Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate:

A State within a State?

By **M A R K   J .   R O B E R T S**

Standing at the crossroads of South, Southwest, and Central Asia, Pakistan is strategically important to the United States. Vice President Richard Nixon recognized the country's significance for Cold War containment in 1953,[1] envisioning it as a linchpin to contain Communist influence in Afghanistan and a "Northern Tier" buffer[2] against Soviet hegemony. In the 1950s and 1960s, the United States pursued military alliances to thwart Soviet and Chinese regional intentions,[3] including placement of National Security Agency facilities in Pakistan.[4] Francis Gary Powers' U–2 reconnaissance aircraft shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960 flew from Peshawar, Pakistan.[5]

After the Khomeini revolution in 1979, the United States lost access to Iran-based electronic surveillance. Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq agreed to intelligence cooperation, strengthening U.S. relations with his Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).[6] President Zia needed to enhance his weak standing and Islamist credentials within Pakistan. U.S. aid burnished his anti-Communist qualifications with Pakistani Islamists and Washington,

Teenage boy, trained by Pakistani *madrassa* as suicide bomber, is held in Afghanistan after failed attempt to kill Afghan governor

President General Pervez Musharraf (front) and former chief of Inter Services Intelligence General Ashfaq Parvev Kayani attend national command authority ceremony

while procuring American military aid increased his prestige with the military.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, President Jimmy Carter declared Pakistan a Cold War "frontline state," supplying Islamabad with arms for a mujahideen proxy war.[7] This covert action as a foreign policy tool, appropriate in a Cold War prism, would later bear unintended consequences, such as transnational terrorist networks.[8] After the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, U.S.-Pakistani relations declined in the environment of growing Islamic radicalism, perceptions that the United States favored India in Kashmir, lack of democratic reforms, and Islamabad's nuclear program.[9] After the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan became a vital partner in U.S. counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.

Soviets in Afghanistan

The Afghan invasion placed President Carter in a strategic predicament. Reeling from Islamic revolution in Iran, loss of key regional ally Shah Reza Pahlavi, and a hostage crisis, he needed to stem a hemorrhaging foreign policy. He worried the Soviets might soon gain access to warm water ports and control the availability of Persian Gulf energy.

In his 1980 State of the Union address, the President articulated the Carter Doctrine, pledging to defend Persian Gulf territorial integrity and support anti-Communists in Afghanistan.[10] Pakistan under President Zia attained strategic significance as a regional ally to thwart Soviet intentions. Although President Carter, a human rights advocate, had criticized Zia's authoritarian rule, he found a willing partner to fight Soviet expansionism. President Carter obtained permission to funnel arms to "Afghan freedom fighters" through Pakistan. Zia shared his counterpart's view that the Soviets in Afghanistan were a threat, but for different reasons.[11] Washington viewed relationships with Islamabad in a global, strategic Cold War context; Islamabad perceived the same relationships through a regional security prism vis-à-vis India.[12]

Money and weapons soon flowed into Pakistan from the United States and the Muslim and Arab worlds. When supplies appeared in Karachi, ISI took control, transporting them to a depot near Islamabad, divid-

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ing them for transport to the Afghan border, and distributing them.[13]

The United States used ISI as a weapons and material distribution conduit to deny its own involvement.[14] ISI established control of allotting financial aid, weapons, and material support to the mujahideen.[15] By deciding who got what and why, it manipulated mujahideen factions,[16] hampering Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) influence.[17] The United States had plausible deniability regarding Afghanistan, but it abdicated responsibility for and denied itself firsthand knowledge of Afghan affairs, with eventual lethal consequences.

This arrangement afforded ISI exploitable leverage as its "domestic political role of manipulating the regime's allies and intimidating its opponents was now cloaked by the legitimate external function of fighting the 'evil' Soviet empire."[18] ISI ran internal security, clandestine operations, and anti-Indian activities. As it exchanged intelligence with the CIA, its domestic power and influence increased.[19] It became more independent and less accountable, disdaining legislative or judicial scrutiny.[20]

Zia kept the "water warm, not boiling hot" in Afghanistan; he wanted to apply constant pressure on the Soviets without bringing

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reprisals.[21] ISI psychological warfare experts ran a propaganda campaign, citing "Islam in Danger" and "Holy War," rallying the faithful to fight Soviet infidels.[22]

When distributing equipment, ISI favored ethnic Pashtuns espousing Islamist ideologies and conforming to ISI operational guidance. It established camps to train mujahideen[23] and sometimes accompanied them on combat operations to gauge which factions were "effective." Under Zia's control, it micromanaged the proxy war and enjoyed latitude and leverage, controlling the flow of U.S. aid. American advisors wanted arms distributed to proficient fighters, but ISI favored "more effective" Islamist guerrillas. In perspective, "it is hard to determine what would constitute an objective criteria [sic] for operational effectiveness, but it seems that much was left to the discretion of the Pakistani strategists."[24]

ISI was the principal power broker in Pakistan and the "most effective intelligence

agency in the Third World."[25] As its influence grew, it was "never richer or more powerful," carrying out its own agenda.[26] In 1983, ISI officers in Southwest Pakistan were removed for diverting mujahideen-bound arms.[27] Throughout the war, the CIA dealt with ISI corruption as weapons intended for Afghans were diverted for profit; in at least one case, the Pakistani army actually sold the CIA its own materials.[28]

Due to the number of Afghans flooding into Pakistan, ISI forced militias and émigrés to associate themselves with various factions to qualify for supplies, food, and aid. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Burhanuddin Rabbani commanded the two largest factions, with approximately 80,000 followers each.[29] Afghan commanders Ahmed Shah Massoud and Ismael Kahn were more autonomous, conducting operations dependent on combat environment, not Islamist doctrine.[30]

ISI's Afghan bureau became "one of the richest and most powerful units in the entire Pakistan army." ISI wanted allied mujahideen ruling a friendly Kabul regime for strategic depth against perennial nemesis New Delhi and a secure western flank.

Radicalism Spreads

During the 1980s, militants poured into Pakistan from the Muslim world, including Palestinian teacher and preacher Abdullah Azzam, who had taught in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, preaching Muslims' duty to wage jihad.[31] One of his students was Osama bin Laden. Azzam created Maktab al-Khidmat (Services Office or MK) in Peshawar to recruit Arabs and raise funds. Bin Laden, with ISI ties, was a key MK organizer.[32] Under bin Laden, MK transformed into al Qaeda. ISI Director General Akhtar Abdul Rahman personally met with him many times, providing money and intelligence.[33]

Warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar received ISI aid and was assessed as one of the most effective mujahideen leaders.[34] Since the United States depended on ISI to distribute materials and conduct the proxy war, Washington remained disengaged, creating "a policy void which radical elements in the ISI eagerly filled."[35] ISI profited from "independence not equaled by any other branch of the armed services, nor was it always subject to constraints imposed by the President."[36]

ISI manipulation of Afghan mujahideen factions angered Ahmed Shah Massoud, one of the most successful jihad commanders. The Soviets deemed Massoud, who commanded over 20,000 troops, an unbeatable master of

guerrilla warfare. Massoud resented ISI dabbling, stating that "strategic direction of the war should be left to the Afghans to decide rather than the ISI."[37] Massoud detested ISI control over economic and military assistance, which favored Islamist groups over secular factions.[38]

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Zia and ISI preferred militant mujahideen, thinking their zeal helped them fight vigorously.[39] ISI created a network of over 400 mujahideen commanders, supplying them with weapons and materiel[40] while diverting unknown quantities.[41] An explosion at the ammunitions depot near Islamabad before a Washington auditing team arrived in 1988 raised suspicions that ISI staged the event to conceal unexplainable inventory discrepancies.[42]

After Zia's death in August 1988, ISI dominated Pakistani dealings in Afghanistan, supporting Islamists forming the Taliban.[43] Factions in ISI promoted tactics such as "the same trucks . . . used to deliver weapons and ammunition for the Afghan fighters from depots

in Islamabad and Karachi went back packed with heroin destined for Western markets and Pakistan's own city dwellers."[44] Within Afghanistan, ISI continued to support the most radical factions, such as Hekmatyar's.[45]

Mujahideen Dispersal, Afghan Blowback

In 1989, the Soviets left Afghanistan, worn down by 10 years of fighting. The ISI–CIA joint venture helped force the withdrawal. ISI was "an army within an army" with weapons, financial resources, access to current technology, and unparalleled authority. The CIA relationship, coupled with U.S. and Saudi funding, made ISI Pakistan's most powerful entity.[46]

After Russia departed Afghanistan, the United States "left" Pakistan to cope with thousands of trained, armed, and battle-hardened militants who espoused radical Islamist ideology and who had no place to go,[47] mingling with millions of refugees. The unintended consequences of the ISI–CIA partnership became transnational terrorism networks which ISI inflamed. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf observed:

We helped created the mujahideen, fired them with religious zeal in seminaries, armed them, paid them, fed them, and sent them to a jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. We

did not stop to think how we would divert them to productive life after the jihad was won. This mistake cost Afghanistan and Pakistan more dearly than any other country. Neither did the United States realize what a rich, educated person like Osama bin Laden might later do with the organization that we all had enabled him to establish.[48]

ISI was now a stronger, more effective intelligence apparatus with ties to extremist groups. It began aiding militants in Kashmir,[49] fomenting pervasive instability and violence. ISI also stayed involved in Afghanistan.

The United States left Pakistan instead of attempting to contain ISI support for extremists, broker peace agreements among warring Afghan factions, or work toward regional stability. Michael Rubin observed, "Washington could have more effectively pressured Pakistan to tone down support for Islamic fundamentalism, especially after the rise of the Taliban. Instead, Washington ceded her responsibility and gave Pakistan a sphere of influence in Afghanistan unlimited by any other foreign pressure."[50]

U.S. diplomats later realized that by letting ISI run Afghanistan and ignoring the region, Washington helped create long-term dilemmas. These included bin Laden, al Qaeda, the Taliban, Afghan volatility, Pakistani instability, Kashmiri terror, nuclear tensions, A.Q. Khan's nuclear sales to terrorist states, and pendulum swings between dictatorship and democracy.

Bin Laden, al Qaeda, and the Taliban

In 1996, Osama bin Laden settled in Afghanistan. He met an ISI representative, who proposed an alliance between bin Laden's network and the Taliban. ISI and bin Laden assisted the Taliban, which won the Afghan civil war in 1996, achieving ISI's aim of a sympathetic government in Kabul.[51]

In 1997, ISI asked Saudi intelligence for permission to sponsor bin Laden. As Riyadh was a generous patron of Pakistani military projects, ISI wanted to ensure that after the November 1995 and June 1996 anti-U.S. terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia the Saudi government would not oppose the relationship. Riyadh did not.

ISI took Saudi money to fund *madrassa*s, which indoctrinated extremists, providing militants to fight India in Kashmir. *Madrassa*s became recruiting and training pipelines whose graduates played key roles in the Taliban and Kashmiri terrorist groups. They

Pakistani tribal militants, calling themselves mujahideen, raid store in village near Afghan border to enforce strict Islamic law

AP/Wide World Photo (Haji Habibullah Khan)

expanded because Pakistan did not invest in public education and other schools were not economically feasible. Graduating extremist students, *madrassa*s taught few practical skills and contributed little to Pakistan's economic, political, or social development. The "network of madrassas became the nursery where the Taliban was raised. Once the Taliban gained momentum in Afghanistan, they became independent of ISI. The impact on Pakistan was that its permeable borders couldn't isolate the religious sectarianism Pakistan nurtured in Afghanistan."[52]

Within ISI's ranks were many al Qaeda and Taliban sympathizers who organized and funded the Taliban. Ties to the Taliban and bin Laden left a ubiquitous ISI presence in Afghanistan as the directorate continued to recruit militants for Kashmir.[53] Its ranks were penetrated with pro–al Qaeda and pro-Taliban officers to the extent that intelligence ISI provided to the CIA on bin Laden and the Taliban was tainted.

U.S. intelligence knew of links between ISI, the Taliban, bin Laden, and al Qaeda to coordinate training in Afghan camps for Kashmiri militants, and ISI was suspected of providing equipment and funding to operate them.[54] In Pakistan, ISI was "too powerful for the government of the day to question and too intrusive for any army chief of staff to clean up."[55]

The Taliban went its own way; having used Pakistani benefactors to gain power, it heeded Islamabad's influence even less.

ISI Involvement in Kashmir

During the 1980s, President Zia employed ISI to "organize, fund, and train Kashmiris, using Islam to motivate them" as part of his "Islamicization" campaign.[56] However, his influence began to fade

to the extent that ISI was free from the normal constraints imposed by the chain of command. Emboldened by this autonomy, the ISI saw no reason why it could not apply the same tactics in Kashmir. If the Soviet superpower could be humbled, the Indian behemoth could be compelled to seek a compromise solution on its outstanding differences with Pakistan.[57]

After Zia's death, ISI control over Afghan groups continued as it supported militant groups in Kashmir and anti-India operations. It trained Kashmiri dissidents and permitted Pakistan-based Islamists to conduct operations in Kashmir as "Kashmir became the new '*jihad*' and the Hindus the new 'infidels.'"[58]

During the 1990s, ISI fomented terrorism in Kashmir. Using expertise obtained during the Afghan war, it organized, trained, and equipped "freedom fighters"[59] to infiltrate Kashmir. Based on success against the Soviets, it modeled its Kashmir campaign on the Afghan jihad. ISI sponsored Kashmiri mujahideen to use low intensity conflict to force a political settlement with India.

In 1990, ISI operated 30 training camps for Kashmiri militants.[60] By 2002, there were 128 ISI-sponsored camps training militants to fight in Kashmir. Approximately 1,000 members of Harakat-ul-Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Muhammad (JEM), and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET) received training each year. Since Islamabad thought it lacked strategic depth vis-à-vis conventional conflict with India, tying down Indian forces in Kashmir asymmetrically prevented them from engaging Pakistan elsewhere. Basing the fighters in Afghanistan, Pakistan created plausible deniability, strategic depth, and a "friendly" state bolstering its western flank.

Washington warned Islamabad that continued ISI support for insurgents in Kashmir would damage bilateral relations. In 1993, the United States placed Islamabad on the terrorism "watch list" due to ISI support for Kashmiri insurgent groups, which threatened regional stability. The next step was to formally declare Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism. Under

Islamabad exploited relationships with the Taliban to use Afghan training facilities for Kashmir-bound mujahideen.[65] ISI convinced the Taliban to relinquish control of al Qaeda camps to bin Laden, which the Taliban exploited, knowing Pakistan would "deny them nothing, as long as they provided bases for Kashmiri and Pakistani militants."[66] Although Pakistan allied with the Taliban to provide strategic depth against India, it provided strategic depth to the Taliban.

Pakistan increased pressure on Indian-controlled Kashmir, raising the operational tempo of attacks and compelling India to send more forces, tying them down while raising Kashmiri issues with the international community. ISI augmented Kashmiri native fighters with militants educated in Pakistani *madrassa*s and trained in Afghan al Qaeda camps.[67]

ISI's training of militants in Afghanistan to fight in Kashmir gave Islamabad plausible deniability against Indian terror sponsorship claims. After bin Laden returned to Afghanistan, ISI sent militants destined to fight in Kashmir through his training camps. ISI subsidized the camps and wired bin Laden's house for security.[68] Ties to Kashmiri militants were endangered when Prime Minister Sharif sought improved relations with India. He was opposed not by New Delhi, but by ISI, which feared that increased trade between India and

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pressure from Washington, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif stifled activity by militants, in some cases sending them back to Afghanistan. Operating from eastern Afghanistan, the militants enjoyed privatized support as Islamabad tried to distance itself from its own proxy warriors. During that period, bin Laden became a sponsor of Kashmiri militants.

Pakistani support to Kashmiri jihadists "fundamentally changed the nature of the struggle. . . . Pakistani backing enabled the Kashmiris to sustain and expand what otherwise might have been a limited and short-lived struggle."[61] This expanded the conflict's scope by "helping organize and insert large numbers of foreign militants into the struggle."[62] The foreign fighters were "trained in the killing fields of Afghanistan and paid and supplied" by ISI.[63] As late as 2002, 25 to 50 percent of the terrorists fighting in Kashmir were ISI-recruited foreign fighters, not Kashmiris.[64]

Pakistan would jeopardize ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Kashmir.[69]

When the United States retaliated against bin Laden–related sites in Sudan and Afghanistan for the East Africa bombings, U.S. officials gave Pakistan notice that cruise missiles would overfly Pakistani airspace. While bin Laden escaped, the missiles hit two ISI training camps in Afghanistan, killing 5 ISI officers and 20 trainees.[70] ISI support for extremism continued to the extent that:

Pakistani secret services encouraged splits in the radical movements. This was partly to be able to control them better, but also in order to cover the tracks left by their operations. The Jaish-i-Mohammad was apparently set up with ISI support as a counterweight to the Lashkar-i-Taiba, which had become too powerful in Kashmir. This was a relative setback, since far from reining in the tempo of terrorist action it

caused the two movements to compete so that each would seek to carry out more spectacular operations than the other. An additional reason for the ISI's encouragement of splits is its desire to separate the Afghan and Kashmiri jihads and to distance the Pushtuns from operations in Kashmir.[71]

Allies or Interests?

As President George W. Bush forged an antiterror coalition after al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks, the United States relied on Pakistan "as a critical ally in the war against forces it helped foster."[72] General Pervez Musharraf received an ultimatum to help America wage the war on terror against al Qaeda and dismantle the Taliban[73] or become a target.[74] For self-preservation and self-interest,[75] as well as to avoid India allying with the United States against him, Musharraf withdrew Pakistani military advisors from Afghanistan and ordered ISI to cease operations.[76]

With Washington's encouragement, Pakistan went from al Qaeda supporter to war on terror coalition member, consolidating its power against internal terrorist groups and instability from Afghanistan.[77]

ISI became a primary instrument to combat the Taliban and al Qaeda, which it helped create.[78] Washington relied on ISI as its "eyes and ears" in operations to capture bin Laden and dismantle the Taliban. Pakistan provided terrorism intelligence to the United States, but some ISI elements provided incomplete or misleading information.[79] There were allegations that ISI helped bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Omar escape capture.[80] Aligning himself with Washington, Musharraf reversed Pakistan's dealings with the Taliban, al Qaeda, and some groups Islamabad sponsored to fight for the Taliban or conduct terrorist acts in Indian-controlled Kashmir.[81]

Pakistan changed course more than any country in the war on terror coalition; ISI shifted from working with extremists to fighting them. While ISI restrained some clients, others labeled Musharraf a traitor and tried to assassinate him. Allying Pakistan with the United States, Musharraf alienated internal factions but ensured Islamabad would not be targeted for previous Taliban support. He fired the ISI chief and replaced him with one who purged pro-Taliban members.[82]

There were collaborative successes. Pakistan captured and gave the United States over 500 al Qaeda and Taliban members, including Abu Zubaydah, Ramzi bin al-Shibh, Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, and Abu Faraj al-Libbi.[83] Islamabad became the most important ally in the war on terror, critical to anti-Taliban/al Qaeda efforts.

Pakistan suffered over 300 casualties in the war on terror, the highest casualty rate for a U.S. ally. In addition:

intelligence provided by Pakistan has led to successes against terrorism around the world . . . all of the top al-Qaida leaders captured to date have been apprehended in Pakistan with the government's help, while Pakistan itself has arrested more than seven hundred terror suspects. The country has also banned or placed on watch lists a large number of sectarian and militant organizations and has enacted numerous antiterrorism laws, freezing thirty-two bank accounts suspected of belonging to terrorist organizations.[84]

Pakistani tribal militia meet in South Waziristan area to search for al Qaeda supporters believed to be hiding near Afghan border

AP/Wide World Photo (Ashsanullah Wazir)

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ISI: On Which Side?

General Musharraf's position is precarious; his personal security and coup attempt possibilities make the country and region unstable. Pakistan is a key partner to the United States, and ISI is an integral part of Pakistan's antiterror strategy, yet ISI's relationships with the Taliban and certain Kashmiri groups (some on the U.S. State Department's terrorist organizations list) may work at cross-purposes.

Musharraf wanted to ally with Washington yet continue Islamabad's nuclear program and Kashmiri militant support. This came to the fore on October 1, 2001, when militants attacked the Kashmiri legislature in Srinagar, killing 38. ISI-sponsored Jaish-e-Muhammad claimed responsibility. The next day, JEM leader Masood Azhar, pressured by ISI, denied his organization's culpability.[85]

On December 13, 2001, ISI-sponsored Lashkar-e-Taiba militants attacked India's parliament in New Delhi. When India went to a war footing, Musharraf ordered the arrest of 50 LET members and banned certain militant groups, declaring he would not allow terrorism, even for Kashmir. Pakistani authorities arrested several hundred militants, including LET and JEM members, but soon released them. Stephen Cohen observed that bans "had no impact on either the membership or the leadership of these groups, nor have they stopped the Pakistani government from using them for their own purposes."[86]

Extremist infiltration of Pakistan's government came to light after the murder of investigative journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002. Pearl was examining ISI links to terrorist groups. After one of his assassins surrendered

to his ISI "handler," authorities waited a week before notifying the United States, highlighting ISI support for regional and Kashmiri militant groups. The incident called attention to the possible involvement of ISI, or its client JEM, in Pearl's abduction and murder, raising questions of Musharraf's control over ISI.

In 2003, probable rogue ISI elements reportedly helped Taliban infiltrators reenter Afghanistan from Pakistan. U.S. complaints led to arrests of Pakistani army officers tied to al Qaeda.[87] This underscored al Qaeda reliance on a sanctuary. Northwestern Pakistan may have served as a haven for al Qaeda and the Taliban to wage guerrilla and terrorist operations in Afghanistan. Under pressure from Washington to stop militant penetrations into Kashmir from Pakistan, Musharraf instead temporarily lowered the militants' profile but did not terminate the militant-ISI relationship or suppress their activities.

The war on terror replaced Cold War containment as Washington's policy and strategy focus. Does Washington need Islamabad or vice versa? Is it possible to carry out effective, combined U.S.-Pakistani counterterrorism operations yet encourage structural reforms within Pakistan's security organs with any hope of success? While the easy answer is to continue the war on terror and maintain the status quo, ignoring Pakistan's structural deficiencies, this path of least resistance has potentially deadly ramifications.

Since Pakistan has terrorism, nuclear weapons, religious extremism, economic instability, and political volatility, easy answers provide little guidance in a dangerous, fluid environment. If, due to ISI sins of omission or commission, terrorists acquire Pakistani nuclear weapons and there is a nuclear incident or nuclear war, the consequences will be unthinkable.

With no easy answers or guarantees, Washington must attempt the role of honest broker—promoting measures other than war to achieve its global aims, trying to help Pakistan peacefully achieve its regional goals, and promoting regional stability. This will be difficult since Islamabad will continue to pursue regional aims regarding India, Kashmir, and its nuclear program—and Washington needs Pakistan's assistance in the war on terror.

Nonetheless, the United States needs to offer economic and diplomatic incentives to convince Pakistan to cease support for militant Islamists. Military aid should be taken off the table, as it will only find its way into the hands of the militants. By promoting social and educational reforms within Pakistan, Washington can help steer Islamabad toward a reformist path to join the community of nations as a respectable member. As the nonmilitary instruments of statecraft have many potent combinations that can be attempted, even though the efforts may ultimately be unsuccessful, the United States must try and try again. **JFQ**

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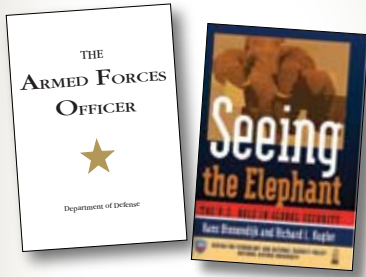
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