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Conceptualizing AfPak: The Prospects and Perils

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Obama administration's AfPak strategy has created the opportunity to recalibrate US engagement with Afghanistan and Pakistan to reverse the Taliban momentum and 'disrupt and dismantle' the terrorist threat from the border region. The strategy advocates an increase in US/NATO troops, reconciliation with 'moderate' Taliban, and a regional approach to the conflict that includes tackling the Taliban in Pakistan's tribal areas. In its current conceptualization, it lacks implementation mechanisms and analysis of the border region to manage the insurgency and quell the violence. This paper analyses some of the contradictions, anomalies and structural flaws in the AfPak strategy that risk further destabilizing the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region.

As part of the AfPak strategy, President Obama has ordered a 'military surge' of approximately 50,000 US troops to implement a shift from counterterrorism to counterinsurgency with an emphasis on the 'clear, hold, build and engage' strategy. But implementing this strategy in the Pashtun tribal belt is problematic among a population that has historically resisted the presence of foreign troops and that, after eight years of the 'war on terror,' is now suffering from intervention fatigue and a sense of occupation. There is a further lack of capacity at the local level to take in more troops, with an absence of government and infrastructure at the provincial and district level and few legitimate interlocutors to help US/NATO troops engage the population and establish security.

An increase in troops has led to an intensification of the conflict and a further militarization of the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderland. After 18 months, the drawdown of US troops by 2011 will be replaced by Afghan forces. Until then US/NATO plan to raise local security forces and build the Afghan National Army to a force structure of 240,000. But the ANA may not be ready to meet the timetable of withdrawal of US troops, given past experience of high rates of attrition and ethnic imbalances that have hampered its development. Creating dual institutions such as local militias that are susceptible to criminality and perpetuate insecurity could undermine institution-building and the counterinsurgency effort.

Calls have grown for 'talks with the Taliban,' but the practicalities of implementing this are complex and elude diplomatic and military strategists. The lack of local knowledge, credible intermediaries, accountability and enforcement procedures prevents a reconciliation and negotiation process

with 'moderate' Taliban or tribal elders. Negotiating with the Taliban creates further dilemmas; it may help contain the conflict and mitigate the insurgency, or it could empower the Taliban to capture parts of the state.

The AfPak strategy amalgamates the insurgency in Afghanistan and militancy in Pakistan into one geopolitical unit, thus expanding the theatre of war. Although it is correct to acknowledge the interrelated aspects of the threat, it oversimplifies the nature of the insurgency on both sides of the Durand Line, and fails to appreciate the differences in security trajectories and capabilities of the two states. This strategy is likely to create friction between the two neighbors and unlikely to engender the type of cooperation necessary to defeat the Taliban insurgency.

The AfPak strategy articulates a strategic shift in US policy imperative towards Pakistan, putting greater emphasis on tackling the militant threat in its Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The US has increased the number of drone attacks there and made its aid to Pakistan conditional on Pakistan's performance in fighting the militants in FATA. But these moves may prove counterproductive, increasing the trust deficit between the US and Pakistan and increasing anti-Americanism amongst ordinary Pakistanis.

In view of this, the Pakistan army has been engaged in military operations with renewed vigour. Military action has had an impact in clearing areas of the Taliban menace in Swat and Bajaur. But it is also leaving in its wake a devastated infrastructure and one of the largest internally displaced populations in the world. Without effective humanitarian and reconstruction follow-up, the military's operations could perpetuate the insecurity and the growth of the insurgency.

The military strategy of steamrolling the Taliban from both sides of the Durand Line through a mixture of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations is likely to politicize an innocent Pashtun population that is caught in the crossfire, giving new meaning and impetus to the notion of 'Pukhtunistan'. The convergence of Pushtun ethnic particularism and Islamic fundamentalism on the borderland makes for an unmanageable insurrection that the Obama administration should take steps to avoid. Unfortunately, the ill-named AfPak strategy, knowingly or unwittingly, conjures up the political map of Pukhtunistan.

AFPAK remains a 'work in progress', under constant review and revision by the Obama administration. It will be some time before its impact can be fully assessed. But to succeed it will need to articulate and implement a political and development plan for the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region outside the

military paradigm. The 'civilian surge' is an important aspect of this, but will only be effective following a revamp of civil–military relations.

INTRODUCTION

'And yet I would invite you to pause and consider what Frontiers mean, and what part they play in the life of nations … It was the adoption of a mistaken frontier policy that brought the colossal ambitions of the great Napoleon with a crash to the ground.' – Lord Curzon, 'Frontiers', The Romanes Lecture, 1907[1]

Eight years of policy failure and a lack of coherent strategy under the Bush administration have left the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region mired in conflict, with a Taliban insurgency that is threatening regional security from Kabul to Kashmir. The Obama administration has created the opportunity to recalibrate policy towards Afghanistan to quell the violence and reverse the Taliban momentum. In March 2009, a new strategy was unveiled that reconfigures US engagement with what is being labelled as AfPak. But what exactly does this mean? The nomenclature translates to the conceptualization of Afghanistan and Pakistan as one geopolitical unit.[2] This means the conflation of two separate but parallel conflicts – the insurgency in Afghanistan and militancy in Pakistan – into one existential threat. The AfPak concept further represents the creation and demarcation of a spatial geographical borderland zone where it is argued that Al-Qaeda is based and where the war against terrorism must be focused. This political landscape amalgamates Afghanistan's Pashtun belt, in the south and east, with Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into one territorial space which takes little account of the Durand Line or border separating the two nations.[3]

Having defined the theatre of operations, the AfPak strategy uses a counterinsurgency toolkit to tackle this borderland with an increase in troops, reconciliation with 'moderate' Taliban, a regional approach to the problem, and a Pakistan policy that deals with the Taliban inside Pakistan's tribal areas. But will it work? An early assessment of the strategy in action points to an expansion, exacerbation and escalation of conflict. Although a 'work in progress', in its current configuration, the AfPak strategy is laden with contradictions, anomalies and structural flaws that may risk destabilizing the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderland and lead to the creation of a frontier quagmire.

The success of the AfPak strategy is contingent on understanding the borderland. But any analysis of borders, borderland societies and their relationship with the state is conspicuously absent. By borderland is broadly

meant the 'non-state spaces' at the ecological margins or geographical periphery of the state – the Pashtun borderland being one of the most important but least understood.[4] This borderland is significant because it plays a central role in state formation and state collapse. Historically it has either resisted state encroachment or acted as an agent of the state.[5] The failure to correctly contextualize it in the AfPak strategy will complicate all aspects of the strategy's implementation, and may even provoke the borderland to act as a catalyst for the dismemberment of the state.

FROM ROGUE REGION TO GARRISON BORDERLAND

The Bush administration perceived the Pashtun borderland in Afghanistan as a rogue region and counterterrorism challenge. Within these parameters, the US policy imperative was determined by the 'war on terror' and the narrow objective of the hunt for Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Engagement with the southern and eastern provinces was unilateral, reactive and defined by an aggressive military campaign heavily dependent on air support. On the ground, interaction with the local population often failed to distinguish between Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Pashtun villagers and was determined by arbitrary detention, invasive house searches in a deeply conservative society and the co-opting and arming of local militias in pursuit of military objectives. The use of war as a policy instrument and the use of force at the operational level as a panacea for Afghanistan's problems turned its Pashtun areas into a war zone. The repercussion has been the outbreak of a Taliban insurgency that is now challenging NATO's presence. Under its watch, the insurgency has grown in momentum and ferocity, gaining control of the Pashtun-dominated territories of Afghanistan and spreading into Pakistan's tribal belt.

Counterinsurgency and the troop surge

From prosecuting a counterterrorism war, the new administration is staying the course with a military-dominated strategy for Afghanistan, but changing tack to engage the Pashtun borderland in a predominantly counterinsurgency war. Counterinsurgency lessons learnt in Iraq, where the military surge proved fundamental to securing Anbar, are being applied to Afghanistan, and the drawdown of US troops in Iraq is making way for the build-up in Afghanistan. But techniques applied to an ethno-sectarian insurgency among an educated population in urbanized Iraq may not translate to Afghanistan's religiously motivated Taliban in the rural villages of an underdeveloped Pashtun tribal belt.

The military surge in Afghanistan and the change in mindset towards military deployment in the Pashtun belt resembles a blueprint for a garrison borderland. President Obama has ordered approximately 50,000 US troops to be deployed in Afghanistan by mid-2010. With the first batch of reinforcements of 21,000, the planned troop count at the end of 2009 was approximately 68,000 US and 37,000 allied forces. With the additional 30,000 US and 7,000 allied troops in 2010, the total troop levels will be similar to

those of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan where 120,000 soldiers, of which 80,000 were ground troops, battled against 85,000–100,000 mujahideen.[6] Soviet post-Cold War calculations retrospectively deemed 500,000 troops necessary to 'pacify' Afghanistan.[7] Analysts today estimate a comparable number will be required to stabilize the situation,[8] based on a ratio of 20 troops for every 1,000 Afghans.[9]

The current US troop presence is informed by General Stanley McChrystal's 'strategic reassessment' of this war and based on a 'troop-to-task' methodology that equates increased troop levels with increased counterinsurgency capacity.[10] The aim is to attain critical mass and through this robust military presence to determine the course of the war and crush the insurgency. But increasing the number of troops is a high-risk strategy vulnerable to mission creep in a conflict where the momentum of war itself seems to be generating the need for more troops.

The current strategy is in sharp contrast to the 'light footprint' approach towards security and military deployment adopted by the Bush administration.[11] It opted for few troops scattered across Afghanistan's mountainous terrain and centred on Kabul. The strategy was risk-averse, focused on a quick and uncomplicated victory through the use of overwhelming force. Despite the pretext of enforcing the peace, as in other peacekeeping missions in Kosovo and East Timor, it undermined the UN's mandate to implement security as originally authorized by the Bonn agreement which set up the post-Taliban government of Hamid Karzai in 2001. The US at first ruled out the use of UN peacekeepers. Instead a UN-supported but not UN-administered multinational force known as ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) was established to secure Kabul. The US further opposed a wider deployment of ISAF on the grounds that it would complicate and conflict with the primary mission of US Coalition forces to 'flush out' Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan's Pashtun-dominated southern and eastern provinces.[12]

Despite the toppling and rapid disintegration of the Taliban in December 2001, the failure to create a security apparatus to 'win the peace' led to a security vacuum that was quickly filled by criminal elements, warlordism and finally the insurgency. It failed to consolidate the initial military successes of 2001, and from then on all security considerations evolved to meet the challenges of increased violence, the growing insurgency and the changing nature of war. ISAF transitioned to NATO, and NATO subsequently expanded beyond Kabul in 2003 and into the Pashtun belt in 2006, reluctantly (and with caveats) absorbing the war-fighting role which it shared with the US Coalition

forces. But by then it was 'too little too late'; it was a strategy too conflicted between war-fighting and peace-building to have credibility with the Afghan people, who had initially welcomed foreign troops.

Now many Afghans are suffering from intervention fatigue and the Pashtuns of the borderland from a sense of occupation, having witnessed the international military presence grow from 5,000 ISAF and 11,000 US Coalition troops to a total of more than 100,000. Opinion polls and surveys conducted suggest a drop in confidence in and support for foreign troops since 2006 when data collection for polling began.[13] According to conventional post-conflict wisdom on Afghanistan, the solution is more troops and greater intervention, but there has been a failure to recognize that this has also had 'negative and contradictory effects and to some extent is part of the problem'.[14] The intervention failures of the Bush administration turned an unstable peace into an insurgency.

The announcement of the new AfPak strategy has led to fears, particularly in the conflict-ridden Pushtun south and east, that an increase of thousands more troops risks further inflaming the conflict.[15] The apprehension is that more troops will mean more fighting and more casualties. Casualty numbers, officially monitored since 2006, show an approximate tripling of civilian deaths by 2008. This points to an upward trajectory caused by increased violence from combat operations between Taliban and international forces. UNAMA (the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) estimated that 1,523 Afghan civilians died as a direct result of armed conflict in 2007.[16] In 2008, 2,118 civilian deaths were reported – an increase of 40% from the previous year.[17] In the first six months of 2009, 1,013 civilian deaths were recorded, compared with 818 for the same period in the previous year – an increase of 24%.[18] The latest UNAMA statistics, presented in January 2010, show 2009 to be the deadliest year for civilian casualties, reflecting a 14% increase in civilian deaths compared to 2008.[19] The high mortality rate has been attributed to both NATO/Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Taliban forces, but those blamed on the international forces are due to air strikes.[20] These are mostly 'rapid response strikes' carried out in support of ground troops, too small or lightly armed to combat insurgents, but causing the greatest collateral damage.[21] Between 2001 and 2003, when there was indiscriminate use of air power by US Coalition forces, various unofficial sources reported many more thousands of civilian deaths.[22] This issue of civilian deaths is enraging the Afghan populace and the Karzai government alike and has become a flashpoint for intense criticism of international forces.

The Obama administration's justification for increasing the number of troops is to avoid such casualties from air strikes by changing the rules of engagement through having 'boots on the ground'. The objective is to counter the Bush doctrine that used overwhelming air power to compensate for light ground force; now the strategy is to deploy a significant enough troop level not to have to rely heavily on air support. General Stanley McChrystal, on taking command in Afghanistan in June 2009, acknowledged that avoiding civilian casualties must be a priority. He ordered a change in tactics on the use of force as well as a change of mindset in the 'operational culture'. His proposal includes greater precautions when calling in air support and a change in force posture that requires troops to protect Afghans before themselves. Since the new administration took charge of military operations in Afghanistan, according to data made available by the US air force, a decrease in the number of munitions deployed by aircraft has been recorded.[23]

Statistics on OEF/NATO military fatalities indicate that these too have reached their highest level, surpassing the number of military fatalities in previous years.[24] For this General McChrystal's directives that put Coalition/NATO troops at risk to protect Afghan civilians are coming under criticism.[25] As Afghanistan becomes a testing ground for a counterinsurgency war not experienced since the Vietnam War, the question remains: can the US military think counter-intuitively and work against the style of warfare it has spent decades developing?[26] If so, is it prepared to accept the human costs and hazards to achieve political and military objectives in Afghanistan? A reliance on technology and the use of overwhelming air power allows its soldiers to keep out of harm's way, rarely leaving base camp.

General McChrystal has set a critical time limit of 12 months in which to 'reverse insurgent momentum', after which 'defeating the insurgency is no longer possible'.[27] During this year the number of military and civilian deaths may increase as troops try to implement a 'population-centric' 'clear, hold, build and engage' COIN (counterinsurgency) strategy. General McChrystal has argued that winning the war in Afghanistan depends on the effective implementation of this military strategy, a prerequisite of which is winning the support of the population. For this troops will need to saturate the borderland and embed themselves within the local Pashtun population. But given the levels of hostility among the population, and the unfamiliar and inhospitable environment where the Taliban and not the central government hold sway, this will prove challenging.

The Taliban dominate the Pashtun area of Afghanistan, controlling and governing its population in varying degrees. For NATO the implications are serious, suggesting that while it may be winning tactical battles, it is losing the larger strategic war. According to assessments carried out by Anthony Cordesman, in the fight against NATO/Coalition forces, the Taliban are winning the battle of political influence, ideology and attrition.[28]

'Clear, Hold and Build' Helmand

Dislodging and dismantling the Taliban is no easy task for NATO. The 'clear, hold, build' COIN strategy implemented during the later stages of the Bush administration under General McKiernan is being pursued with greater vigour. Helmand has become the litmus test for the first 'troop surge' strategy, where an influx of 4,000 US Marines in July 2009 was intended to propel Obama's AfPak strategy forward, change the course of a battle that has been undermining British command in the area, and push back the Taliban from their stronghold. [29] The push to clear the Taliban has proved taxing, with troops tackling a range of logistical challenges and new rules of engagement.

The thrust by US Marines into Helmand has intensified the conflict. The number of fatalities among US and British troops rose sharply since the start of Operation Khanjar as they moved into areas outside of their 'safety net'. July and August 2009 were the deadliest months for US/NATO troops. Although US Marines faced little resistance on their way in to Helmand, the Taliban have proved to be an elusive foe, avoiding direct contact and melting into the population only to return later with hit-and-run ambush tactics, IED attacks and suicide bombings. But there has been a far greater impact of the US offensive: the dispersal and transference of Taliban to other provinces and districts, spreading insecurity. As US Marines try to clear up Helmand, the Taliban have been on the rise in Kandahar, the country's second largest city and the strategic capital of the Pashtun belt. This poses a new set of challenges for NATO's stabilization efforts.[30] Configuring in these trends, military commanders on the ground have argued that only a significant number of troops, strategically located, can grapple with the dynamics unleashed by the latest round of war-fighting.[31]

The argument extends to the COIN strategy of 'holding' areas previously cleared. Helmand has been the main battleground of the war in Afghanistan since approximately 3,600 British troops first set foot there in 2006. The fighting has been relentless and unremitting; successes have been short-

lived, with areas temporarily cleared only to be retaken by Taliban shortly afterwards. Initials plans by the British to secure whole regions failed and there are very few permanent bases in Helmand. The question now is whether the Americans will do any better. Marines on the ground complain that they lack the support of local people, who are suspicious of their presence. This complicates the task of separating insurgents from the general population. The further absence of government and infrastructure at the provincial and district level makes establishing security practically unattainable. The fundamental issue is that despite the military logic of the 'need' for more troops, and in spite of the thousands more planned to arrive by early 2010, there is a lack of capacity at the local level to take in more troops. This creates a new set of problems for Marines on the ground, who may become overexposed, looking increasingly like an occupying force and vulnerable to insurgent attack. Operations in Helmand are ongoing and it is too early to make a complete assessment of the counter insurgency effort. But if 'holding Helmand' fails this time round, it may lead to a reversion to the 'bunker mentality', reliant on air support, that has defined military engagement with Afghanistan so far.

Increasing troop numbers is not the only answer to Afghanistan's quandary. The more significant issue is what these 'boots on the ground' can do to change the course of the conflict. General McChrystal has argued that this war is about 'hearts and minds' – about gaining the support of the Pashtun population and building its community. Military advocates point out that once the 'clear' and 'hold' stages of COIN have been successfully executed, the 'build' phase will create the infrastructure and institutions for long-term development. Despite the good intentions and rhetoric of reconstruction, past experience has shown that the military has complicated aspects of peace-building in Afghanistan's southern and eastern provinces. In the first instance, at the overarching policy level, the military objectives of the war and the political objectives of state-building have been contradictory in what is not a post-conflict country but one that is at war. Analysts have dubbed this 'conflictual peacebuilding',[32] where state-building is subservient to and undermined by military objectives, thereby complicating the implementation of reconstruction projects in the Pashtun belt.

'Hearts and minds' and the civil–military conundrum

At the operational level in the Pashtun belt, the military dictates the development agenda and is the main provider of reconstruction efforts through Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and Quick Impact Projects (QIPs). The aid community has argued that the use of the military in development projects can be divisive in a complex emergency or conflict situation.[33] PRTs are the primary implementing component of NATO/ISAF deployments and are small contingents of civilian and military personnel that undertake civil–military operations incorporating governance, reconstruction, humanitarian relief, conflict resolution and counterinsurgency measures. According to analysts, 'the US military introduced PRTs and the notion of winning hearts and minds as a military strategy through the implementation of humanitarian projects in areas under their control'.[34] NGOs have complained that they create an insecure environment, blur the distinction between soldiers and aid workers, and have curtailed the humanitarian space, putting staff members of aid organizations at risk.[35] In the north of the country, the separation between military and humanitarian agendas has reduced tensions considerably.[36] In the south, the increased military engagement since 2001 has led to incremental expansion of no-go areas for humanitarian organizations. According to UN security maps, Afghanistan's Pashtun belt is now out of bounds for neutral humanitarian/aid workers.

Recipient Pashtun communities and NGOs, in turn, perceive QIPs to be limited in scope and intended to gain local support for military missions. They are not long-term sustainable development projects and are often implemented without community engagement. Local *shuras* or councils have claimed that while some projects such as schools have been beneficial, others are hasty infrastructure constructions – 'show pieces' related to military or foreign policy objectives.[37] These become 'white elephants' and are irrelevant to a population whose primary needs are poverty alleviation and humanitarian aid. When the delivery of aid directly dispersed by PRTs is closely linked to counterinsurgency, Afghans are weary of assistance and NGOs worry that this contravenes humanitarian principles.[38]

General McChrystal wants to put the civil–military operations at the heart of the counterinsurgency strategy for Afghanistan, but in view of the lessons of the past eight years, they will need to be revamped to effectively assist the war-ravaged peoples of the Pashtun belt who are suffering from food insecurity and displacement and who are in desperate need of medical facilities. President Obama has stated that a civilian surge will follow this

military one, with USAID as the primary body for implementing development in the southern and eastern provinces. But USAID has yet to put a plan in place to take on its designated role. What is actually required is a genuine development strategy for the Pashtun belt undertaken by United Nations outside the military paradigm.

Militarizing aid is unlikely to win the hearts and minds or regain the trust of the Pashtun majority. Despite this, it will continue to be used as a tool to penetrate a society of which NATO/Coalition troops have little understanding. This knowledge deficit is a key impediment to military success. As the current strategy shifts away from central government towards local structures in Pashtun provinces, where General McChrystal's population-focused counterinsurgency will bring NATO/Coalition soldiers in direct contact with the local inhabitants, an in-depth appreciation of the society is vital. General McChrystal has argued that this military engagement, unlike that of the Bush administration, is aimed at 'connecting with the people … physically and psychologically' in order to 'understand their choices and needs' so that NATO/the US can 'protect the population.'[39]

Anthropology, intelligence-gathering and the war

The Human Terrain System (HTS), set up by the US Army in 2006 is an example of the military's attempt to gain knowledge and cultural understanding of the local population. The scheme involves small units of civilian regional experts and anthropologists assigned to brigade combat teams, who undertake interview-based data collection on kinship structures, political leadership, economic indicators and the agricultural landscape, to provide a social database of the area. Army officials and media reports have argued that the HTS is responsible for reducing the levels of violence in Eastern Afghanistan and has 'helped save lives' by enhancing the cultural sensitivity of US soldiers to their environment and its populace.[40] But academics in the social sciences point out that there is no empirical evidence to support these claims.[41] Some have argued that, on the contrary, HTS is essentially an intelligence-gathering exercise to support combat operations.[42] The American Association of Anthropology has opposed the programme on ethical grounds on the basis of 'the potential misuse of anthropological information for targeting purposes',[43] which violates the principles of the discipline.

Tribal warfare and raising militias

The HTS bears an uncanny likeness to the ethnographic mapping of the Pashtun tribes that British civil and military officers undertook to inform military strategy during the nineteenth century. The use of a colonial template to engage with the Pashtun borderland today is ill-advised. It defines Pashtun communities in an ethnographic present that is misleading, outmoded and inappropriate. Three decades of war have changed the ecology of the borderland and transformed its society. Nonetheless, military tacticians are taking lessons from the colonial era on how to win tribal warfare in Afghanistan, co-opting local tribesmen and creating militias.

This strategy is currently under way in two small districts of Wardak province, 30 kilometres west of Kabul. In a pilot project known as the Afghan Public Protection Force (or 'the Guardians'), US forces are training and arming locals chosen by tribal elders to protect the community and fight the Taliban. But this is a risky strategy given the decades of civil war.[44] Many of those recruited are either former anti-Soviet mujahideen or belonged to jihadi groups. The potential for creating warring militias and new forms of conflict and contention is high in a society where ethnic, tribal and clan allegiances are fractious and fluid. The strategy further undermines the UN disarmament, demobilization and reintegration effort because it may encourage the formation of militias that will perpetuate insecurity and are susceptible to abuses of power and criminality. Finally, it reinforces and empowers, and even creates, local warlords at the expense of the central government.[45]

Alongside the development of local security forces and international forces, a priority for the US administration is the training and equipping of the Afghan National Army (ANA). But dual structures may lead to competing institutions where local security forces may complicate the counterinsurgency effort. Currently, the ANA has 92,000 troops. General McChrystal is asking for a substantial growth in these forces, to 240,000 by 2011. The aim is for the ANA to take over from NATO/US forces. But questions have been raised about the quality of the force that this quick-fix approach is likely to produce. The process of building the ANA has been harmed by high rates of attrition and an ethnic imbalance. The pace of McChrystal's plans for the ANA may be too fast. The ANA may not be ready to meet the timetable of withdrawal of US troops set by President Obama, and the large numbers planned are unlikely to be sustainable without long-term international financial assistance.[46]

Engaging the Taliban?

As the war has progressed, and with plans for an exit strategy, calls have grown for 'talks with the Taliban'.[47] At the macro-level this would entail dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban leadership. Since the latter were excluded from the Bonn peace talks in 2001, it is now questionable whether talks are plausible simply because the incentives and aspirations of the two sides are diametrically opposed. The Taliban's basic demand prior to negotiations is for international forces to leave Afghanistan; for NATO and the Afghan government talks would be conditional on Taliban acceptance of the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. At this point, in the midst of an insurgency, the situation is at a stalemate.[48]

At a local level, the idea of talks has a different meaning, involving power-sharing deals with stakeholders in the insurgency, whether Taliban insurgents themselves or religious and tribal leaders linked to the insurgency. More often than not it is difficult for NATO forces to make distinctions. The tenuous peace deal achieved in Musa Qila in Helmand in 2008 after two years of fighting between British forces and the Taliban hinged on negotiations that bestowed the governorship of the town to Mullah Saleem, a man who had fought against British forces but was subsequently described as a 'Taliban defector'. The definition is ambiguous, but relates to the policy of co-opting those Taliban who are willing to consider reconciliation.

The ultimate goal is to distinguish and separate hardline Taliban fighters from a second tier of less militant and more malleable foot soldiers who joined the insurgency for non-ideological reasons. This more nuanced approach comes from a realization that the Taliban are an amalgam of regional and tribal militias. Military generals recognize the differences and advocate exploiting them as part of the counterinsurgency strategy. But this requires reliable and legitimate interlocutors and local governance structures that enable engagement with the Taliban. The process would need to be Afghan-led to be effective. More recent plans being conceived include giving financial incentives or employment to Taliban to lure them away from fighting, but experts argue that 'fighters can collect cash or other incentives and simply rejoin the insurgency'.[49]

It has been argued that 'courting the Taliban is more an act of desperation than strategy'.[50] But reconciliation is an inevitable part of ending any war. The hope is that engaging the Taliban will mitigate the insurgency to a manageable level. But others point out that negotiating with the Taliban

should be from a position of strength, not weakness. Reconciliation with the Taliban would only further empower the Taliban, allowing them to capture parts of the state. This undermines the original compelling logic for international engagement with Afghanistan in 2001 and that legitimized the presence of international forces there.

'FROM AFPAK TO PAKAF':[51] EXPANDING THE THEATRE OF WAR INTO PAKISTAN'S TRIBAL BELT

Peace deals in Pakistan's tribal areas

While the US AfPak strategy endorses reconciliation with the Taliban in Afghanistan, it is against such measures in Pakistan. The Pakistan army has been intermittently engaged in peace deals between military operations as leverage to both keep its hold on militants and prevent the militants from taking hold of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. But NATO/US commanders in Afghanistan argue that these peace deals are counterproductive, allowing the militants to regroup and leading to an increase in cross-border infiltration. The Pakistan government argues that the evidence and intelligence are not conclusive. Nevertheless, the peace deals in Pakistan have not been an effective conflict resolution tool. They have been implemented on an ad hoc basis, lacking accountability and enforcement procedures. As a consequence the terms of agreement of the peace deals have often been broken by both militants and the army.

Legitimate peace deals were attempted by the provincial government of the Awami National Party (ANP) in 2008. High hopes were pinned on this secular Pashtun party that was elected to power in the North-West Frontier Province with the mandate to use dialogue and diplomacy to broker the peace in Pakistan's tribal areas.[52] The party planned peace deals initially with tribal elders, holding the latter accountable for enforcing the peace. But the fragile peace brokered at the time could not hold in the face of' what many in Pakistan perceive as US opposition and drone attacks, which helped to derail the process. Since then, the ANP held talks directly with militants, brokering the controversial cease-fire with the militants (the Tehrik-i-Nifaz-i-Shariat-Mohammadi or TNSM) in Swat in exchange for concessions allowing Sharia law. This was short-lived when the Pakistan government opted for a military solution to end Taliban intransigence and control of the area. Negotiating with the Taliban is not without pitfalls and continues to elude military and diplomatic strategists. Unlike Afghanistan, which lacks the institutional mechanisms to implement conflict resolution strategies at the local level, Pakistan has the required governmental experience and capacity based on its historical administration of the 'tribes'. The failure to allow for conflict resolution strategies on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line is unlikely to neutralize the Taliban threat on either side.[53]

US foreign policy towards Pakistan and Afghanistan: a new direction?

The contradictory policy towards the two countries, critics argue, may lead to AfPak's undoing. It is a reflection of a strategy that has not envisioned an endgame for the Bush administration's 'war on terror'. Rather, the AfPak strategy in its political conceptualization amalgamates the insurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan into one existential threat. This lays the groundwork for an expansion of the theatre of war into Pakistan's FATA and potentially even Balochistan. Critics argue that 'treating Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single theatre of combat' overlooks the marked differences between the two countries.[54] But opening up a new front as an intended diversion and distraction from the seemingly unwinnable war in Afghanistan is part and parcel of counterterrorism strategy.[55] It is also a reflection of the change in intent of the new Obama administration to pursue the 'hunt for Al-Qaeda' in earnest. The consequences of this have yet to be factored into the AfPak strategy, but the experience of Afghanistan does not bode well for Pakistan.

The narrative from Washington and from the military commanders on the ground in Afghanistan has changed to support this AfPak strategy. General McChrystal has situated the 'command' structures of the Afghan insurgency inside Pakistan, arguing that while the 'insurgent fighters are Afghans … they are directed by a small number of senior Afghan leaders in Pakistan'.[56] The White Paper on US policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan strategically emphasizes Pakistan in the lexicon of the 'war against terrorism' and Afghanistan in the lexicon of 'reconstruction' – moving the strategic centre of gravity of the threat to Pakistan.[57] The current strategy is in sync with the perspective of members of the Afghan government that 'it is in Pakistan that the war against terrorism must be defeated',[58] but Pakistani officials believe that US strategy 'downplays the fact that the situation in FATA is the consequence of the collapse of security in Afghanistan and not the other way round'.[59] In the ideological battle between the two countries, Pakistan is now being seen as the linchpin in the insurgency jigsaw, which in the words of Daniel Markey lends to a strategy shift 'from AfPak to PAkAf.'[60] But this narrative shift may create friction between the two neighbours and is unlikely to engender the type of cooperation necessary to defeat the Taliban insurgency.

The lack of intelligence and the misinformation that feeds into the misrepresentation of FATA are likely to challenge an accurate and informed conceptualization of AfPak. Information is scant in FATA about the names,

numbers and nature of the militancy and insurgency. This leads to the sort of confusion that often surrounds the death of prominent militants such as Baitullah Massud, the former leader of the Pakistani Taliban. Informants are plentiful in Afghanistan, where US and NATO forces are often 'overwhelmed by information on hundreds of contradictory databases'[61] and have been plagued by faulty intelligence that plays into local rivalries and vendettas.

Before his inauguration, President Obama announced that he would authorize US air strikes inside Pakistan with 'actionable intelligence'.[62] As one analyst put it, 'You don't ordinarily in diplomatic relations pronounce that you will bomb your allies.'[63] The US has frequently used drone attacks inside Pakistan's territory to compel it to fight the 'war against terrorism' and deter Pakistan from undertaking peace deals with the Taliban. It is the punishment in what has become a 'carrot and stick'-driven US foreign policy towards the country. The Obama administration has increased the number of drone attacks in Pakistan's FATA.[64] This continues the Bush administration's policy that cornered Pakistan into ally status when it was forced to decide between being 'with or against' the US shortly after the 9/11 attacks. But while this use of coercive diplomacy is designed to pressure Pakistan out of its previous role of giving succour, sustenance and support to the Taliban, it has complicated Pakistan's ability to take ownership of the war against terrorism within its borders. It has enraged public opinion, which regards drone attacks as an infringement of Pakistan's sovereignty. More fundamentally, it has forced Pakistan to perceive itself as 'a hired gun to go after Al-Qaeda and the Taliban'.[65] Despite substantial military casualties in the Pakistani army, its officers are being referred to as 'America's mercenaries'. This is adding to the erosion of troop morale, where many, according to Haider Mullick, are 'unwilling to continue fighting an unpopular war against their own people with no conclusive victory'.[66]

The Pakistan Army and conflict in FATA

It was not until recently, following the military successes of the Pakistan army in clearing out militants in the Swat and Bajaur offensive and as a consequence of the elimination of Baitullah Massoud by a US drone attack, that morale in the army recovered and public opinion was galvanized in the fight against terrorism. Despite these achievements, the Pakistan army's mere presence in FATA is perilous. Just as in Afghanistan, where the Pashtun borderland has historically resisted and been resentful of the

presence of foreign troops, so in Pakistan the FATA Pashtuns have had a historically vexed relationship with military presence. Only after the removal and abandonment of military cantonments by the British Indian army in 1947 was the then newly created Pakistani state able to achieve a harmonious relationship with its borderland citizens. To reverse the military adventurism of Britain's - Forward Policy and bring an end to the war in the tribal areas, the British army withdrew from tribal territory, thereby securing tribal allegiance to the Pakistani state. From then until 2001, this western frontier remained relatively trouble- free.[67]

The Bush administration's admonishments to 'flush out' remnants of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, and its urgings that 'Pakistan must do more' pushed the army back into FATA – an event not witnessed since Pakistan's independence. This action alone was perceived as a provocation and breached the social contract between the state and its borderland communities. Since then, the Pakistan army has been engaged intermittently in military operations to curb cross-border infiltration and remove foreign fighters, militants and the Taliban from FATA.

The Pakistan army, like the US forces in Afghanistan, has fought the insurgency on the border primarily through counterterrorism operations which have been imprecise, causing significant damage to civilians and property. Just as counterterrorism operations by US/NATO forces are increasingly being blamed for perpetuating the insecurity and the growth of the insurgency in Afghanistan's Pashtun belt, so the Pakistan army's intervention is seen as exacerbating the security situation in FATA.[68]

Any action by the military is treated in the context of *badal* (revenge in accordance with the Pashtun social code), in which, according to Khalid Aziz, 'retaliation is deemed necessary, is random and swift'; and suicide bombing, fundamentally alien to the Pashtun social ethic, is now 'one means of equalizing the disproportionate use of force'.[69] Far from mitigating the militant threat, counterterrorism operations have inadvertently had the opposite effect, and indeed have aggravated the threat; grievances against the military have been compounded by the degree and extent of loss received. This is radicalizing the population of FATA and could create an endless supply of militants.

This may explain the targeting of the military and police in areas outside FATA, specifically the Punjab, the traditional heartland of the Pakistan army. The military action has given impetus, purpose and meaning to a myriad of different groups, including the Taliban spoilers, criminal elements, militias,

warlords and jihadi groups. Unlike the insurgency in Afghanistan, in Pakistan these disparate groups are not linked, but are coalescing and merging to resist the state under the broad rubric of an insurgency. At the start of military action in FATA in 2003/04, radical Islamist groups in the urban areas of Pakistan posed more of a threat to the state. Prominent terrorists with viable Al-Qaeda links were captured in cities while the tribal areas failed to produce a single member of Al-Qaeda who merited official identification. Since then any latent radicalism in the tribal areas has become inflamed.

FATA now houses the Pakistani Taliban or Tehrik-i-Taliban, which was created under the leadership of Baitullah Massoud in 2007, and the TNSM, and is a magnet for Afghan Taliban, jihadi groups including Uzbek, Punjabi and Kashmiri-based groups, and a source of lawlessness that transcends tribal borders.[70] The militancy initially localized in Waziristan, in 2004, has mutated, intensified and expanded geographically and now extends beyond tribal territories into the settled areas of Pakistan. Since 2009, however, the Taliban momentum from FATA went into reverse. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan was in disarray following the death of Baitullah Massoud. Government officials stated that the insurgency was on the back foot following Pakistan's military operations in Swat. While the threat from the Frontier seems to be in flux, a new Punjabi Taliban has emerged based in the heart of the Punjab. This adds to the complexity of any analysis on the insurgency.

During the Swat offensive of May 2009 the Pakistan army changed tack, undertaking counterinsurgency operations to rid Swat of the TNSM militants so entrenched and emboldened that they planned to impose Sharia law in the area. The army focused on population security as opposed to clearing operations. From retreating to base camp and a reluctance to maintain a presence in previous years, recently soldiers have carried out troop patrols, identifying and reconciling with Taliban and working with tribal lashkars (militias).[71] Officials state that the militant threat in Swat has been defeated. But in the wake of the conflict the military operations have left behind a devastated infrastructure and torn social fabric.

The traditional security apparatus of the tribal areas involves the Frontier Corps, Khassadars and levies. - These localized forces could be given the mandate to take on the insurgency in FATA, but they would need to bet trained in counterinsurgency or equipped with the necessary military hardware. The induction of the army and the complex and untenable security environment have eclipsed their role. In fact, the current conflict dynamic may be inducing state failure in the long term. The system of political administration that governs FATA has been undermined by Taliban violence

and the military operations. The army's direct dealings with tribes have subverted the regular chain of command in FATA, weakening the administrative capacity of the state. The political administration in FATA, an anachronistic relic of colonial governance, is losing its capacity to govern. Reforms should be implemented and effective governance structures put in its place. But in the midst of an ongoing war, this will be challenging. Without an alternative system to administer FATA, it may create a governance vacuum.[72]

The tragedy of Pakistan's internally displaced

The gravest consequence of military action in the North-West Frontier Province has been the human cost. The civilian casualty figures are unclear because of the lack of information and access. However, visible manifestations of the human costs are all too apparent. An exodus of refugees has fled - fled from FATA since 2003/04. Two million fled from Swat during the 2009 military operation that lasted a few months. The UN has described the population movement as the most dramatic displacement crisis since Rwanda in 1994,[73] equalling the number of Afghans who fled the Soviet occupation over a span of ten years. The white UNHCR tents that housed Afghans in the 1980s and 1990s now house Pakistani Pashtuns.

The Pakistan army has been able to return many of internally displaced persons from Swat but not rehabilitate all of the massive influx from FATA, and the bankrupt Pakistani government is heavily reliant on international humanitarian aid to facilitate the process. But the international community has not delivered the aid required to meet the needs of the IDPs within Pakistan. NGOs working on the ground are blaming Western governments for not providing financial assistance in a timely and effective manner.[74] The failure to adequately respond to this humanitarian crisis may harm the reputation of donor countries, and the failure to rehabilitate this war-torn society in the aftermath of conflict may 'reverse any gains in the battlefield, boost radical Islamist groups' and create the conditions for further instability.[75]

FROM AFPAK TO PUKHTUNISTAN: DESTABILIZING THE BORDERLAND

As Pakistan's army gradually rids its borderland of the Taliban menace, it may well lose the war on extremism in the refugee camps that have historically been a breeding ground for the next generation of jihadis, mujahideen and Taliban. As US/NATO forces call in a 'troop surge' to change the course of the war, it may well create yet more refugee communities.

The Afghanistan–Pakistan borderland is an ancient mountainous crossroads and by definition a contemporary highway for the movement of peoples, goods and ideas. The current AfPak strategy in its aim to 'disrupt and dismantle Al-Qaeda' is setting the wheels in motion for a greater momentum and ferocity in these otherwise benign movements. It is potentially destabilizing for the borderland and may exacerbate its transnational character. Internally displaced Pashtuns are moving to Karachi in Pakistan and Kunduz in Afghanistan, far away from their traditional homes. For the first time in recent history, it was reported by the media that the flow of refugees from Pakistan moved in the opposite direction to Afghanistan when approximately 200,000 Pashtuns sought refuge from the Pakistan army's offensive in Bajaur in 2008, by crossing to other side of the Durand Line.[76] The current offensive by 4,000 US Marines is dispersing the Taliban to other areas in Afghanistan, and the Pakistan government fears it may push them further into new areas inside its territory, such as Balochistan. The Tehrik-i-Taliban in Pakistan, now an enfeebled insurgency, has declared that it will avenge the death of their former leader by attacking Pakistani and US troops.[77] Instead of disaggregating what is becoming a 'jihad' for the Taliban and various Islamist militant groups the Obama administration could end up galvanizing and uniting it.

The military strategy of steamrolling the Taliban from both sides of the Durand Line through counterterrorism and counterinsurgency is unlikely to win hearts and minds and more likely to politicize an innocent Pashtun population that is caught in the crossfire. At some point they may feel compelled to take up arms and join in a 'cause' that will take *badal* or revenge in accordance with the Pashtun social code for the loss of life and property inflicted. The perception among the Pashtuns of the borderland is that they are victims of violence because of their ethnicity. In Afghanistan, they were marginalized in the Bonn political process. In the 2009 Afghan elections, legitimate Pashtun votes were not counted and in many cases could not be cast because of a poor security environment. In Pakistan, elections that brought a landslide

victory to the Pakistan People's Party following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto also ousted the Islamist party, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), from the North-West Frontier Province in favour of the moderate Pashtun Awami National Party. Despite this, the ANP lost its ability to politically mobilize and voice Pashtun concerns because of Taliban violence and the military conflict in the province. Internally displaced Pashtun families who sought refuge in the Punjab and Sindh have faced discrimination and lack channels to express their grievances.[78]

The convergence of Pashtun ethnic particularism and Islamic fundamentalism on the borderland makes for an unmanageable insurrection that the Obama administration's strategy should take steps to avoid. But the ill-named AfPak strategy conjures up the political map of 'Pukhtunistan' – a spacial configuration of a theatre of war that crosses the Durand Line and includes Pashtun-populated border areas within the two countries. Pukhtunistan was the name given to define and legitimize Afghan claims to Pashtun lands inside Pakistan, as well as the Pashtun nationalist sentiment that arose in Pakistan at the partition of India in 1947. It has been a bone of contention and a source of animosity between the two neighbours since the inception of the Pakistani state. The Obama administration should not allow a misnomer conjured out of historical amnesia and ignorance of the region to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Obama administration has argued that the AfPak strategy is aimed at the local and provincial structures of the Pashtun belt. But as Zalmay Khalilzad has argued, 'If it looks like we're abandoning the central government and focusing just on the local areas, we will run afoul of Afghan politics.'[79] Although the AfPak strategy focuses on the borderland, it has given this border a specific political configuration in the counterinsurgency paradigm that will make its relationship with government particularly problematic in both Islamabad and Kabul.

The fundamental flaw of the AfPak strategy is the conspicuous absence of the border and the borderland as an analytical variable. As Jonathan Goodhand puts it, 'We know much more about how states deal with borderlands than how borderlands deal with states.'[80] But history has shown that military action in the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderland has proven ineffectual because of its topography and terrain, social, political and economic orientation but more fundamentally because of its transnational nature. It is this variable that heightens the possibility of unintended consequences in this conflict. The AfPak strategy as currently conceptualized underestimates these characteristics of the borderland and oversimplifies the insurgency on both

sides of the Durand Line. It fails to comprehend and acknowledge the differences in the 'security trajectories, contexts and capabilities' of the two states in dealing with their own borders.[81] While Afghanistan lacks the local governance systems and infrastructure to engage the borderland, Pakistan has working administrative structures in place that can tackle the insurgency. However, these are constitutionally flawed and outside the judicial jurisdiction of the state. Although Pakistan is facing an insurgency, its characteristics are not fixed; it is made up of a loose amalgamation of Islamist militant groups, and this offers opportunities to dissect and dismantle the threat. Afghanistan, by contrast, is facing a monolithic insurgency rooted in the Taliban who are increasingly a political entity and now govern large swathes of Afghanistan's territory. This complicates any prospect of reconciliation outside of engaging the Taliban themselves.

Any action taken on one side of the Durand Line will reverberate and have repercussions on the other. Military action on both sides equalizes the differences but pits the borderland in direct conflict with the international system, with the real and dangerous potential of transforming small wars into one big war. Having set the geopolitical game in motion in this AfPak strategy, it is hard to see the final outcome. Regionally contained animosities and tensions could be stoked when set against the backdrop of a growing insurgency between two weak or failing states and superpower interests. To quote Hew Strachan, in his article 'Strategies for the Limitation of War':

The Duke of Wellington on the occasion of the 1838 rebellion in Canada said that 'There is no such thing as a little war for a Great nation'. He recognized the opportunity for exploitation given to lesser powers by embroilment of a great power in armed conflict and he also in consequence appreciated small wars escalating into big ones.[82]

ENGAGING THE BORDERLAND

What is required is a strategy that brings the borderland areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan back into their respective states. This can only be achieved by engaging the borderland in effective and sustainable social, economic and political development to help it through the various stages that lead to integration and assimilation. This would include the integration of FATA under the broader governance structures of the state and breaking down the policy of encapsulation in Afghanistan's Pashtun belt that has historically emboldened the periphery at the expense of the centre. To successfully achieve this would mean introducing policies to contain the conflict, defuse regional tensions and encourage diplomatic cooperation and consultative dialogue between Pakistan and Afghanistan through national and local *jirgas* (councils)*.* The insurgency could be managed not by diminishing the concept of an international border or the Durand Line, but by bolstering border security through the indigenous guarded border posts of the two countries. Settled borders help to make economic integration possible. Economic integration in turn will pull the population towards modernization and urbanization and out of the clutches of the Taliban – to whom the people of the Pashtun borderland are host and hostage.

The political leadership of the AfPak strategy under Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke is aware of what is needed to help the Pashtuns of the borderland out of their marginalized and underdeveloped state, and is working towards formulating applicable and appropriate policies. This includes reform of the agricultural sector to wean Afghanistan off its opium reliance, and industrialization zones in Pakistan's FATA region to encourage unemployed youths to put down their guns for a better future. But, implementing these policies requires, first, development projects that are not defined by and subservient to security concerns. This will be challenging in a war zone and will require a rethink of civil–military operations. The 'civilian surge' can be an important part of the AfPak strategy if it translates to a substantial civilian contingent with clear non-military roles and responsibilities. In this situation, it could facilitate the stabilization of the war-ravaged Pashtun belt in preparation for reconstruction and long-term development.

Second, it requires an aid package that is delinked from the counterinsurgency budget. Assistance to Pakistan during the Bush administration was focused on the military. Under the Kerry-Lugar bill, financial aid is being earmarked for civil society and civilian-led development. But moves to make this aid conditional on Pakistan's performance in the war

may be counterproductive and may hinder these good intentions. For Afghanistan, the cost of conducting the war since 2001 has until now far outweighed that of implementing reconstruction and development.[83] Unfortunately this seems likely to continue as US/NATO forces engage in a protracted counterinsurgency war.

The final requirement is a long-term commitment by the United States to the sustained political and economic progress of both countries. So far the short-term benefits of waging the war have undermined long-term stability and democratic development in both countries. This has compounded the trust deficit that many Afghans and Pakistanis feel towards the United States exacerbated by the track record of the United States in the region which implies that its commitment is determined solely by geostrategic interests. During the Cold War, the US engaged the Pakistanis to orchestrate the formation, funding and fight of the mujahideen in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union acknowledged defeat and withdrew from Afghanistan, the United States left both Afghanistan and Pakistan to handle the fallout. It failed to negotiate a settlement between the warring mujahideen factions, which led to Afghanistan's disintegration into civil war and state fragmentation. The US did not help manage and moderate Islamic militancy which was encouraged in Pakistan for the purposes of the Cold War. That has now turned inwards to undermine cohesion within Pakistan.

President Obama's AfPak strategy aims to finally 'defeat and dismantle' the Islamist extremists in the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderland before the withdrawal of US troops by 2011. The international community hopes that this ambitious military plan will be the antidote to Islamic militancy and the Taliban insurgency. But the AfPak strategy will need simultaneously to articulate and facilitate a political plan that lays the groundwork for Afghanistan and Pakistan to build their state institutions and reform their societies at the end of international military engagement. For this, the international community should help support accountable, democratic governments that will need to extend their remit to the Pashtun borderland, which has remained largely a 'non-state' space, and therefore susceptible to Talibanization and conflict for far too long.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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