

INSIGHTS INTO THE WORLD / Tallying Obama's balance sheet in Afghanistan

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As we draw close to the ritual grading of new tenants in the White House, U.S. President Barack Obama gets high marks for rapidly recasting the domestic and international discourse on Afghanistan.

During his long election campaign, Obama had criticized his predecessor, George W. Bush, for turning away from the United States' "war of necessity" in Afghanistan, the source of direct threats to the U.S. homeland, to a disastrous "war of choice" in Iraq.

There is no doubt that Obama is determined to keep his campaign pledge to end the prolonged drift in U.S. policy toward Afghanistan. But few analysts in the United States or around the world are ready to bet that Obama will prevail in what has been widely called the "graveyard of empires."

As we add up his balance sheet on Afghanistan, Obama scores well for the speed at which he has made major decisions. Within his first week in office, Obama announced the appointment of a new special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan and tapped veteran U.S. diplomat and tough taskmaster Richard Holbrooke for the job.

Obama's swift pace has been matched by the energy and vigor he has brought to bear on the Afghan policy. Although South Asia did not receive high-profile visitors such as U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, all the heads of the major U.S. security agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency, have traveled to Kabul, Islamabad and New Delhi.

By choosing a former marine general, Jim Jones, as his national security adviser and retaining Bush's defense secretary, Robert Gates, Obama has sought to insulate his Afghan policy from potential attacks by conservatives in the United States foreign policy establishment.

American military leaders, who have acquired a powerful new voice in shaping Obama's strategy toward Afghanistan, have repeatedly traveled to South Asia for high-level consultations in the region.

By the end of March, Obama had put on the table a brand new strategy for what his team now calls the Af-Pak region. Central to that strategy are Obama's promises to deploy more personnel and money, and find ways to better integrate the civilian and military efforts in Afghanistan.

In an attempt to reframe the international perceptions on U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, Obama has abandoned Bush's lexicon on the "war on terror" that sounded like a religious crusade and angered Muslims around the world.

Obama has acted to bring the U.S. allies back into a purposeful role in Afghanistan. The Bush administration was focused entirely on military contributions to the war on terrorism from its allies and was increasingly frustrated at their lack of effective participation in stabilizing Afghanistan.

Instead of pressing allies for more combat troops, Obama wants them to focus on what they

might be comfortable with, for example, stepping up the training of the Afghan police forces, which are now seen as critical in providing local security against the Taliban and the Al-Qaida.

Japan has taken the lead in the nonmilitary arena by agreeing to pay the salaries of Afghan police for six months and coordinating international economic assistance to Pakistan.

Obama also has called for an international contact group on the Af-Pak region that will comprise all the major international powers and the regional actors including India, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

By bringing together all the stakeholders into a single framework, Obama hopes to prevent the competitive jockeying for influence that has undermined the prospects for peace and stability in Afghanistan for decades.

Obama's most significant innovation has been the decision to view Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single theater in the unfinished contestation with international terrorism.

During his campaign for presidency, Obama argued that Afghanistan cannot be stabilized without fixing the sources of support for extremism inside Pakistan.

Unlike Bush, who relied entirely on his personal equation with then President Pervez Musharraf for Islamabad's cooperation in stabilizing Afghanistan, Obama is looking for institutional changes in Pakistan.

In order to promote a structural change in the internal and external orientation of Pakistan, Obama is putting together a major package of economic incentives for Islamabad in collaboration with the U.S. Congress at home and an international group called the Friends of Pakistan, which met in Tokyo on Friday.

The idea of devising a set of risks and rewards for promoting changes in Pakistan's behavior toward Afghanistan is indeed ingenious in its conception. But translating it into a credible policy was never going to be easy for Washington.

The Obama administration's hopes for winning Pakistan's cooperation have begun to run into major problems. Differences between Washington and Islamabad on the terms of their cooperation in Afghanistan are growing and spilling over into the public domain.

Obama has made it quite clear that increased economic aid flows to Pakistan--from the current levels of 500 million dollars a year to 1.5 billion dollars annually over the next five years--will be linked to Islamabad's performance on antiterrorism cooperation.

If Washington says it cannot give a blank check to Islamabad, the civilian and military leaders of Pakistan bristle at what they say are unacceptable conditions.

Despite formal opposition from Islamabad, the Obama administration has persisted with unpiloted drone attacks on the sanctuaries of the Al-Qaida and the Taliban inside Pakistan's tribal areas. The militant groups have retaliated by taking the war into Pakistan's major urban centers by launching some spectacular attacks in recent weeks.

This has severely squeezed the political space for Pakistan's civilian leaders, who have had little stomach for confronting the growing influence of the extremist groups, and hope that the United States' conflict with jihadi groups will simply disappear.

The real problem for the United States, however, is to find a way to break the Pakistani Army's long-standing relationship with extremist groups.

Washington wants Islamabad to recognize the growing threats from the jihadi groups to Pakistan's own national security. Obama is urging Pakistan to dissociate its security agencies from the various organizations that indulge in terrorism.

Islamabad, however, is not sure of Washington's long-term commitment to the region, and sees no logic in abandoning the foreign policy assets it has nurtured over decades against Afghanistan and India.

While rejecting conditional aid from the United States, Islamabad has its own list of expectations from Washington in return for its cooperation in Afghanistan. For one, Islamabad wants a lot more money than Washington is willing to offer. Its ambassador to the United States has called for an aid package of 30 billion dollars over the next 10 years.

For another, Islamabad also wants the United States to deliver political concessions from New Delhi and Kabul on its bilateral disputes. There is no way, for example, that India would oblige Obama on the sensitive question of Jammu and Kashmir.

Despite these many divergences, it is important to remember that the United States and Pakistan have a long record of security cooperation and hard bargaining over terms.

There were times when Washington lost its patience with Islamabad and moments when the Pakistani Army overplayed its hand. Yet both sides know they badly need the other at this juncture.

The challenge for the Obama administration in the next few weeks is to come up with a framework that boosts bilateral security cooperation with Pakistan, but does not undermine regional stability.

If he could align the interests of Kabul, Islamabad and New Delhi, Obama would vastly improve the U.S. prospects for gaining the upper hand against the Al-Qaida and the Taliban.

If the United States cannot, the entire South Asian neighborhood of the Af-Pak region could be devoured by conflicts spawned by religious extremism and international terrorism. The world, then, has a huge stake in Obama's success in Afghanistan.

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