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Help Us or We Leave

By Stanley A. Weiss

WASHINGTON — Just weeks after the attacks of Sept. 11, I met with an architect of America's post-9/11 response in the Pentagon. The topic was the impending U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. I asked why he expected America to succeed when every foreign invader in history had failed.

He rolled out a map of Afghanistan, pinned it to the wall, and then superimposed a map of a much smaller Bosnia on top of it. He said, "We needed more than 30,000 troops in Bosnia. We'd need 10 times that number if we were going to stay in Afghanistan. But we're not. We're going to go in, we're going to kick their butts, and we're going to leave."

So how is it, eight years later, that America is deepening its commitment in both Afghanistan and Pakistan? Certainly, the idea of a rapidly growing nuclear arsenal falling into the hands of vengeful jihadists is enough to chill the blood.

The prominent Indian political analyst K. Subrahmanyam puts it bluntly: "Al Qaeda is as dangerous as Nazism."

Perhaps a better question is: If Afghanistan and Pakistan are the most dangerous places on earth, as President Barack Obama recently said, then why is America there largely by itself?

The short answer comes in the form of another question: Why should other nations do anything if the United States is determined to do everything? I asked experts in the region to think the unthinkable: What if America just walked away from Afghanistan and Pakistan?

For starters, "Any withdrawal would be hailed as a great victory for Al Qaeda," says a former Indian ambassador to the United States, Naresh Chandra. "In Pakistan, civil society is likely to cave in to extremist demands for changes in law and social conduct. Heaven help the womenfolk."

"China would take no responsibility either on the nukes or the militant extremists," says the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid. "It would close its border with Pakistan, continue both helping it and in a sense isolate it."

The Indian diplomat Narendra Sarila, agrees: "China would likely establish a Pak-Taliban pact under its aegis." A leading Indian diplomat adds, "Pakistan is useful to China in keeping India bound to South Asia, Iran off-balance and even Russia anxious."

Shiite Iran is loath to see a fundamentalist Sunni regime in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Islamic Republic would likely pull out all the stops in Afghanistan — while also co-opting the Baluchis, their ethnic brothers in Southwest Pakistan, says Mr. Sarila.

Saudi Arabia would use American withdrawal to spread the extremist Wahhabi faith. Mr. Subrahmanyam says the

Pakistani Army "could become the sword-arm of Wahhabi Islam."

As for India, if Wahhabi radicalism takes over Pakistan's Punjab heartland, says the editor of India Focus, Subhash Agrawal, "India would face its most serious existential threat" and be forced to take action.

It is now clear that the United States alone cannot stabilize the situation in Pakistan or Afghanistan. As President Obama said, it is a regional problem that demands regional solutions.

It is time for America to make China, Saudi Arabia, Iran and India an offer they can't refuse: Either join us or we leave.

First, the president should make clear: The target is Al Qaeda, not the Taliban. This fight is against those responsible for suicide bombers in New York, London, Madrid, Bali, Mumbai and elsewhere, including every major city in Iraq and Pakistan.

In both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Taliban is largely comprised of Pashtuns, whose homeland was cut in half by the British. Their focus is local, not global: to create an independent Pashtunistan incorporating Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province with much of Afghanistan.

On the other hand, it was Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden who masterminded a global reign of terror and issued a fatwah against the U.S. and its allies, proclaiming that "killing Americans and their allies was an individual duty for every Muslim."

The biggest reason that the prospect of loose nukes in Pakistan is scary is that if Al Qaeda gets them, it will use them.

Second, in Pakistan, America should cut back on military assistance and focus on building a civil society. Less than a third of Pakistan is literate — many Pakistanis still live as serfs for feudal landlords. The United States should work with all of the nations in the region to replace feudalism with land reform. It should convince Saudi Arabia to stop financing thousands of religious schools across the region, which only fuels violence.

Third, America should reach out to Russia, and help it make good on its promise to arm the Afghan National Army, identify new supply routes and use Russian territory to move military armaments.

Finally, the United States should insist that China join in guaranteeing the territorial integrity of Pakistan so that the Pakistan Army moves the bulk of its troops from the Indian border to face its real enemy, the Islamic militants. China has gotten a free pass on America's back: No more.

If the rest of the world can't do its part, America goes home. Eight years later than it was supposed to.