

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
House Committee on Foreign Affairs

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Testimony of Ralph Peters, military analyst and author

“PAKISTAN AS A FAILING EMPIRE”

Introductory remarks: This testimony arises from three premises.

First, we cannot analyze global events through reassuring ideological lenses, be they left or right, or we will continue to be mistaken, surprised and bewildered by foreign developments. The rest of the world will neither conform to our prejudices nor behave for our convenience.

Second, focusing obsessively on short-term problems blinds us to the root causes and frequent intractability of today's conflicts. Because we do not know history, we wave history away. Yet, the only way to understand the new world disorder is to place current developments in the context of generations and even centuries. Otherwise, we will continue to blunder through situations in which we deploy to Afghanistan to end Taliban rule, only to find ourselves, a decade later, impatient to negotiate the Taliban's return to power.

Third, we must not be afraid to “color outside of the lines.” When it comes to foreign affairs, Washington's political spectrum is monochromatic: timid, conformist and wrong with breathtaking consistency. We have a Department of State that refuses to think beyond borders codified at Versailles nine decades ago; a Department of Defense that, faced with messianic and ethnic insurgencies, concocted its doctrine from irrelevant case studies of yesteryear's Marxist guerrillas; and a think-tank community almost Stalinist in its rigid allegiance to twentieth-century models of how the world should work.

If we do not think innovatively, we will continue to fail ignobly.

Pakistan's Empire and Baluchistan's Freedom Struggle

Pakistan is not an integrated state, but a miniature empire that inherited its dysfunctional and unjust boundaries from Britain's greater, now-defunct empire. Pakistan consists of two parts: the core Pakistan constituted by the comparatively rich and powerful provinces of Punjab and Sindh, and the territories, primarily west of the Indus River, treated as colonial possessions by the Punjabis and Sindhis. Once an observer grasps this elementary fact, Pakistan's internal problems and our own difficulties with Islamabad come into focus.

We must set aside our lazy Cold-War-era assumption that Pakistan is a necessary ally and recognize that the various insurgent movements challenging the Islamabad government are engaged in liberation struggles against an occupier. Whether Baluchi separatists or the Pakistani Taliban, these fighters (some of them certainly distasteful to our social values) are not an isolated phenomenon—as we would prefer to believe—but simply more players in the long struggle for the devolution of power that began with the collapse of European empires. Their version of freedom may not match our criteria, but they are, nonetheless, freedom fighters on their own terms and for their own people.

Pakistan's borders make no sense and don't work. The Durand Line, delineating the state's border with Afghanistan, was just a convenient inheritance from British India: Originally, it established how far the British believed they needed to push out a buffer zone west of the Indus River to protect "the Jewel in the Crown," British India, from tribal warfare and imperial Russian machinations. The Durand Line marked a *military* frontier, but the "real" frontier of British India and its rich civilization was the Indus.

Anyone who travels to Pakistan and drives across the Indus in either direction recognizes that the river remains what it has been since the age of Alexander: the divide between civilizations. To the east, in populous Punjab and Sindh, you encounter the complex cultures of the Subcontinent: Even the food is dramatically different. To the west, you find tribal societies whose characteristics, cultural and physical, are those of Central Asia. To the east, relative sophistication; to the west, tribal norms. From Gwadar northward through Quetta, Peshawar and on to Gilgit, the visitor stands on occupied territory.

The Durand Line arbitrarily divided tribal territories for British (and now Pakistani) convenience. It would be hard to devise a more dysfunctional international border. Along with the rupture of minor ethnic groups, it split the substantial Pashtun and Baluchi populations between the artificial constructs that emerged as Pakistan and Afghanistan. Also for convenience, the rest of the world agreed to pretend that these are viable states. Yet, Afghanistan is little more than a rough territorial concept: Its historical rulers controlled, at best, major cities and the caravan (now highway) routes between them. At its birth sixty-five years ago, Pakistan was a Frankenstein's monster of a state, cobbled together from ill-fitting body parts to award the subcontinent's Muslim activists a state of their own.

Today's ethnic-based and religion-fueled insurgencies are inevitable protests against borders that never worked and cultures that don't match. Even Afghanistan's western border is a manifestation not of sound geopolitical logic, but of Iran's weakness at the time the border was determined. Afghanistan will *never* become a modern, integrated state; Pakistan will never be a prosperous and peaceful one; and Iran will never be a contented one.

When we support the Islamabad government, we not only support an enemy who sponsors and protects the terrorists who kill and maim our soldiers in Afghanistan; who hid our most-wanted terrorist in a garrison town; and who extorts blood-money to keep our ill-conceived supply routes open; but we also support a brutal oppressor and occupier that denies fundamental rights, legitimate opportunities and even identity to millions of its own citizens.

Failing to distinguish adequately between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, we cannot conceive of the Pashtuns as engaged in a freedom struggle: Their social values and religious fanaticism are abhorrent to us. Yet, objectively viewed, they are fighting—with broad popular support among their own kind—for independence and their reactionary, tribal version of

freedom. If we remove our emotions and prejudices from the equation, can we justify denying forty million Pashtuns in Pakistan and Afghanistan their own state? Of course, determining the final boundaries of such a state would be problematic, but why shouldn't the Pashtuns have their own country? Because long-dead Britons drew a line on a map?

The same logic applies with even greater force to the Baluchis, who are not our enemies. We remain blinded by our ill-starred Cold-War alliance with Islamabad—a regime that always behaved treacherously toward us (our current relationship with Pakistan bears an uncanny resemblance to our country's relations with the Barbary Pirates before President Jefferson put an end to tribute money). Thus we miss the fundamental injustice of the Pakistani construct. We avert our eyes from the arrests and murders of Baluchi activists because we're unwilling to face the truth about Islamabad's nature—and our complicity in oppression.

At present, the Baluchis are divided between southwestern Pakistan, southern Afghanistan and southeastern Iran—all because of those artificial borders that were convenient for someone else. At least ten million and perhaps twice that number suffer intolerable levels of discrimination, dispossession and state violence.

While going to Afghanistan to shatter al Qaeda and punish the Taliban for hosting Osama bin Laden was necessary, remaining in force to persuade Afghans to remake themselves in our image was folly. With the best intentions, we thrust ourselves into a generations-long civil war that will, eventually, redraw the region's boundaries. In fact, our allegiance to today's boundaries exacerbates the conflict, worsening the lot of our former allies, the Northern Alliance, and marginalizing the Baluchis in the south, while enabling the Taliban to exploit those borders against us (with Pakistan's help).

Afghanistan's borders don't work, and Pakistan's borders don't work. It's not our job to alter them, but it's a fool's errand to defend them. We have stranded 100,000 American troops at the end of vulnerable supply lines through hostile or unreliable states in order to defend borders left behind by defunct European empires. This is a travesty of the first order. And instead of recognizing that peoples throughout the conflict zone, from Baluchis, through Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, to Kashmiri separatists are fighting for their identities and independence in multi-sided conflicts, we reduce the formula to us-against-them. But this conflict is not about us. We're military tourists passing through, unwilling to recognize the nature of the fight into which we have thrust ourselves.

We're on the wrong side of history in AfPak, defending the legacy of imperial ghosts. And we're going to lose. It's not our job to change these borders ourselves, but it's only common sense to get out of the way. We support the Karzai government from a lack of strategic imagination, bureaucratic inertia and military vanity. And our support for Pakistan is not only un-American, but facilitates the ongoing murder and mutilation of our troops.

Killing terrorists across the border in Pakistan is the sole useful aspect of our presence in Afghanistan. It doesn't take 100,000 troops.

The Pakistani Military's Obsession with Afghanistan

Pakistani strategic thought is frozen in the mid-twentieth century. The Pakistani military's world-view was shaped primarily by two events. First, the relatively junior officers who became Pakistan's colonels and generals at Independence had witnessed how the British were able to exploit strategic depth when the Japanese sought to invade India; despite the impressive initial victories of the Japanese and their superior fighting qualities early in the war, extended supply lines exhausted them and left them vulnerable to counteroffensives that finally destroyed their armies. Thus, the Pakistani military has been obsessed since its creation with strategic depth for a war with India. Their thinking always missed the fact that the Burma buffer kept the Japanese from the prize, while India would reach the prize immediately--the Afghan buffer and strategic depth are on the wrong side. But strategic depth became the basis of Pakistani strategy and no one dares challenge it. Even the threat of nuclear conflict has failed to alter the Pakistani mindset, with generals still insisting that strategic depth in the Afghan wilds would somehow be useful after the nuclear destruction of Pakistan. (A key lesson here is that strategy—including our own—is more often driven by habit and emotion than logic.) So, today, we have Pakistan's security establishment waging a clandestine war against our presence in Afghanistan, determined to secure Afghanistan for strategic depth in a war with India that Pakistan would lose catastrophically at the outset.

The other key event that shaped the mindset of today's Pakistani generals was the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 (by far the most traumatic for Islamabad of the four wars and numerous lesser confrontations between the two countries since Independence). The war began as Pakistan's military moved to crush the independence movement in East Bengal (today's Bangladesh). The savagery of the Pakistani army toward its own citizens shocked the world and gave India cover for intervening and dismembering Pakistan—a great advantage for New Delhi, since East Bengal had allowed Pakistan to operate against India's eastern as well as western frontier. The Pakistani military's humiliating defeat and the loss of nearly half of the state they inherited from British India left the security establishment determined to crack down hard and early on any signs of separatism.

Unfortunately for Pakistan, the obsession with strategic depth ultimately trumped anti-separatism policies to the extent that Pakistan assisted in the rise of the Taliban and maintains support for it today. Pakistan's generals assumed, naively, that terrorists and insurgents could be managed (we're not the only victims of wishful thinking). But the Afghan Taliban in turn gave birth to the Pakistani Taliban. Now the Pakistani security establishment is riven, intermittently fighting some insurgents, while tolerating or actively supporting others, and unsure how to move forward.

In supporting the Pashtun insurgency in Afghanistan, Pakistan has sown the seeds of its own destruction. While its generals remain skillful at manipulating the United States Government, they have lost control of significant portions of their own country.

Only a gross perversion of *Realpolitik* could justify our acceptance of this military's brutality toward the Baluchis and other minorities. We are in bed with an imperialist, militarist and thoroughly corrupt state that barely makes a pretense of democracy. We *want* to be duped.

AfPak in a Global Context

The problem of dysfunctional borders left behind by the retreat of European empires isn't limited to AfPak. One of our own worst blind spots lies in the conviction of our diplomats that all borders currently on the map have existed since the age of the dinosaurs and must never change. But borders have always changed and will continue to change. Our own age is one of breakdown: first of those European empires, now of the vestigial empires and artificial states that appeared in their wake. Not only in AfPak, but around the world the grim joke is that the United States of America, the greatest force for freedom in history, now defends the legacy of bygone European empires.

Consider this: Every one of our wars and significant military engagements since and including Desert Storm has been triggered or exacerbated by artificial borders left behind by European empires: Iraq has always been a phony state created for British clients, and Saddam Hussein decided that the Ottoman Empire's old borders entitled him to Kuwait; Somalia is a bizarre amalgamation of territories that divides some peoples, while thrusting together others who hate each other (yet, our diplomats refuse to recognize Somaliland as a separate—thriving—state, insisting that it must remain under the mastery of a Mogadishu government that cannot defend itself against Islamist terrorists); Yugoslavia, too, was a mini-empire doomed to collapse, yet Republican and Democratic administrations alike continued to argue that the shrinking state should somehow remain unified; we went to Afghanistan and decided that the will of the locals didn't matter and that we would build a western-style, rule-of-law, unified democracy within European-designated borders; and we deposed Saddam Hussein, but refused to countenance freedom for the Kurds or a judicious break-up of the dysfunctional state, insisting again that those European-drawn borders remain sacrosanct. Now we face a conflict with Iran—the latest, shrunken version of a Persian Empire—while Turkey dreams of re-establishing the Ottoman Empire. Not one of the borders listed in this paragraph worked or works.

Beyond the litany of our recent and pending military involvements, consider just a few of the other crises underway that stem from European-demarcated borders that either thrust together those who do not wish to be together, or divide peoples who seek reunion: Nigeria only maintains its current borders because those boundaries were established by British colonialists; otherwise, Nigeria makes no sense as a state and, by nature, would be two or even three states. Congo does not and cannot possibly work as a unified state, but other European empires awarded it to the King of the Belgians in the 1880s, so we accept it as a sovereign state for all eternity. Today's Syria was created for the French in a bout of Franco-British horse-trading (or land-swapping). Jordan was created as a prize for British Great-War clients. Indonesia—another empire—is just the post-colonial name of the Dutch East Indies, with no other unifying principle than the might of the Javanese. And Russia maintains much, though not all, of the empire of the czars.

The unifying thread—beyond the false borders themselves—is the centrifugal pressures created by peoples determined to rule themselves. When we automatically side with the “imperial” powers against the right of self-determination, we betray our own history and professed values. This certainly does not mean that every secessionist movement is admirable, only that these movements are inevitable in a world so long deformed by European empires.

Nor will these problems soon resolve themselves. Every person in this room will be dead before the legacy of the European imperial era is fully behind us. Apply simple logic: Depending on which part of the globe we examine, European imperial powers forcefully altered local social, governmental, military and economic structures for between one-hundred and five-hundred years. The post-colonial era began in earnest in 1945. Can we really believe that dilemmas that took up to half a millennium to create can be resolved in an American election cycle or two? Nor is this to say that all of Europe's imperial legacies were bad: They were a mixed bag, varying from the monstrous cruelty of the Belgians in Africa, to the unifying legacy of the British in today's India. Rather than arguing over just how bad the colonial powers were, we need to accept their interlude of rule as historical fact and move on from that point.

The best way to explain the varied upheavals we see around the world, from Benghazi to Baluchistan, from Caracas to Kandahar, is to think of human societies as eco-systems or simply physical systems. In the Newtonian order (and ninth-grade physics), when an external agent forces a system out of its natural balance and holds it out of balance, the sudden removal of the external agent causes the affected system to seek to regain its equilibrium. For centuries, the external force of European colonialism forced human societies around the world out of the "organic" balance they had achieved for themselves (although it doesn't do to shed tears for the Aztecs). With the sudden removal of that external force, we've seen the liberated societies strive to find a new functional balance. The process is difficult and fraught with mistakes, and patience is not a salient human characteristic. When the process frustrates the participants sufficiently, they turn to violence. Almost all of the wars and conflicts we see around us, from South Sudan to Dagestan, reflect the challenges of rebalancing social and political ecologies. Artificial borders make it all worse.

And there's more bad news: Globalization, which we were assured would bring us all together, only unified the world's most privileged. For the masses, globalization and its consort, the information revolution, have created a wrenching crisis of identity: Around the world, disappointed human beings have defaulted to the elementary question "Who am I?"

Increasingly, their answer is not the one academic theories predicted. Instead of answering, "I am a Pakistani" or "Afghan" or "Nigerian" or "a citizen of the world," their answer is "I am a Baluch" or "Pashtun" or "Hausa," or, even more fundamentally, "I am a Muslim" or "Christian" or "Jew." In times of stress and dislocation, primary identities reassert themselves—and no identities are more powerful or persistent than those of faith and ethnicity. Kabul intellectuals may tell us that they're "Afghans," but our Western-educated interlocutors only deceive us (and themselves). This is an age of comprehensive breakdown, when even Europeans insist that they are Walloons, Catalans, Lombards or Scots.

What Should We Do?

None of the points made above are intended to spark an American campaign to fix all the world's flawed borders. We can't and we shouldn't. Rather, the purpose is to warn against the folly of defending the doomed relics of the colonial era. There may be times when preserving specific artificial borders are a strategic necessity, but we should not reflexively defend all extant borders for the convenience of diplomats delighted with their embassy housing assignments. When borders are under great local pressure to change, it's usually best to get

out of the way and let them change. The process and result will often be messy, even disheartening...but we cannot resist the deepest currents of history. Our demand for instant gratification is our greatest strategic weakness.

We must stand back and try to understand the roots of strategic diseases and not just rush to treat the topical symptoms.

We also need to accept that the Cold War is over. Russia remains a self-destructive nuisance, but some old alliances—not least, ours with Pakistan—do far more harm than good (as did our long support for the Mubarak regime in Egypt, for example). Instead of applying a comforting twentieth-century template to the world, we must work to understand the new orders that are emerging—and will continue to emerge for generations. And unless we wish to continue to waste the blood of our troops and our treasure, we must not be afraid to be politically incorrect.

We must stop casting geostrategic challenges in simplistic us-vs.-them terms. Every conflict in which we have been engaged in recent years has been many-sided and many-layered. I used to quip that, in the Balkans, you can't ask "Who's guilty?" but have to ask "Who's guilty this week?" In complex, multi-generational conflicts such as those playing out in the semi-governed territories we call "Pakistan" and "Afghanistan," players may be helpful and treacherous simultaneously. Instead of forever asking "Who are the good guys?" we need to ask "Which course of action is to *our* advantage?"

We need to ask honestly why Baluchis are not entitled to a Free Baluchistan, why the Pashtuns—despite their abhorrent customs—are not entitled to a Pakhtunkhwa for all Pashtuns, why forty-million Kurds aren't entitled to a Free Kurdistan, or why its eastern provinces must remain part of the geopolitical monstrosity we call "Congo." Again, the point is not to encourage an activist foreign policy, but simply to recognize that it's usually wise to get out of the way of the oncoming train.

We live in a great age of contradictions and confusions, even in our terminology. While the Taliban are insurgents, they are not revolutionaries, but reactionary forces fighting for the old ways of tribal life. We are the revolutionaries, but tribal, religion-tyrannized cultures don't want our program of secular values and social liberation (we're willfully blind to the fact that in Afghanistan we are attempting exactly what the Russians attempted—not only governmental, but social and moral modernization; for example, the Russians did more for the plight of Afghan women than we have). While we may hold our own ideological convictions dear, we have to learn to content ourselves with doing what's necessary and doable.

Serious strategy begins with three questions: What precisely do we want to achieve? Is it achievable? And, if it's achievable, is it worth the probable cost? In our recent conflicts, we failed to answer a single one of those questions honestly.

Except for existential wars of survival, sound strategy aims at a positive return on investment—just as we expect a positive return on the money we put into our retirement accounts. In conflicts in which we have a choice of engagement or non-intervention, we have to become more sophisticated at analyzing the "investment quality" of our decision. Again, we return to the basic question: "What do we get out of it?" Turning our occupation of Iraq into a looting orgy for well-connected contractors did not enhance the security of our citizens.

The old American argument of Crusader America versus Fortress America, of interventionist versus isolationist, is dangerous and childish. We cannot hide in Kansas because, as on 9/11,

the world comes to us. But we also cannot embark upon spendthrift nation-building efforts where there's no nation to build.

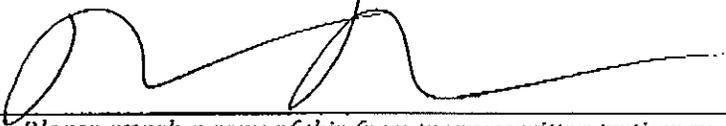
We need to re-learn the strategic art of acting in our own interests. Generally, our interests are not served by clinging to old, dictatorial or corrupt regimes, but by declining to support the dying order. At times, military intervention in support of change may be to our advantage. More often, it will be a matter of getting out of the way of the inevitable. But what we should never do is to align ourselves with violent oppressors of minorities, with blackmailers, or with those who help our enemies kill our troops. In other words, it's time to abandon Pakistan and switch our support wholeheartedly to India.



United States House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs

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