



Isi's new triumvirate

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Afghanistan, the main battleground in the war on terror, has been short-changed by the Iraq war and its manpower and equipment priorities.

Al-Qaida got trounced by U.S. forces in Iraq -- but Iraq was never the problem. Under Saddam Hussein, al-Qaida was not welcome in Iraq. After the U.S. invasion, Iraq became a force multiplier for would-be unholy warriors from Middle Eastern countries -- primarily Saudi Arabia -- and Europe's Muslim ghettos. Several hundred al-Qaida volunteers have been killed -- or gone home. But home base for al-Qaida and Taliban was and still is the weird-sounding acronym for Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area -- FATA -- some seven fiercely independent tribal "agencies" under nominal Pakistani sovereignty that form, along with Baluchistan (one of

Pakistan's four provinces), the 1,400-mile border with Afghanistan.

Inhabited by fiercely independent Pashtun tribes whose women are so backward only 2 percent can read and write and their men only marginally better at 20 percent, the landscape is among the world's most inhospitable. Mountains that soar to 15,000 feet interspersed by deep gorges and ravines and deserts provide safe havens for al-Qaida and Taliban's training camps as well the world's most wanted terrorists. For Pashtun tribesmen, hospitality is sacrosanct. Rewards for information leading to the capture of Osama bin Laden and his top lieutenants have soared from \$20 million to \$50 million -- but no one talks.

Under President-Gen. Pervez Musharraf, the U.S. military was told to butt out of FATA. Bombing of FA-

TA targets by the United States or raids by Special Forces would have led to bloody clashes countrywide. Bin Laden is certainly more popular than President Bush for millions of Pakistanis. Instead, the United States made its \$1 billion-a-year military aid to Pakistan contingent on Musharraf ordering the Pak army to chase Taliban and al-Qaida up and down FATA's snow-covered peaks.

The Pakistan army began entering FATA in mid-December 2001 for the first time since independence with 37,000 troops. Assigned to blocking positions while U.S. bombers dropped 15,000-pound "Daisy Cutters" on the Tora Bora mountain range, they deployed too late to intercept the terrorist chieftains. Since then, Musharraf has increased the military assigned to FATA to 110,000 troops. Most of them hate the assignment with a mix of revulsion against killing fellow Pakistanis, unease over the hostility of the local population, and the conviction they are acting under U.S. orders transmitted by Musharraf.

Beginning last summer, the Pak army in FATA, mostly Punjabis, in effect stood down. Heavy casualties and sympathy for Taliban fighters led to ambushes and surrenders without a fight. This makes the Afghan war unwinnable, unless the United States can strike a new deal with new Pakistan military chief Gen. Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani now that Musharraf is a much-weakened civilian president subject to impeachment by political parties victorious in the Feb. 18 elections. But Kiyani must tread carefully lest he

be seen as another American puppet. He has agreed to closer intelligence sharing among Pakistani, Afghan and U.S. agents on the mythical Pakistan-Afghan border and quick responses by U.S.-trained Pakistan Special Forces. The United States will continue remote-controlled (from Nevada-based cockpit by satellite) Predator drone airstrikes on targets generated by agents on the ground in North and South Waziristan and Bajaur -- which 99.9 percent of Americans could not locate on a world map. Yet this is where a WMD attack on the United States is being planned.

The three strongest parties to emerge from Pakistan's relatively free elections are now haggling over what kind of coalition to put together among ideological opponents. Together, they can impeach Musharraf and force the election of a powerless civilian president. But the Bush administration wants Musharraf to stay in the job even with much reduced authority. More worrisome for U.S. and NATO objectives in Afghanistan, the two victorious pols -- the Pakistan Muslim League's Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistan People's Party's Asif Zardari (Benazir Bhutto's widower) -- want to talk and negotiate with Taliban, not fight. Taliban reacted with a "unilateral cease-fire," a decision Islamabad's cognoscenti say was the work of the still all-powerful Inter-Services Intelligence agency, the original sponsoring entity that midwived Taliban and shepherded its conquest of Afghanistan in the early 1990s.

Trouble is, this was tried Sept. 5, 2006, when Musharraf signed a peace accord with FATA's tribal leaders, which was violated within 48 hours. One of the signatories was Baitullah Mehsud, the "Emir of Taliban in Pakistan," second in command after Mullah Mohammed Omar, and the terrorist who ordered the assassination of Mrs. Bhutto last Dec. 27.

Replacing U.S. influence topside in Pakistan -- or still competing for it -- is Saudi Arabia and its protege Nawaz Sharif, the man who was deposed by Musharraf in 1999 and exiled to the Saudi kingdom for 10 years. He flew home last fall after Mrs. Bhutto's return, this time generously bankrolled by his Saudi friends. Saudi Arabia was one of only three countries (with Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates) to recognize the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The new triumvirate that is gradually superseding President Bush's "most trusted non-NATO ally" is made up of ISI, Saudi Arabia and Sharif. This does not bode well for the future of NATO in Afghanistan.

President Hamid Karzai's govern-

ment in Kabul controls only a third of the country while a resurgent Taliban is now solidly entrenched in 10 percent of the narco-state, according to U.S. Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell. And tribal leaders call the shots in the rest of a barren, medieval country whose opium poppy production generates more than two-thirds of its gross domestic product and funds Taliban's insurgency. The most optimistic estimate calls for the United States and NATO to remain engaged, with increased military and economic assets, for another three to five years. Ten years would be more realistic.

Speaking not for attribution, a Dari-speaking U.S. official, back from a wide-ranging inspection trip to Afghanistan, said, "The corruption defies imagination. It has to rank as the worst in the world." Karzai, he said, used to be called the mayor of Kabul. No more, said my informant. He doesn't even control the capital. Most of his ministers have U.S. visas up to date -- just in case. More important is that NATO could fracture and founder over the Afghan commitment. Violence and terrorism could then quickly escalate across the world.