

It's not too late for U.S. to play 'The Great Game'



THOMAS FRIEDMAN doubts that Iran is the big winner in Iraq and offers some strategic moves that may be game-changers in Afghanistan

AGRA, India — Last week, I toured the great Mogul compound of Fatehpur Sikri, near the Taj Mahal. My Indian guide mentioned in passing that in the late 1500s, when Afghanistan was part of India and the Mogul Empire, the Iranian Persians invaded Afghanistan in an effort to “seize the towns of Herat and Kandahar” and a great battle ensued. I had to laugh to myself: “Well, add them to the long list of suckers — countries certain that controlling Afghanistan’s destiny was vital to their national security.”

There were already plenty before and there have been even more since. As America now debates how to extract itself from Iraq and Afghanistan, it is worth rereading a little Central Asian history and recalling how many centuries great powers — from India to Persia, from Britain to Russia, and now from America to Iran, Turkey and Pakistan — have wrestled for supremacy in this region, in different versions of what came to be called “The Great Game.” One can only weep at the thought of how much blood and treasure have been expended in this pursuit and how utterly ungreat this game has been in retrospect.

It is with this bias that I look at the debate following President Barack Obama’s decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from Iraq, on schedule, at the end of this year — a decision that has been greeted with much huffing and puffing from hawkish Republicans about how Obama will be remembered for losing Iraq to Iran. Iraq will now fall under Iran’s “influence,” they proclaim, and none of us will ever be able to sleep well again.

Please put me down in the camp that thinks Obama did the right thing and that Iran’s mullahs will not be the winners.

Why? Well, for starters, centuries of history teach us that Arabs and Persians do not play well together. Yes, Iraq has a Shiite Muslim majority and so does Iran. But Iraqi Arab Shiites willingly fought for eight years against Persian Iranian Shiites in the Iran-Iraq war.

Moreover, I am certain that in recent years America’s lingering troop presence in Iraq actually gave Iran greater influence in Baghdad. The U.S., however well intentioned, became a lightning rod that absorbed a lot of Iraqis’ frustrations with their government’s underperformance, and the U.S. “occupation” drew all attention away from Iran’s shenanigans inside

Iraq. Iraqis are a proud people. Once our troops are gone, Iraqi Arabs will surely focus entirely on their own government’s performance and on any Iranian or other attempts to try to be the puppeteer of Iraqi politics. Any Iraqi leader seen as Tehran’s lackey will have problems.

I actually think the dominant flow of influence will be from Iraq toward Iran — if (and it is still a big if) — Iraq’s democracy holds. If it does, Iranians will have to look across the border every day at Iraqis, with their dozens of free newspapers and freedom to form any party and vote for any leader, and wonder why these “inferior” Iraqi Arab Shiites enjoy such freedoms and “superior” Iranian Persian Shiites do not.

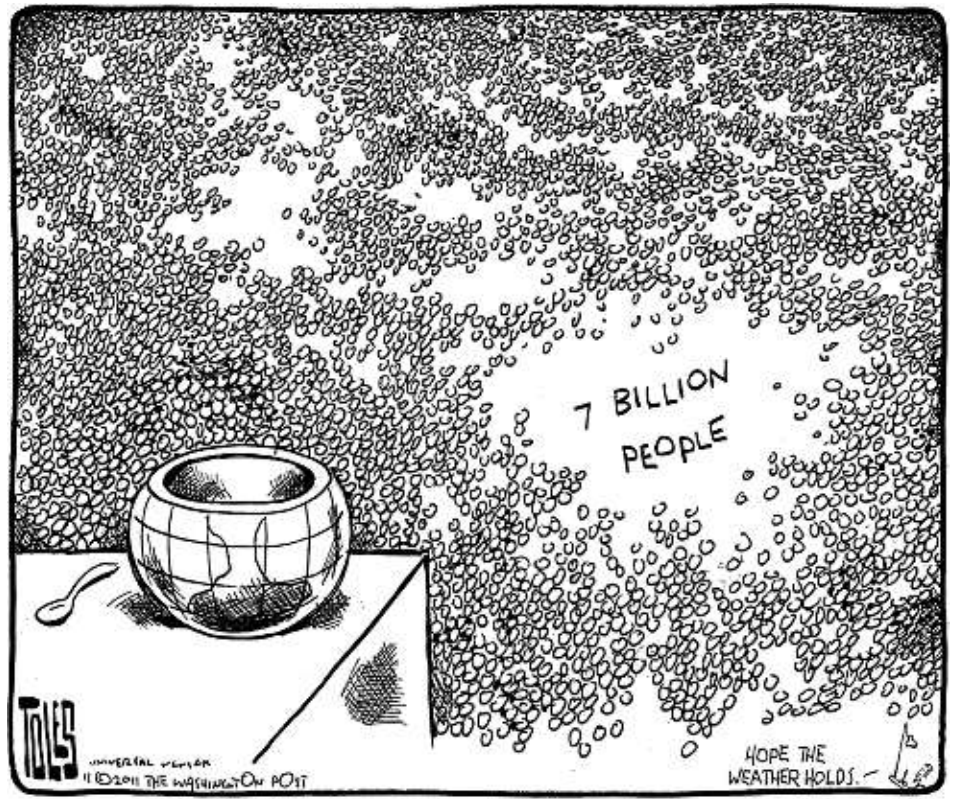
Some say Iran was the geopolitical winner of the U.S. intervention in Iraq. I’d hold off on that judgment, too. “The Iranian regime is at its lowest moment of influence in the region — 14 percent popularity in the latest Zogby poll,” remarked Abbas Milani, who teaches Iranian politics at Stanford.

Just as I don’t buy the notion that we need to keep playing The Great Game in Iraq, I also don’t buy it for Afghanistan.

“If the U.S. steps back, it will see that it has a lot more options,” argues C. Raja Mohan, a senior fellow at the Center for Policy Research, in New Delhi. “You let the contending regional forces play out against each other and then you can then tilt the balance.” He is referring to the India, Pakistan, Russia, Iran, China and Northern Alliance tribes in Afghanistan. “At this point, you have the opposite problem. You are sitting in the middle and are everyone’s hate-object, and everyone sees some great conspiracy in whatever you do. Once you pull out, and create the capacity to alter the balance, you will have a lot more options and influence to affect outcomes — rather than being pushed around and attacked by everyone.”

America today needs much more cost-efficient ways to influence geopolitics in Asia than keeping troops there indefinitely. We need to better leverage the natural competitions in this region to our ends. There is more than one way to play The Great Game, and we need to learn it.

Friedman is a columnist for The New York Times and a three-time Pulitzer Prize winner.



Silenced Mexican press works to cartels' benefit

■ Gangs can operate freely without scrutiny

By JOAN NEUHAUS SCHAAN

HOW will we know that Mexico has fallen to organized crime? There will be silence.

While the extortion and killing of teachers in Acapulco and the rise of vigilantes nationwide point to further degradation of the quality of life for the average Mexican, citizens continue to fight to protect themselves, and at least their story is being told — for now.

Five years ago, the nonprofit Reporters Without Borders listed Mexico second among the most dangerous countries for journalists; only Iraq was more dangerous. Three years ago, in the paper “Security in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: The Crisis, the Forces at Work and the Need for Honest Assessment and Action,” the attacks on Mexico were detailed along with the continued deterioration of security within Mexico. Two years ago, the Juarez newspaper El Diario published an open letter to the organized crime cartels from its editors stating, in part:

“You are, at present, the de facto authorities in this city because the legal institutions have not been able to keep our colleagues from dying ...

“We do not want more deaths. We do not want more injuries or even more intimidation. It is impossible to exercise our role in these conditions. Tell us, then, what do you expect of us as a medium?”

Last year, one television company was subjected to three car bombs in the northern state of Tamaulipas. While self-censorship became the norm, journalists continued to be brutally attacked, and some sought asylum.

With the silencing of the press, Mexican citizens desperately spoke out directly, through YouTube videos, blogs and other social media. But soon these may be silenced.

On Sept. 24, a newspaper editor in Nuevo Laredo was found beheaded. María Elizabeth Macías of Primera Hora had blogged about crime in the area under the name “La Nena de Nuevo Laredo,” and her body was found with a note: “OK. Nuevo Laredo Live and the social networks, I am La Nena de Laredo and I am here because of my reports and yours ... for those who don’t want to believe it, this has happened to me because of my actions.”

On Sept. 13, two individuals were found disemboweled and hanging from a Nuevo Laredo bridge with a message to “Blog del Narco,” a leading source of narco-terror reporting since the silencing of the local press. The deaths of these

two people indicate a marked turn for the worse: Organized crime has not only been able to identify bloggers and exact retribution, but it is using the most gruesome of torture.

If social media is blocked, the last line of defense is the tip line. Suggestions to establish tip lines (<http://www.bakerinstitute.org/publications/SEC-pub-ChronNeuhausSchaanTipline-051009.pdf>) several years ago resulted in the establishment of Crime Stoppers in Mexico, and numerous successes can be attributed to tip lines. Great pains were taken to have the tipsters’ identities shielded. One can only hope the integrity of this reporting system remains secure.

Three wild cards will mark the near future. The first comes from elections. What if organized crime controls the political system? In 2009, Mexico’s Secretariat of National Defense estimated the cartels funded candidates in 219 municipalities in 22 states, and the situation is likely worse now. In many cases, the political opposition has been assassinated, whether candidates or office holders. For example, between February 2010 and July 2011, at least nine mayors in Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon and Chihuahua (Mexican states bordering Texas) were attacked; six of them were killed.

The second comes from a change in strategy. What if the Mexican government finds it expedient to side with one cartel over others? Some Mexican political leaders seem to be giving this possibility serious consideration, whether out of allegiance or necessity. What if a similar strategy is pursued by the United States?

The third wild card comes from the Internet, namely “Anonymous” and other hacker groups. On Sept. 19, “Mexican Anonymous” hacked into Mexican government systems to expose indifference and corruption. “We demonstrate to the government and drug trafficking groups that we will not allow more violence and insecurity and let them know Mexican Anonymous,” they explained. The fight against Mexican organized crime has not included an Internet offensive. Perhaps this is the first salvo.

The killings continue in Mexico, and Texans have witnessed the border war firsthand. Have you heard of the recent battles in Tampico? Most likely not. If there is silence, we should all be very, very concerned.

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Cain’s faulty memory adds up to a weak defense



KATHLEEN PARKER says the Republican presidential candidate needs to bone up quickly on facts about harassment allegations.

HERMAN Cain searched his memory for details about what might have caused a woman in the 1990s to accuse him of sexual harassment. No, he couldn’t remember her, not much at all. Then again, there was one time, he told me, when he stood next to the woman and noted that she was about the same height as his wife. He showed me how close he was standing to her by asking a female staffer to stand next to him. It was close. Not touching, but close.

The allegations, which were brought against Cain when he was head of the National Restaurant Association, were determined at the time to be without merit. Even so, the woman received a settlement from the association, which Cain recognizes raises skepticism about events. He

also notes that his success in the polls has made him a target. “Only when I came inside the Beltway did this crap come up,” he said in an interview.

Cain has repeatedly denied ever sexually harassing anyone. He also says he doesn’t remember another woman who Politico reports also filed a complaint and also got a settlement. When a reporter showed him the other woman’s name, he remembered her, but says he has no recollection of a complaint. On this he doesn’t budge and is convincing in his assertions.

Regarding the “false allegation” he does recall, the candidate insists nothing happened. At the time, when he was informed by the association’s attorney, he couldn’t place the woman. Her name didn’t ring a bell. But when pressed, small details began to emerge. He remembered that his

office door was open and that his secretary was seated just beyond the threshold. He also remembered offering the woman a ride to a meeting, but said she wasn’t the only one he invited. He says he doesn’t remember whether she accepted the ride. “I don’t know what else I can say because there isn’t anything else,” he said.

As political history makes clear, where there is smoke, there is usually at least a match. In this case, as in many instances of alleged harassment, it also can be a matter of perception. Nothing is more subjective than sexual harassment.

What Cain remembers doing — standing close to a woman, commenting on her physical stature and comparing her to his wife — probably crosses the line for some. Wives and husbands are intimate together and co-workers generally don’t want to be considered in terms of a spouse. Physical proximity is also fraught with potential tension. Some women wouldn’t blink at such a comment; others could feel it was the wrong remark in the wrong place.

I asked Cain how he defines sexual harassment and he listed offenses that would resonate with most Americans: forcing a female to do something against her will; inappropriate touching; making

inappropriate comments in the presence of a female. To Cain’s generation (age 65), a casual remark about someone’s appearance is often viewed as a gesture of friendliness. To someone younger, versed in the catechism of sexual harassment, it could be viewed as hostile or at least inappropriate. When you’re running for president of the United States, you’d better know the difference. Today, Cain surely does. But over a decades-long career as an executive, Cain says he never gave his behavior a second thought. He was just being Herman — “upbeat and jovial.”

As to the details of the settlements, he pleads absolute ignorance. Even his campaign attorney wasn’t able to get details from the restaurant association. It’s a personal matter, they said.

Cain is hardly the first candidate to suffer this kind of scrutiny. But a faulty memory is a weak defense when the national media is chasing your history. As soon as humanly possible, Cain needs to find out what was in the complaints and settlements and get the facts on the table. If he doesn’t, someone else will.

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