

How an Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group Could Help



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SEPTEMBER 2011

In June 2011, the House Appropriations Committee unanimously approved an amendment introduced by U.S. Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA) that would provide \$1 million for the establishment of an independent Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group. The blue-ribbon panel's charge would be to assess U.S. policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan and offer recommendations within 120 days.

Could an Afghanistan-Pakistan Commission actually accomplish anything? Although the popular perception is that commission reports achieve little beyond giving publicity to the graybeards that serve on them, my research on over 50 blue-ribbon panels shows that under the right circumstances they can catalyze important policy changes.

At first blush, an Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group might seem pointless, since President Obama has already decided to implement a gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. But beyond the withdrawal of our surge forces much of our policy remains uncertain or undecided.

In particular, it remains unclear how large of a troop presence we will maintain in Afghanistan beyond 2012, how we will seek a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan and deal with the Taliban if they gain ground as we pull out, and, as relations with Pakistan remain tumultuous in the wake of the Bin Laden assassination, how the U.S. will craft a comprehensive, stable policy toward Islamabad that best serves national interests over the long term.

Given these uncertainties, a blue-ribbon commission could be quite valuable in proposing a sensible strategy for protecting U.S. security as many of our troops pull out from Afghanistan. The study group's bipartisan credibility could allow it to carve out political space for a whole-of-government approach to this regional challenge, one that combines diplomatic, development, intelligence, and military efforts.

The study group's impact would also depend, however, on events on the ground. If the start of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan goes relatively smoothly and U.S. policy toward South Asia is not a front-burner issue in the 2012 presidential campaign, the commission might have difficulty generating interest in its proposals. But if conditions in Afghanistan and Pakistan deteriorate and the threat to America from that region appears to grow, the commission's proposals could frame the American debate on South Asia during the election campaign and shape important changes in U.S. policy.

The Impressive Track Record of Commissions

Since 9/11, the United States has carried out two major overhauls of its national security institutions: the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the establishment of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). Remarkably, each of these overhauls was inspired by a blue-ribbon commission—the Hart-Rudman Commission in the case of DHS, and the 9/11 Commission in the case of the ODNI. While the implementation of these reforms has been far from perfect, the basic idea that launched these and other innovative, bold national security policy policies have sprung from similar commissions.

These commissions, moreover, are not anomalies. In the wake of nearly every terrorist attack that has claimed American lives over the past 30 years, blue-ribbon panels have provided the guide for important counterterrorism reforms, on issues ranging from embassy security standards, to aviation security regulations, to military force protection policies.

The key to the success of commissions is their distinct form of political credibility, which derives from their independence, stature, and bipartisanship. Commissions typically are comprised of a mix of Republicans and Democrats, yet since they are relatively insulated from direct political pressures, they usually manage to issue unanimous reports. When they do so, they send a powerful signal that their proposals can be supported by people across the political spectrum.

Commissions are especially valuable during moments of crisis. In the wake of a disaster or in the middle of a contentious war effort, policymakers often face pressure or wish to make changes, but they frequently cannot agree on what to do. This political climate creates a window of opportunity for a commission to issue proposals that become the focal point for the policy debate. It is in such an environment that a commission on Afghanistan and Pakistan could have substantial influence next year.

The Keys to Success for an Afghanistan-Pakistan Commission

If an Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group is established—a big “if” since legislation to form it has not been introduced in the Senate and the Obama administration has not endorsed the idea—it could help frame the debate over our South Asia policy during the upcoming presidential election and even generate a modicum of bipartisan consensus on our approach to the region.

Interestingly, there is an important precedent for this type of commission. When violence in Iraq was at its peak in 2006, Representative Wolf—the same legislator behind the Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group—drove the creation of the Iraq Study Group, which was led by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton (D-IN). The Iraq Study Group’s unanimous December 2006 report called for a shift in the principal U.S. military mission in Iraq from combat to training and counterterrorism, a gradual withdrawal of U.S. combat troops over a period of 16 months, and aggressive regional diplomacy with all of Iraq’s neighbors. Although President Bush chose to double-down on the war effort by pursuing a surge instead, the study group’s proposals enjoyed very strong public support and became the blueprint for Barack Obama’s own Iraq plan as he began his presidential campaign in early 2007. This is the same plan that Obama has implemented as president.

In a similar way, an Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group could develop a plan with bipartisan credibility for protecting core U.S. interests in South Asia as the American footprint in Afghanistan gradually recedes. From a political standpoint, part of the value of such a plan could be in providing cover for elected officials to support a relatively moderate approach that lies somewhere in between the growing calls on the left and right for a rapid and complete troop pullout and the calls from some hawks for maintaining a large military presence in Afghanistan indefinitely. But if the study group is created, there are several keys to its potential success.

First, the study group should be composed primarily of widely respected moderates who are likely to engage in real deliberation and seek common ground, rather than approach the commission’s work as a political battleground. This is critical because commissions only tend to have a large impact when they issue unanimous reports.

Rep. Wolf’s measure is smartly drafted in a way that facilitates the prospects for commission consensus. The measure calls for \$1 million to be appropriated to the Defense Department for the purpose of commissioning the study via a nonprofit organization with expertise in military affairs. Since such an organization would want the study group to have a large impact, it would probably appoint to the commission distinguished

moderates, making it likely that the commission would achieve consensus and garner substantial publicity.

Alternatively, since Rep. Wolf's measure might not pass both houses of Congress, the Obama administration could establish the commission using the executive branch's own authority to form independent advisory groups. A commission created by President Obama would also probably be comprised of moderates and have good prospects for reaching consensus. This executive branch authorization would also enable the commission to be established more quickly than is possible via the slow legislative process, and would give the president a greater stake in the commission's outcome.

Second, relatively few of the commissioners should already be experts on Afghanistan or Pakistan. That might sound strange, but the downside of having expert commissioners is that they often have already staked out a firm public position on the issue or think they already know what should be done. By contrast, the Iraq Study Group's membership included former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and Democratic power broker Vernon Jordan—both of whom possessed little foreign policy experience. They approached the issue with open minds and excelled at the art of "getting to yes", which can be even more valuable on a commission than pre-existing expertise. (It is essential, however, for a commission to have expert staff, and at least some of the commissioners should have a strong general foreign policy background).

Third, the study group should only look forward, and should aim to formulate a coherent strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan that includes specific and actionable proposals. Some might be tempted to use this commission to debate whether the Afghanistan war has been worth fighting, but such a debate is only likely to be divisive. At its first meeting, the study group should decide that it will not directly assess the merits of U.S. policy to date and will focus only on what America should do now.

The starting point for the study group's proposals must be an identification of core U.S. interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan and an assessment of the most important threats to those interests. Based on that assessment, the study group must explain how America can most effectively and at an acceptable cost protect its core interests in the region. The study group's impact will be greatest if it goes beyond a general statement of strategy to offer specific recommendations on issues such as troop levels and drawdown dates, the training of Afghan security forces, the use of drones and spies in Pakistan, development programs in both countries, and diplomacy in the region. Specificity on such issues will make it easier for policymakers to translate the commission's ideas into concrete legislation or executive branch action.

Fourth, the study group's impact will depend heavily on conditions in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the nature of the debate here at home next year. If the Afghanistan withdrawal goes relatively well, Al Qaeda remains on the defensive in Pakistan, and the Republican nominee for president advocates a policy that is not too different from President Obama's, it will probably be hard for the commission to generate much public interest in its ideas. But recent attacks on President Obama's foreign policy by the leading Republican presidential candidates suggest that the Republican nominee is likely to advocate a different approach to the region than Obama's—one that places greater emphasis on the use of military power. The commission is therefore likely to have the opportunity to provide a valuable voice of moderation, making the case that U.S. interests are best served by a strategy that smartly employs all instruments of national power, at an acceptable cost to the American taxpayer.

Moreover, if the threat to America from this region appears to grow more dangerous over the next 12 months—for instance, if the Taliban gains ground in Afghanistan, the Pakistani government becomes more unstable, or Al Qaeda launches a successful terrorist attack from Pakistan—a new sense of crisis could generate great public interest in a sensible South Asia plan with bipartisan credibility.

Conclusion

It is hardly guaranteed that an Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group would catalyze a major policy shift. Given the killing of Osama bin Laden and the start of our Afghanistan withdrawal, there might be limited interest in a new approach to the region when the study group reports.

Still, key elements of U.S. policy toward South Asia remain uncertain or contested, and the Obama administration could benefit from using a commission—at little cost to the taxpayer—as a helpful tool for formulating a long-term policy in the region. Moreover, the commission's payoff could be great if conditions in Afghanistan or Pakistan worsened during the coming year, calling into question our current approach. In such a circumstance, and if the study group managed to reach consensus, it could chart a new strategy that gains strong public support and backing from influential Republicans and Democrats.

More broadly, rather than disparaging blue-ribbon commissions, we should recognize their growing value as one of the only tools available to counter the extreme partisanship and polarization that often cripple policy making today. Certainly our expectations for commissions should remain relatively modest: they cannot solve all of our problems or replace the regular institutions of our democracy. But particularly in moments of crisis, such as a difficult war, commissions can play a critical role in generating proposals that gain bipartisan support, and in inspiring important policy changes.

It would be nice if we did not need blue-ribbon commissions because our elected officials routinely engaged in meaningful deliberation and achieved reasonable compromises. But in a world where Republicans and Democrats often seem to be headed in opposite directions, commissions can help prevent them from growing too far apart—and, sometimes, can even propel them back together. Since American foreign policy is stronger when it has bipartisan backing, commissions can thereby help us achieve our goals more readily both in war and in times of peace.

About the Author

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