The exodus of Western countries from Afghanistan has the appearance of being all exit, no strategy. By the end of 2013, all Western troops will have withdrawn from combat roles in Afghanistan and the troops themselves will leave the country by the end of 2014. One hundred thousand American troops at an annual cost of $100 billion, backed by European and Australasian allies, have failed to defeat a mere 20,000-25,000 Taliban who fight for no pay, but rather a cause.

As in Iraq, Washington will leave behind a country radically different from the one envisaged when it was attacked and invaded. Occupation proved different from and more challenging than invasion, and nation-building proved more difficult and protracted still. After a dozen years of Western blood and treasure, as well as efforts and investment to create, train and arm the Afghan military, no one seriously expects the Afghan Army to be fit for purpose in 2015. In October, the Red Cross and the International Crisis Group warned that Afghanistan faces an increasingly precarious future. The most likely scenario from 2014 is a protracted low-level conflict between government and Taliban forces that will test the Afghan national security forces and obstruct stabilization and reconstruction efforts.

As Western forces wind down their military presence in Afghanistan, there are widespread concerns about the country’s future security and stability. While much attention has been focused on the stake Pakistan perceives itself to have in who governs Afghanistan, India has quietly re-emerged as a player in a new iteration of the Great Game, writes Ramesh Thakur.

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In assessing the failure of the West’s efforts in Afghanistan, western analysts and commentators draw attention to such factors as the lack of a reliable local partner, the corruption, incompetence and violence of the security forces, the non-Pashtun ethnic bias of the government, the lack of connection to local tribal and religious leaders, and the
The battle space in Afghanistan straddles the border with Pakistan, and those with a deep appreciation of local realities would have known that the battle for Afghanistan would be won or lost ultimately in Pakistan, which has more — and more proximate and critical — historical, ethnic and geopolitical interests in Afghanistan than India. These translate into the conclusion that no peace in Afghanistan is likely to be stable and durable unless Pakistan has a seat at the table during the negotiations that produce the peace agreement. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Kabul in 2001, many of the most prominent anti-Karzai government leaders — Mullah Omar, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Jalaluddin Haqqani — are believed to have established residence in the border regions.

For decades, US-Pakistan relations have oscillated between make-believe friendship and barely concealed distrust. When Pakistan’s help is necessary, it is courted with US financial and military largesse and political bonhomie. When the need passes, Pakistan is abandoned, say some bitterly, like a soiled condom. Presented with a stark choice after 9/11 of being with Washington or against it, and wishing to avoid a deepening of India-US relations, President Pervez Musharraf did a strategic pivot and agreed to a limited American presence on Pakistani air bases, controlled use of Pakistani air space and a logistical supply corridor for NATO through Pakistani territory. In return, he got military and economic assistance.

But neither side’s heart was in the relationship. Pakistan’s game of double-dealing and deceit was rooted in sound strategic logic. To openly defy Washington in the febrile post-9/11 atmosphere would have been suicidal. But to disrupt, defeat and dismantle the human and physical terrorist infrastructure so painstakingly built up over decades would have eliminated Pakistan’s most important bargaining chip to secure generous US military and economic aid, on the one hand, and its long-term asset vis-à-vis India, on the other.

The tensions and frustrations that boiled over in US-Pakistan relations were the logical culmination of hunting with the hounds while running with the hares. Stephen Krasner, head of the US State Department’s Policy Planning in 2005-07, argues that Pakistan’s policy is not born of state weakness but is the result of a rational choice that makes deliberate use of nuclear proliferation and terrorism as tools of statecraft. 2 Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of The Australian, argues that the Pakistani military has been indoctrinated into viewing the West as the enemy of Pakistan and Islam. He questions why the West should train, equip and fund Pakistan’s military, which provides assistance to the Taliban to kill Western soldiers.

Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency remains the Taliban’s most important accomplice. Pakistan has an abiding interest in preventing their destruction and elimination. First, this gives Islamabad strategic depth with respect to locating training camps for India-specific insurgents and terrorists beyond the reach of the Indian military, even if the latter had permission to launch cross-border hot pursuit, punitive and reprisal raids. Second, it avoids the security nightmare of a two-front hostile neighborhood and the possibility of a pincer movement in which Pakistan could be entrapped. And third, if the threat of Pakistan-based militancy evaporated and Afghanistan were stabilized, Pakistan’s usefulness to Washington would fade, and the aid and possible lever of US pressure on India over the issue of Kashmir would disappear.

Even by the standards of a rocky relationship, 2011 was an annus horribilis for Pakistan-US ties. Unquestionably, the worst incident came on May 2, when US Navy SEALs attacked and killed Osama bin Laden in a secret hideout in Abbottabad, close to Pakistan’s major military academy just north of Islamabad. In early 2012, Western media reported that a secret NATO dossier had concluded that Pakistan’s security services were directly assisting the Taliban in Afghanistan. 4 US drone strikes have killed up to 3,000 people in northwestern Pakistan and fuelled popular anti-American rage.

Pakistan points to the fact that it has deployed 140,000 soldiers in the fight against the militants in North and South Waziristan and lost more than 3,000 killed in action there — higher figures than the corresponding ones for NATO in Afghanistan. Polls confirm that most Pakistanis view the US, not al-Qaida or India, as their mortal enemy. The security forces were more indignant in looking for who helped the Americans locate Bin Laden than who helped to hide him for a decade. A Pakistan-US divorce is more likely than reconciliation, because their interests diverge irreconcilably over Afghanistan’s future government. The disposition of Afghanistan’s future government matters more to Pakistan than to the US, to the point where Islamabad would rather risk rupture in relations with Washington than cease efforts to install a friendly government in Kabul. While the US, NATO and India have invested heavily in a constitutional regime that will secure Afghanistan against Taliban extremism, Pakistan wants and will act to install a government that is friendlier to it than to anyone else. Pakistan fears that with a substantial presence in Afghanistan, India would not be able to resist the temptation to dismember Pakistan yet again by supporting and arming an insurgency in Baluchistan.

**THE ROLE OF PAKISTAN**

Under the new great game, Pakistan initially benefited from the disintegration of the Taliban regime and the bilateral conflict between the US and the Taliban. But neither side’s heart was in the relationship, and the Thal approach to Afghanistan was more a “hounds-and-hares” strategy than a genuine partnership. Pakistan’s attempts to destabilize the new government in Kabul ultimately failed, as US and NATO forces committed to the fight against the Taliban as well as the Afghan government’s security forces were more industrious in looking for foreign networks and significantly disrupted their flow of money, arms and fighters. Pakistan’s role became more of a strategic and geopolitical play, especially considering its geographic location as a gateway to Central Asia and the Middle East. The country’s security services and national reconciliation efforts returned to Afghanistan with a vengeance, and those with a deep appreciation of local realities would have known that the battle for Afghanistan would be won or lost ultimately in Pakistan, which has more — and more proximate and critical — historical, ethnic and geopolitical interests in Afghanistan than India. These translate into the conclusion that no peace in Afghanistan is likely to be stable and durable unless Pakistan has a seat at the table during the negotiations that produce the peace agreement. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Kabul in 2001, many of the most prominent anti-Karzai government leaders — Mullah Omar, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Jalaluddin Haqqani — are believed to have established residence in the border regions.

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There is a natural marriage of convenience between US hard power and Indian soft power in Afghanistan. The markets of Kabul are generously stocked with Indian music and movies. Karzai studied in India and speaks Hindi. Injured senior Afghan military officers are often flown to India for treatment. Just about every public opinion poll has shown India to be immensely popular and Pakistan to be deeply unpopular among Afghans.

Karzai studied in India and speaks Hindi. Injured senior Afghan military officers are often flown to India for treatment. Just about every public opinion poll has shown India to be immensely popular and Pakistan to be deeply unpopular among Afghans. In the words of BBC analyst Andrew North, in the streets and bazaars of Kabul, “While you never hear a good word about Pakistan, you rarely hear a bad one about India.”

India has provided more than $2 billion in aid for civilian projects, built Afghanistan’s new parliament and operates the biggest children’s hospital in Kabul. It was emphatic in welcoming the overthrow of the Taliban government in 2001 and has been just as emphatic in warning against too hasty a withdrawal of Western forces. Pakistan has proven problematic and unreli- able for the West. US interests converge on just a few issues with those of China and Russia. By contrast, Afghanistan features regularly in the struc- tured security and political dialogues between India and the US, covering the sharing of sensitive intelligence, homeland security and combined defence exercises. They co-operate also in capacity-building, agriculture, energy and women’s empowerment in Afghanistan. The adminis- tration of US President Barack Obama has turned around from treating India as part of the problem to an essential prop of the solution in Afghanistan. To this end, the first trilateral meeting of senior US, Indian and Afghan officials was held in Wash- ington in late September 2012.

The combination of US military aid and Indian cultural and political influence should be useful for shaping Afghanistan’s future for the better, without guaranteeing any such outcome. Thus in June 2012, the Confederation of Indian Industry, in collaboration with the governments of Afghan- land and India, hosted the Delhi Investment Sum- mit on Afghanistan to showcase the country’s potential and attract foreign investment.

The famous Buddha statues in Bamiyan that were destroyed in an act of wilful cultural vandalism, stand in silent rebuke to a world that allowed this to happen. There is abundant evidence that the Taliban imposed no restrictions on the travel of Afghans, and even promoted tourism. In 1997, the year before the American invasion, an estimated 2 million Afghans traveled abroad, mostly to Pakistan, Iran and Turkey. By contrast, tourists are scarce today and the Taliban regime, in part a creation of the US and Saudi-backed mullahs against the Soviet-installed regime, had nurtured jihadists as a potent weapon against all infidels. Even after the overthrow of the Taliban regime by Western forces, terrorists have frequently attacked Indian targets in Afghanistan.

As on a giant chessboard, the pieces of the great game are being rearranged. Karzai signed a number of high-profile agreements with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi on Oct. 4, 2011 that will see India bolster its soft-power con- tributions with hard-power activity. Along with educational, energy and development assistance, India will help to train Afghanistan’s security forces. The number of Afghan officers attending Indian military colleges is already more than 100. Karzai has been careful to stress that while India is “a great friend,” Pakistan is “a twin brother.”

Recognizing the dangers of the declining US military footprint to its own strategic interests and no longer content to rely on Pakistan to secure and stabilize Afghanistan, China also signed agreements with Afghanistan in Septem- ber to train, fund and equip the Afghan security forces. Similarly, in August India took advan- tage of the Non-aligned Movement summit in Tehran to hold trilateral discussions with Iran and Afghanistan on the development of transport cor- ridors to reduce Kabul’s reliance on Pakistan for access to the sea.

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