



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on December 15, 2010

Obama Ignores Afghanistan-Pakistan Reality

The President obviously has the ability — common to politicians — to ignore reality when it conflicts with his agenda. For example, “violence in Afghanistan has reached an all-time high, with clashes up fourfold since 2007,” [wrote the BBC](#), paraphrasing a November Defense Department report to Congress. That report stated that “efforts to reduce insurgent capacity ... have not produced measurable results.”



Then there is the [open letter](#) to Obama, signed by over 50 journalists, academics, and retired military personnel with experience in Afghanistan, reminding the President of certain other inconvenient facts: (1) “the situation on the ground is much worse than a year ago because the Taliban insurgency has made progress across the country”; (2) “the cost of the war is now over \$120 billion per year for the United States alone,” which is “unsustainable in the long run”; (3) “human losses are increasing”; and (4) improvements due to military action “are neither going to last nor be replicable in the vast areas not garrisoned by Western forces without a political settlement.” The letter urges Obama to negotiate with the Taliban and all other interested parties, including neighboring countries, so that the United States can “exit Afghanistan while safeguarding its legitimate security interests.”

Now along come two National Intelligence Estimates on the Afghanistan-Pakistan situation that, [reports the New York Times](#), “offer a more negative assessment [than the administration] and say there is a limited chance of success unless Pakistan hunts down insurgents operating from havens on its Afghan border.” The reports, which the paper says “represent the consensus view of the United States’ 16 intelligence agencies,” indicate that “although there have been gains for the United States and NATO in the war, the unwillingness of Pakistan to shut down militant sanctuaries in its lawless tribal region remains a serious obstacle. American military commanders say insurgents freely cross from Pakistan into Afghanistan to plant bombs and fight American troops and then return to Pakistan for rest and



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resupply.”

These conclusions seem to differ little from those reached by the Pentagon in November, yet the *Times* says that “American military commanders and senior Pentagon officials have already criticized the reports as out of date” and as having been “written by desk-bound Washington analysts who have spent limited time, if any, in Afghanistan and have no feel for the war.” The newspaper chalks up much of this to “the longstanding cultural differences between intelligence analysts, whose job is to warn of potential bad news, and military commanders, who are trained to promote ‘can do’ optimism.”

Indeed, the intelligence community ought to have a pretty good handle on the situation, given that “the largest Central Intelligence Agency station since the Vietnam War [is] located in Kabul,” according to the *Times*. “C.I.A. operatives also command an Afghan paramilitary force in the thousands. In Pakistan, the C.I.A. is running a covert war using drone aircraft.”

Not surprisingly, the CIA pats itself on the back in the NIE, finding that its “drone strikes on leaders of Al Qaeda in the tribal regions of Pakistan have had an impact,” the *Times* writes, and indeed they have: They managed to kill around 700 innocent civilians in 2009 and, [avers Antiwar.com’s Jason Ditz](#), “the limited evidence suggests that they haven’t gotten any more accurate in 2010, meaning the toll is likely at least as high.” The NIE also concludes that “security has improved in the parts of Helmand and Kandahar Provinces in southern Afghanistan where the United States has built up its troop presence,” which should make Obama and the Pentagon happy.

Still, the reports suggest that Washington isn’t getting very much for all the time, money, and effort it is expending in the region. Besides the military and intelligence forces, there is the approximately \$2 billion in military and civilian aid being funneled to Pakistan annually. After nine years of this, all American commanders can tell the *Times* is that “they are now proceeding on the assumption that there will be limited help from” Islamabad. Some American officials, in fact, believe Pakistan is actually supporting the insurgents, while former Afghan intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh told the newspaper that the Pakistanis know that “bad behavior brings cash,” giving them little incentive to improve the situation.

Plainly the administration’s report is simply going to pretend none of this is happening. Fortunately, in addition to the signers of the open letter, there are people with actual political power who are getting fed up with this interminable war. Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.), a member of the House Armed Services Committee and the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, told the *Times* that “there would be increasing pressure from the political left on Mr. Obama to end the war, and he predicted that Democrats in Congress would resist continuing to spend \$100 billion annually on Afghanistan.”

Of course, Democrats have considerably less influence in Congress than they did a few months ago. On the other hand, the influx of Tea Party-backed legislators is forcing the Republicans to rethink their knee-jerk support for all so-called defense spending, to the point that incoming House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) [told](#) NBC’s Matt Lauer that “everything should be on the table,” including defense spending, when it comes time to make budget cuts next year.

Could the anti-war Left and the deficit-hawk Right unite to force a U.S. exit from Afghanistan? When Obama can go from “Change We Can Believe In” to (as Lew Rockwell put it) “Change We Hate the Guts Of” in just two years and the GOP can go from gung-ho militarism to serious consideration of military spending cuts practically overnight, anything is possible.



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