

Destroy the Taliban's Sanctuary

By STEVEN METZ

America's new strategy in Afghanistan seeks to replicate the success of Iraq. The idea is that an increase in the number of troops, more nonmilitary advisors, and expanded aid will strengthen the Afghan national government and secure the local people, thus filling the power vacuum that the Taliban exploits. This plan has two major flaws.

The first is the absence of a viable economy outside of opium production. Iraq had oil, some industry, and a once-vibrant agricultural sector. Afghanistan has little beyond subsistence farming. But more importantly, Afghanistan faces what may be the single most important determinant of insurgent success or failure: external sanctuary for the rebels.

Over the last century, only a handful of insurgents succeeded without external sanctuary. China, for instance, was so large that Mao's communist insurgents were able to create and control internal sanctuary. In Cuba, the Batista regime was so weak that

Castro could topple it without the benefit of external bases. But in most instances of insurgent victory—Vietnam, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and so forth—sanctuary was vital. In Greece in the 1940s and, more recently, Iraq, eradicating external sanctuary helped strangle the insurgency. History suggests that to defeat the Taliban, its sanctuary must be destroyed.

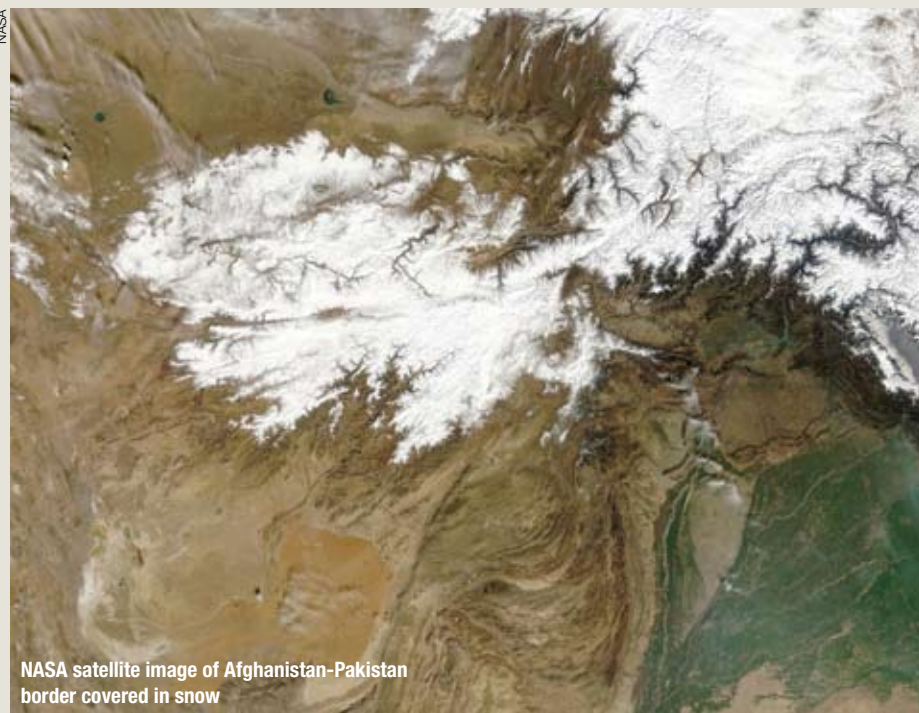
The problem is that America's ally Pakistan is unwilling or unable to do so. This goes beyond a simple lack of capacity—it is a *deliberate* policy. Recent reports claim that elements of Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence directly support the Taliban, apparently hoping to appease militants or prevent the emergence of a stable Afghan government. As in Vietnam, political considerations have prevented the United States from destroying the Taliban's external sanctuary. The fear is that either cleaning out the sanctuary directly or pressuring Pakistan to do so might precipitate the collapse of the Islamabad government. As a poor substitute,

the policy of the United States is to target identifiable Taliban leaders in the Pakistan sanctuary and play defense on the Afghan side of the border. There is little evidence that this will defeat the insurgency. It failed when the United States tried it in Vietnam, when the white minority government of South Africa tried it, when the Israelis tried it against Palestinian militants, and when the Russians did it in the Caucasus. Nothing suggests that history has shifted so that the defend-and-assassinate approach is now viable.

This leaves three options. If eradicating the sanctuaries would, in fact, lead to the downfall of the Pakistani regime and if its survival is more important than stabilizing Afghanistan, Washington could continue the current policy, either pouring in additional blood and money for many years or relegating Afghanistan to the Taliban. If stabilizing Afghanistan and lowering the American burden there is the priority, then the United States must give the Pakistani government a choice. It can either eradicate the Taliban sanctuaries within its territory or the Afghan government can have the United Nations declare the sanctuary a threat to regional peace and security, then ask the United States to deal with it.

There is no doubt that such actions would challenge, and perhaps even threaten, the Pakistani government. But Islamabad cannot be both America's friend and enemy at the same time. Our Afghan ally is at great risk because of Pakistan's inaction. American military forces are killed by insurgents operating from their sanctuary in Pakistan.

Perhaps the best solution is disengagement from this embattled part of the world. But if the United States elects to sustain its commitment to peace and stability in Afghanistan, the insurgent sanctuary must be destroyed. **JFQ**



NASA satellite image of Afghanistan-Pakistan border covered in snow

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