After "AfPak," What Next?

BY CHARLOTTE KENNEDY

One of the most critical yet overlooked tasks involved in the 2014 withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan is shifting the U.S. conceptual and strategic thinking towards South Asia. Since 2009, Washington has come to view its relationship with Pakistan primarily through an "Afghanistan-Pakistan" or ‘AfPak’ lens. Post Afghanistan, this term and regional strategy will likely be discarded. The question then remains: How will the U.S. redefine its relationship with Pakistan in a post AfPak world?

In 2009, President Obama first introduced ‘AfPak’ as a way of emphasizing the U.S. regional approach to the conflict in Afghanistan and recognizing Pakistan's key role in countering the al-Qaeda threat. Despite calls by policymakers over the years to alter the language and approach (some, including Pakistan analyst Daniel Markey, even suggested that Pakistan should be the focus in what he termed a PakAf strategy), remnants of the old and largely unsuccessful framework have remained in place.

But the 2014 drawdown will mean finally de-coupling these two countries, not just in policymakers' lexicon, but also in their strategic thinking. Already think tanks, Twitter hash-tags, and blogs are moving towards a new framework by changing the names of departments and collapsing vast AfPak empires back under more humble and seemingly less ambitious ‘South Asia' titles.

Of course, the hyphenated relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan has never been popular, particularly amongst Islamabad's sophisticated Punjabi policy elites who viewed it as Washington's attempt to paint them all as backward tribal Pashtun militants. At the time, however, it made sense and Pakistan profited from the new nomenclature. It also provided a strategic rationale for bundling up large cash transfers to Islamabad to help the government flush out militants from the tribal belt (a policy
that has yet to reap any tangible rewards).

But beyond mere semantics, tying the fates of Afghanistan and Pakistan together meant too often that the international community was prioritizing Afghanistan over its larger and arguably more fragile nuclear neighbor. It also meant the broad spectrum of political and diplomatic relations with Pakistan was often reduced in the eyes of some Washington policymakers to one simple counterterrorism objective. This served only to exacerbate the vast number of irritants within the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. More importantly, it also led to a de-hyphenation of Pakistan from India, which in turn led to an incoherent policy towards South Asia overall.

So the change in language should please Islamabad, which has long been pushing Washington to recognize it as more than a mere appendage to Afghanistan. But Pakistan should be careful what it wishes for. While international forces have been waging war in Afghanistan, India has had an economic boom and the U.S. relationship with the South Asian powerhouse has broadened and deepened significantly. If policymakers now revert back to a South Asia paradigm, without the AfPak status, Islamabad may find itself having to compete for scarce diplomatic attention and resources against its long-time rival.

If there is one thing that Islamabad hates more than falling back into diplomatic irrelevance, it is being neglected at India's gain. If this recalibration of the U.S. relationship with the region is not handled tactfully, it could inadvertently ratchet up diplomatic competition between the two states, causing the emergence of an India/Pakistan nuclear doomsday paradigm once again.

Instead of thinking about two separate and only vaguely related regions of AfPak and India, policymakers need to recast India and Pakistan's relationship as a potential anchor of regional stability and make that the central focus -- not Afghanistan. As Stephen Cohen, a Senior Fellow at Brookings points out, "India is a friend but not an
ally, while Pakistan is our ally but not our friend." In balancing the two complicated relationships, Washington needs to play a more constructive role encouraging economic and trade integration between India and Pakistan as a means of normalizing this relationship.

A stronger Pakistan-India economic focus should be accompanied by a revised counterterrorism strategy to assist Islamabad in stabilizing its own internal conflict. And as the U.S. goes through this transition, it needs to remain wary that a deserted Afghanistan does not become a new proxy battleground between the two nuclear powers but also that Delhi is not able to leverage policymakers over Islamabad and vice versa.

All in all, the drawdown from Afghanistan and removing the AfPak designation should not mean the U.S. simply walks away from Pakistan or the region altogether. There are dangers in this transition, but also opportunities to strike a new diplomatic contract with Islamabad and recast South Asia in a new light. Policymakers just need to be creative, cautious, and regionally-minded in how to get there.

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