OPINION | WAR

Can the U.S. End Pakistan's Double Game?

A Q&A with Pulitzer Prize-winning author Steve Coll on America's forever war against the Taliban.

By **Nisid Hajari**

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U.S. commanders say they're turning the tide, again. *Photographer: Wakil Kohsar/AFP/Getty Images*

Steve Coll's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Ghost Wars" laid out in gut-wrenching detail the chain of events that led from one modern war in Afghanistan --

against the Soviets -- to the Sept. 11 attacks and the brink of another conflict. When the book came out in 2004, the U.S.-led war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda seemed on the wane, at least compared to the then-raging insurgency in Iraq. Soon, however, with the aid of their longtime sponsors in Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, the Taliban would reconstitute their movement and seize control over great swathes of the Afghan countryside, dueling the U.S. and the Afghan Army to a stalemate. If current trends hold, the U.S. will in the not-too-distant future be sending soldiers to the "graveyard of empires" that hadn't even been born on 9/11.

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Coll's new book, "Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan," tells the story of this new war in equally magisterial fashion. The narrative is punctuated by folly, frustration and hubris, with the U.S. striving unsuccessfully to convince the Pakistanis to abandon support for their Islamist proxies -- tools, generals in Rawalpindi believe, to counter Indian influence in Afghanistan -- and to defeat the Taliban on the battlefield. It comes out just as a series of horrific attacks <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/28/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-kabul-attacks.html> in Kabul have reminded the world how ineradicable the Afghan insurgency remains. I spoke with Coll about where he thinks America's longest war is headed and how it might, finally, end. The following is an edited and condensed version of our conversation:

NISID HAJARI: Now that the Trump Administration has released its "new strategy <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/asia/afghanistan-troops-trump.html> " for Afghanistan, including an increase in the number of airstrikes, you're starting to hear U.S. commanders talk again about gaining momentum and reaching a "turning point" in the war. After retracing the first 15 years of this conflict, what do you think when you hear such comments?

STEVE COLL: Well, the history is dispiriting when you excavate it because it's so repetitive. And some of the reason is what you suggest, that new commanders come in, they don't stay for longer than two years in high military command, sometimes shorter. Not to be too cynical about it, but their career depends on a narrative of achievement. I remember Eliot Cohen, who was a counselor to [then-Secretary of State] Condoleezza Rice

during the Bush Administration, recounting how he discovered that the six-month command rotations had a common pattern: A new commander would come in and say, “This looks like it's going to be very, very difficult.” And then, six months later, he’d say, “We've irreversibly changed the momentum of the war.” As a writer, it was a narrative challenge, because at a certain point I would think, "Haven't I already told this story?"

NH: Do you see anything materially different in the Trump administration’s strategy compared to those that have been tried in the past?

SC: Well, yes and no. Yes, the administration has been more explicit about challenging Pakistan, and the decision <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/04/us/politics/trump-pakistan-aid.html> to withhold [military] aid conditionally is a significant departure. Unfortunately, I don’t see the case that it's going to be decisive in changing Pakistani conduct because the amount of aid, while significant as a top-line dollar figure, is not significant from the perspective of Pakistan's political economy, especially because they have this deep, deep relationship with China.

Also, the problem is not just that American influence has diminished but that the Trump Administration has taken up the same line, in only a slightly varied form, of the Bush and the Obama administrations, which is, “Yes, we understand that there is no military solution to this war.” And yet what they resource, what they prioritize is military action without any predominant or even parallel political strategy. Trying really to get the Chinese to put pressure on Pakistan, having a clear idea of what you're asking Pakistan to change about its conduct -- I don't see any of that happening.

NH: I was in Lahore recently, and among middle- and upper-class Pakistanis, there seem to be two narratives: One is that Pakistan no longer needs the U.S. because of China, and the other is that, in fact, Pakistan is quite vulnerable economically and may need to return soon <https://www.dawn.com/news/1355654> to the International Monetary Fund, and that Chinese support isn’t unconditional. Which narrative do you favor?

SC: I think the assessment that Pakistan is vulnerable to IMF pressure and that China is ambivalent about Pakistan's dysfunction and accommodation of militants is correct. That, at least theoretically, is an opportunity, although when really pressed to choose sides, the Chinese have been

reluctant to do so -- not necessarily because they think that Pakistan should be defended against all critics, but because the U.S.-Chinese relationship has so many other priorities and friction points.

Pakistan, I think, would actually prefer to have a balanced relationship with China and the United States. In the current international environment, where there is a lot of uncertainty about America's role in the world, I think making a bet on China seems likely to be an easier decision [laughs] than it did 10 or 15 years ago. But, if you're a small country like Pakistan is, and you've got great powers in your orbit, the natural strategy is to have access to both, to keep both in balance and try to use that equilibrium as a space to grow.

NH: What would it take to enlist Chinese help in changing Pakistani behavior?

SC: During the Obama administration, I participated in these Track 1.5 meetings with Chinese specialists on Afghanistan and Pakistan. You'd meet with these people that had been engaged in the region for a long time and try to have these conversations about exactly the question you asked. And I took away a couple of observations. One was that the specialists in China who thought about Pakistan and Afghanistan just weren't influential enough to be heard over issues like South China Sea, future of North Korea, future of U.S.-China trade, great power balancing. We were on the C-list in U.S.-China relations.

And then secondly, when you did get around to Pakistan, they did have an interest in suppressing transnational Islamist movements that could inflame populations in western China. Definitely concerned about that. Definitely not opposed to U.S. counterterrorism efforts against transnational militant groups. But, their main interest was Pakistani stability and prosperity. And I remember one meeting where one of our Chinese counterparts said, "We used to track your strategy because we couldn't figure out how to improve Pakistan. We noted that you switched from a centralized approach to a more of a province-by-province approach. Then we decided to switch from a centralized approach to a more province-by-province approach. And at the end of a couple of years we concluded that neither you nor we were succeeding." [laughs]

NH: The unofficial Pakistani defense for supporting the Taliban has always

been that India is the one destabilizing the situation, by seeking to dominate the Afghan government and thus encircle Pakistan. Do such claims have any merit?

SC: Well, it's a complicated picture. Let's start with the hardcore Pakistani allegations -- for example that NDS [the National Directorate of Security, the Afghan intelligence agency] is an Indian project, or that the disposition of Indian consulates and the activities of Indian citizens in Afghanistan are really just a massive cover for destabilization operations inside Pakistan. That's exaggerated if not entirely fanciful in my assessment. I mean, the NDS is a CIA operation. It has Iranian connections. It has Russian connections. It has a few Indian liaisons. But the idea that NDS is a proxy for RAW [India's Research and Analysis Wing espionage service] is just incorrect.

You know, the Indians have been very careful about the kinds of things they do in Afghanistan -- building hospitals, roads, a little bit of military training. From time to time they get a little bolder. Does India sponsor or run sometimes in cooperation with Afghan clients, covert action against Pakistan? Yes, they do. They clearly have their fingerprints in Baluchistan [the site of a long-running separatist insurgency]. When the war got really nasty and there was NDS collaboration with elements of the Pakistani Taliban, as a tit-for-tat response to Pakistani collaboration with the Afghan Taliban, was India aware of that? Did it perhaps support it at some level? Maybe. But NDS was in this game for its own reasons.

India asserts, and I think any reasonable person would recognize, that it has a right to provide aid to support Afghanistan's recovery. Does it take satisfaction that this annoys Pakistan? Yes. Is it the most important priority in Indian foreign policy? Not at all.

NH: Pakistan's support for the Taliban, and the sanctuary it provides Taliban leaders, is obviously critical to prolonging the war. But there's an endless list of other contributing factors as well, from government dysfunction in Kabul to corruption to the drug economy. How would you rank them in terms of their importance to ending the conflict?

SC: I think the most important one, and it may be as important as the Pakistani sanctuary and ISI support, is the political crisis in Afghanistan among the elites. It's kind of a paradox because Afghan nationalism is very

strong and has been strengthened by the experience of Pakistani interference. I mean, the main thing that ISI has accomplished in Afghanistan, apart from seizing some territory through the Taliban, is to rally Afghans around a national idea greater than ethnic identity.

But having said that, ethnic factionalism and the failure to create a unity government after the 2014 elections has left Afghanistan in a grave position. And the other thing that's new is social media, which has really modernized the country and plugged in a new generation, but also exacerbated factionalism and ethnic polarization. It's really a virus.

NH: Really? You see something similar in Myanmar and other developing nations, of course, with Facebook and WhatsApp and other platforms being used to spread hate speech and vicious rumors about targeted communities.

SC: Yeah, yeah, it's really rough. I happened to visit Afghanistan in September 2016 to report the epilogue for the book. I was in Kabul, and there was a violent dispute in the city between Uzbeks and Tajiks over the reburial of a forgotten Afghan king. I was sitting with some Panjshiri friends [ethnic Tajiks from the Panjshir Valley], and they were all on their phones, all day long, rallying [their followers] over this incident. And when I asked them about the role of social media in ethnic polarization, they were very clear that this is where people speak, it's where they mobilize and there's a lot of hate speech in those spaces.

NH: You mentioned earlier that you see no signs of a political or diplomatic push to try and end the war. What might one look like?

SC: The most interesting aspect of the negotiations that took place during the Obama years was the question, "What do the Taliban really want?" I think part of what [Taliban negotiators] were saying then was, "We learned from our last experience in power that we need to find legitimacy in the international system. We need a more capable government. We need a transition period. We are prepared to share power. We need a broader ethnic balance in Afghanistan; we can't just be the Pashtun radical movement. We see that there are lots of different ways that Islamist movements like ours participate in politics, as in Egypt after the Arab Spring." And, you know, you could dismiss that as the musings of a negotiator. But it's evidence that the Taliban are a more internationally sophisticated, more internationally

aware movement than they were in the days of obscurantist policies and isolation in Kandahar.

If this war doesn't end with a victory ceremony, then the question is, how can the shared interests of the United States, China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and India in an Afghanistan that is not engulfed in chaos, that is not a font of transnational violence -- how can that be realized, even incrementally, even if it just involves reductions of violence rather than a full-blown peace treaty? As long as nobody attempts that kind of diplomacy, there's really no reason to think that the structure of violence that we see in Afghanistan now is going to change. And that just feels grotesque.

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