems in building Afghan forces, some knowledgeable observers estimated that at least 50,000 troops would still be in Afghanistan through 2012.⁵¹ By July 2011, it became clear that the administration was focused on transitioning to Afghan-led security forces, with most US troops coming home by 2014. But even were this to be successfully implemented, as Major General Bill Mayville, McChrystal's Chief of Operations, observed, the eventual outcome is more likely to resemble Vietnam than Desert Storm: "It's not going to look like a win, smell like a win or taste like a win ... This is going to end in an argument."⁵²

Third, and far worse than an abstract argument about "who lost Afghanistan," was the continuing, deeply dangerous double game authored by Pakistan. Obama had made non-proliferation of nuclear weapons a cornerstone of his foreign policy and taken some major steps towards advancing that agenda. Yet, as Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark put it in their devastating exposé of the questionable deals and short-termism informing Washington's long-term tolerance of Pakistan's progression towards the bomb and its role in proliferating nuclear know-how, all of the world's nuclear-tinged crises from Iran through North Korea to global terrorism:

... emanated from the mismanagement of one wellspring: Pakistan ... The gravest consequence of the Pakistan deception was that in the name of political pragmatism the whole architecture of non-proliferation, the robust scaffolding that was erected in the 1950s by President Dwight D. Eisenhower to prevent nuclear secrets from getting into the wrong hands, has been brought crashing down.⁵³

The killing of Bin Laden represented only the latest, albeit the starkest, exposure of the Pakistani complicity in terror. That Bin Laden was located in a compound in a prosperous and prestigious military district, Abbottabad, a mere 75 miles (120 km) from Islamabad, strained credulity. As one prominent Pakistani journalist, Cyril Almeida, pointedly observed: "If we didn't know [Bin Laden was in Abbottabad], we are a failed state. If we did know, we are a rogue state."⁵⁴ Responding to questions about the role of Pakistani authorities in Bin Laden's tenure in Abbottabad, President Obama noted, "What we know is that for him to have been there for five or six years probably required some sort of support external to the compound. Whether that was non-governmental, governmental, a broad network, or a handful of individuals, those are all things that we are investigating ..."⁵⁵ Reaffirming the commitment he first made publicly during the Democratic Party primary debates in 2007, the president restated his pledge to act if necessary to eliminate terrorist threats within Pakistan: "We are very respectful of the sovereignty of Pakistan. But we cannot allow someone who is actively planning to kill our people or our allies' people, we can't allow those kind of active plans to come to fruition without us taking some action."⁵⁶

By the fall of 2011, bilateral relations had reached a new nadir. Following the controversy over Raymond Davis – a CIA contractor arrested for the murder of two Pakistanis in Lahore in January 2011, and released only after alleged Saudi government "blood money" payments to the victims' families – the ISI became determined to identify the rest of the CIA's "shadow network." After Bin Laden's killing, authorities expelled approximately 200 US trainers and withdrew permission for the US to use the Shamsi air base. The US responded by withholding some \$800 million in military aid. Later in 2011 Islamabad sought a "memorandum of understanding" with Washington, limiting CIA operations in Pakistan, identifying all CIA agents and declaring what would occur if Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's successor as al Qaeda leader, were discovered in Pakistan.⁵⁷ The death of twenty-four Pakistani border guards at NATO hands in November 2011 was merely the latest incident in a relationship headed at speed for the rails.

In such a deteriorating context, quite how long the fiction of Pakistan's "alliance" with the US can be maintained in the face of the voluminous evidence of its double-dealing, intimate complicity in terrorism and long-established abetting of proliferation is anybody's guess. But the moment is surely long overdue for Washington to drastically reconsider its strategic approach, much as it had in prior relationships that were clearly not working out as intended. As Seth Jones argued in relation to Pakistan's "dangerous game":

When US and Egyptian interests began to diverge in the 1950s as Gamel Abdel Nasser gravitated toward the Soviet Union, President Dwight D Eisenhower cut ties and moved on. NATO is at an important crossroads with Pakistan today.⁵⁸

Although mainstream commentators invariably caution against either abandoning or seeking to contain Pakistan,⁵⁹ in the absence of such a reconsideration, the options confronting policy-makers in this and successor American administrations will be few and unappealing. As former US Ambassador to Afghanistan and Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, rightly noted:

We have to escalate the pressure on Pakistan in order to finally force it to choose whether to be truly a friend or an enemy of the United States, because the Pakistani generals think they've outsmarted us for a decade by taking our money and at the same time working for our defeat in Afghanistan ... It has sent the message that you can ignore US entreaties and pressure and not take us seriously, and there is no price to be paid. We can't ever forget that it has also led to quite a lot of American troops being killed and maimed by extremists who enjoy Pakistani support.⁶⁰

If and when a withdrawal of US troops begins, Washington's leverage over Kabul and Islamabad will contract, which no amount of further subsidies is likely to compensate for (not least given the corrupt practices permeating both nations). A standing presence in Afghanistan will perhaps deter al Qaeda forces from re-entering the country, but in the absence of removing their safe havens in Pakistan, al Qaeda will remain degraded but not fully defeated. An attack on the US originating in Pakistan would also then compel a response that would likely render the "partnership" inoperable, at least in the eyes of mass publics in the two nations. Should the growing and highly vulnerable Pakistani nuclear arsenal become breached – whether via jihadist infiltration of the military, insurgent attacks, or an Islamist coup – the deeply unpopular prospect of US intervention is likely to become a necessity. As Jack Caravelli, a member of the Clinton National Security Council in the late 1990s, affirmed, "Both in the Bush Administration and certainly in the current Obama Administration the plans exist ... in the most dire of circumstances, that the United States would at least have the option to undertake operations to try and secure those weapons and materials, if necessary."⁶¹

The more deep-seated and abiding problem is one that is even less amenable to easy or rapid resolution. While Obama's efforts at public diplomacy with the Muslim world were sincere and heartfelt, they did not sufficiently address the basic reality that – as former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, observed – the domestic and international threat from Muslim extremism "doesn't begin on the battlefield, it begins in the school"⁶²:

President Obama's speech in Cairo in June 2009, which was a brilliant exposition of the case for peaceful coexistence, marked a new approach, and if he is given the support and partnership he needs, it is an approach that can combine hard and soft power effectively ... It was in part an apology, and taken as such. The implicit message was: We have been disrespectful and arrogant; we will now be, if not humble, deeply respectful. But join us, if you will. The trouble is: respectful of what, exactly? Respectful of the religion of Islam, President Obama would say, and that is obviously right; but that should not mean respectful of the underlying narrative which many within Islam articulate in its politics today.⁶³

Conclusion: the limits of strategic engagement in South Asia

President Obama inherited an Afghan situation that was in dire straits. Politically, pulling out completely in 2009 would not have been remotely realistic, given the domestic pressures on his presidency and the ambitious agendas he pursued at home and abroad. With national security a traditionally Republican electoral advantage, even in 2008, and having emphatically identified it as the necessary war, ownership meant Obama achieving some kind of credible “victory” as president. But as the important policy divisions among his team graphically demonstrated, devising a plan to do this without creating an open-ended occupation, the expenditure of trillions more dollars, and the loss of support of his own party – all in the face of a sceptical American public – was close to impossible. When asked about the July 2011 date for transferring responsibility to the Afghans for their own security and drawing down US troops, Vice President Biden replied, “In July 2011 you’re going to see a whole lot of people moving out. Bet on it.”⁶⁴ Yet Bob Gates, at a dinner with President Karzai in Washington on May 10, 2010, had stated bluntly, “We’re not leaving Afghanistan prematurely ... In fact, we’re not ever leaving at all.”⁶⁵

By the fall of 2010, respected foreign policy thinktanks such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies were commending a dramatic shift in military policy, abandoning counter-insurgency entirely in favor of the narrower objective of containing al Qaeda, to reduce forces in Afghanistan, deny the insurgents the claim of victory when US forces inevitably withdraw, and free up resources to confront other sources of global instability:

War aims traditionally expand, but in Afghanistan they ballooned into a comprehensive strategy to develop and modernise the country and its government ... The Afghan campaign has involved not just mission creep but mission multiplication; narrowing the political-military engagement will allow for proper attention to be paid to other areas posing international terrorist risks.⁶⁶

Moreover, while Obama correctly analysed the real source of the terror “cancer” as Pakistan, he proved no more successful than his predecessors at surgical operations to remove it, either by persuading or compelling Islamabad to seriously steer away from – much less abandon – its lethal double game. By increasing US forces and, against his wishes, abetting the Americanization rather than the internationalization of the war, Obama’s substantive policies contradicted his stated downsizing of the global war on terror; most Muslim opinion – unsurprisingly – took the former more seriously than the latter in their evaluations of the US. Yet, simultaneously, by de-emphasizing the war on terror and seeking to abandon the overt and consistent securitization frame of his predecessor, Obama gained little credit inside the US for the sharply increased

military and covert efforts against al Qaeda, at least until the revelation of Bin Laden's targeted assassination. But while this powerful symbolic act, and the substantive further leads it produced, cannot be gainsaid, in the wider picture the more acute problem remained a state in which democratic forces are entirely secondary to the overwhelming power of the India-obsessed military and terror-sponsoring ISI.

With popular sentiment against America at "shocking" levels, and over 60 percent of Pakistanis regarding the US as an "enemy," a former UK High Commissioner to Pakistan was surely correct to pen the still-born obituary of a dubious "alliance" and argue that, despite American governmental and civil generosity to the Islamic Republic, "rising American aspirations that this will turn the current animosity around seem bound to be disappointed"⁶⁷:

By 2010 it had become clear that the American efforts since October 2001 to forge a transactional partnership with Pakistan had failed. Pakistan's army had suffered more losses than the whole of ISAF; it felt no gratitude for America's attempted inducements; it declined to do American bidding over the Afghan Taliban, still less in relation to "freedom fighters" such as the Lashkar-e-Tayiba, which was implicated in the outrages in Mumbai; and the opening of US military markets allowed the army to purchase big-ticket weaponry to feed its fixation on India, at the expense of the nation's social welfare. The Pakistani population had further cause to resent the United States: for what they saw as attempted bribery; for diminishing their security and well-being; for increased violations of the sovereignty of a declared ally; and, in anticipation, for the "fourth betrayal" when, as they fully expected, the United States started to pull out of Afghanistan in mid-2011.⁶⁸

The response of Pakistani authorities to the humiliation of Bin Laden's killing was also instructive. Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani made a trip to Beijing within days, returning with a commitment from the Chinese to take over the operation of the port of Gwadar and upgrade it to a naval base. Charges that the Chinese had been allowed to examine the downed US stealth helicopter in the Abbottabad raid compounded the mistrust. The implicit warning to Washington that the US was not the only game in town was abundantly clear (even if such an approach was not entirely welcome in a Beijing rightly wary of its erstwhile ally).

Obama thus entered the 2012 presidential election race with a major symbolic triumph of understandably powerful emotive resonance to the American people: the death of Osama Bin Laden; a scalp that – much to his predecessor's frustration – had eluded George W. Bush. Vindicating the Obama strategy, Leon Panetta claimed in July 2011 that, "We're within reach of strategically defeating al-Qaeda," while General Petraeus had similarly predicted the "strategic dismantling" of the organization.⁶⁹ Only time will tell whether or not that broader obituary was premature. But the basic strategic dilemmas facing Obama's administration, much like Bush's before him, remain mostly unaltered by Bin Laden's individual passing and the losses that al Qaeda

has suffered in South Asia: a heavy Afghan albatross; a war against an Afghan Taliban coalition that must be a part of an ultimately political solution to the troubled nation's ills; a transfer of control to Afghan military and police forces that remain barely credible as security guarantors for the nation; negotiations between the Karzai government and groups such as Mullah Omar's Quetta Shura, mediated by the Saudis, that are themselves tightly controlled by an Islamabad wary of an unfriendly government emerging in Kabul; a Pakistani state not simply unwilling to stamp out terrorism, but keen to use as proxies terrorist groups such as the Haqqani network and Lashkar-e-Tayiba; a set of al Qaeda safe havens in Pakistan that, despite the administration's best efforts, remain untouched and continue to recruit, equip and train *jihadists* intent on attacking the West; a set of al Qaeda groups outside Pakistan, such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and al-Shabaab in Somalia ('the "youth," in Arabic) and Nigerian Islamists that posed ongoing threats; and a US presence that, while beginning to scale down, appears set to remain in the South Asian and Gulf theaters for several years to come. The gravest threat – of the unanticipated consequences of a Pakistan-sourced terror strike, the collapse of the Pakistani state, a war with India that sooner or later is surely probable, or an internal coup resulting in radical Islamists with access to nuclear weaponry – remained all too serious.⁷⁰ Exacerbated by the monsoon floods of 2010 that affected some 20 million Pakistanis, the failings of the state threatened still further ruptures.

Remarkably, Pakistan did not merit even a single index entry in *The Audacity of Hope*, perhaps because – as a US senator sitting on the Foreign Relations Committee and a potential presidential candidate – Barack Obama was all too aware of just how vexing a problem it would pose; less something emblematic of hope than of despair. Or perhaps, more worryingly, the absence of Pakistan from Obama's survey of the world signified a lack of awareness of its centrality to American, and Western, national security and counter-terrorism efforts. Whatever is the case, its place in his future presidential memoirs, for better and worse, is assured, as Islamabad's status as either a genuine US ally or a failing pariah state of the first order – alternating between extortion, alibi and virtual collapse – becomes a matter upon which Washington can no longer equivocate and extemporize without severe geo-political consequences and Pakistan's emergence as a new, and unequivocal, enemy state.