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Petraeus Hearing Should Focus on Three Fronts, One Long War

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On April 24, President George W. Bush announced his intention to nominate General David H. Petraeus as Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). As a Combatant Commander he will be responsible for overseeing all military action in the Middle East and South Asia.

CENTCOM includes the three most violent and decisive fronts in the battle against al-Qaeda's transnational terrorist network. Senate leadership has indicated its plan to hold confirmation hearings on the appointment before Memorial Day. Those hearings should focus on the single most important issue—recognizing that the fights in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are inextricably linked, in much the same way as the campaigns in France, the Mediterranean, and the Russian Front were integral to defeating Nazi Germany during World War II. The CENTCOM commander will have to pursue an integrated strategy that wins on all three fronts.

A War to Be Won. There are three vital fronts in the war against al-Qaeda. After escaping Afghanistan in 2001, elements of al-Qaeda holed up in the Pakistan border region. “The survivors split into two wings,” as international terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna recently explained to the *Los Angeles Times*, “Internal operations ran combat in Pakistan and Afghanistan [helping the Taliban regroup].... External operations oversaw attacks elsewhere.” Most of the international efforts showed only a modicum of success.

Iraq was an exception. Groups in the region aligned themselves with Osama Bin Laden; one even

renamed itself “al-Qaeda in Iraq.” Exploiting the poor security conditions in the country, they went after both U.S. troops and Iraqi civilians with a vengeance. Pipelines were set up to import foot soldiers from Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa.

Al-Qaeda has staked its reputation on demonstrating it can make America fail in Iraq. Without question, Iraq has become a crucial battleground in the war against al-Qaeda. Leaving al-Qaeda to prosper in the country would be a disaster.

Breaking Taliban/Al-Qaeda Nexus in South Asia. Winning in Afghanistan and Pakistan are just as vital. In fact, Pakistan is of major importance in the war against al-Qaeda. The Taliban, capitalizing on the sanctuary they share with al-Qaeda in Pakistan's tribal border areas, continue to fight coalition forces in Afghanistan and conduct terrorist attacks against innocent Afghan civilians.

Moreover, most major international terrorist plots that have either been executed or thwarted in the last three years have had links to Pakistan, particularly the tribal areas. The Taliban and al-Qaeda have a symbiotic relationship. Al-Qaeda relies on the Taliban, which has links to the local population, to maintain its safe haven in the Pakistani-Afghan

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border areas, while the Taliban relies on al-Qaeda for ideological inspiration and access to material support and fighters, to help it fight coalition forces in Afghanistan. Allowing al-Qaeda to continue to operate there would only enable it to conduct its next terrorist atrocity.

Bin Laden has taken globalization to heart. He is outsourcing his destructive agenda by inspiring groups to adopt terrorist tactics. It is not just the occasional bin Laden video on al-Jazeera that creates the problem. Bin Laden's propaganda factories are cranking out a steady stream of material. Hundreds of DVD's and videos—on average, one every three or four days—are finding their way throughout the Muslim world, increasingly distributed through the Internet.

A few dozen Web sites on the Internet are “hate central.” They are providing the tools for individuals and groups to self-radicalize. Policing the Internet and eliminating the Web-based threat is impractical—maybe impossible. Getting online and waging a battle of ideas in the chat rooms and file-sharing serving is a better tactic.

Stabilizing Afghanistan and driving al-Qaeda out of its Pakistani safe haven will also help de-legitimize the movement and break the back of Bin Laden's operation “hate central.” Ensuring al-Qaeda has no safe harbor and no place to hide requires winning in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

An Anvil-and-Hammer Strategy. Operations in Afghanistan need to be the “anvil.” NATO operations need to hold back the Taliban insurgency and build the capacity for the Afghans to defend themselves. The Pakistani military must become the “hammer” driving al-Qaeda out of its border regions. Achieving both these goals will require significant assistance and the focused attention of the CENTCOM commander.

The new Pakistani government's attempts to negotiate with hardcore Taliban elements—although perhaps providing temporary respite from suicide bombings inside Pakistan—are unlikely to address the international threat emanating from the region and may even heighten it. The “cease-fire”

and potential pull-back of Pakistani military troops from the region would likely only increase the Taliban's ability to cross back and forth to Afghanistan to fight coalition forces and continue their suicide bombing campaign there.

The terrorist problem in Pakistan is broader and deeper than any one Pakistani administration or any one individual leader. Links to Taliban run deep within the Pakistani establishment and there remains support within Pakistan for Taliban efforts to try to oust coalition forces from Afghanistan.

Hearings Ahead: What Should Be Done. Washington should focus on getting the new Pakistani government on board with a joint strategic plan that employs economic, military, and political tools to address the terrorist threat in the border areas. Washington should convince the civilian government and military leadership that efforts to negotiate with al-Qaeda-backed Taliban leaders (such as Baitullah Masood) will only boost the influence and legitimacy of the most dangerous terrorists in the region.

A better approach is to peel off the less ideologically committed elements of the Taliban and demonstrate that the hard-line leadership aligned with al-Qaeda will be defeated by cooperative efforts between Pakistan and the U.S. Defeating al-Qaeda in Pakistan will require a sophisticated campaign employing all the instruments of Pakistani national power, as well as the support and assistance of the U.S.

During the upcoming confirmation hearings, senators from both sides of the aisle should make clear to the incoming CENTCOM commander that winning all three fronts is vital to American interests and that they will do everything in their power to support accomplishing these goals.

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