

Afghan war success demands action in Pakistan

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Political news for the next few weeks will be dominated by the elections in Canada and the United States. These are important spectator sports, as well as central events in democratic governance.

At the same time, a lot of politics is going on elsewhere in the world. Much of it is grim and far removed from democratic elections that, for all the serious consequences they entail, are still upbeat events.

For a contrast with our politics, consider what has been going on recently in Pakistan and Iran.

One of the few agreed upon generalizations concerning counter-insurgency fighting is that it is impossible to win so long as the insurgents have a sanctuary where they can train, rest, regroup and plan.

It is widely agreed that there can be no success in Afghanistan without also doing something about the sanctuary provided by Pakistan.

Over the years, joint operations by NATO special operations forces and the Pakistanis have been directed chiefly at al-Qaeda, not the Taliban.

Recently an increase in U.S. air strikes into Pakistan has targeted the Taliban.

This poses a real problem. On the one hand Pakistan -- or rather, some factions in the army and especially in the government -- are happy to have NATO deal with the jihadi militants on its own.

On the other, unilateral military operations by NATO adds to Pakistan's political instability because of growing anger at these American-led attacks.

To make matters worse for Pakistan, Indian army engineers have just finished building a road linking southwestern Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chahbahar on the Arabian Sea.

The completion of the road by rival India means Pakistani influence in Afghanistan has been reduced because it opens an alternative route to bring goods and equipment into the country other than by going through the Khyber Pass.

The announcement that the U.S. was prepared to act in Pakistan with or without Pakistani permission brought a strong response from the head of the military, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. He warned that Pakistani forces would fight to defend their sovereignty against any foreigners.

Whether they do so or not, the crisis between Pakistan and NATO has been enlarged and intensified.

Moreover, the reason is easy to see: The Taliban has made a resurgence in Afghanistan and base camps in Pakistan are central to their success.

NATO troops would obviously welcome the end of supplies flowing from Pakistan to the Taliban. Due to the political sympathy for the Taliban among Pakistanis, however, that country has been unable to act against them on its own.

So the Americans have said, if you won't do the job, we will.

Unlike joint operations against al-Qaeda, dealing with the Taliban bases requires a lot more than special forces and a few unmanned aerial vehicles.

The change in relations between Pakistan and NATO means that a crisis is coming to a head. The NATO options are either to widen the war against the Taliban by attacking in Pakistan, in accord with standard counter-insurgency practice, or abandon Afghanistan altogether.

If things look to be growing more dangerous and violent in Pakistan, there is good news out of Iran. Or, more cautiously, there is ambiguous news about Iran that might turn out to be good.

If you cast your mind back to the days prior to the Georgia-Russia war, speculation was all about the possibility of attacking Iran. Remember the Israeli dress-rehearsal over Greece and the eastern Mediterranean?

Since Aug. 8, all such talk has disappeared.

Remember, as well, that for years Iran has provided assistance to Shiite insurgents in Iraq.

Today, the level of violence in Iraq has diminished significantly.

To put it in a nutshell: The Americans have toned down their rhetoric against Iran and Iran has toned down its support for Iraqi Shiite militants.

The Americans have also acquiesced in the expulsion of an anti-Iranian terrorist group from Iraq and are about to turn over the last two provinces in the Shiite south to Iraqi control.

This does not mean that Iran and the U.S. are now pals, but it does mean that they have made some kind of deal to bring greater security to Iraq.

That will free troops for service in Afghanistan, which might go some distance to explain the harder line taken by the Americans and NATO with the Pakistanis.

Perhaps more importantly, the misery and slaughter elsewhere in the world puts our benign election struggles into perspective.

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