

In a surprise announcement on Tuesday, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates revealed and accepted the "resignation" of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander Navy Adm. William J. Fallon. This was no regular personnel shift in Washington, especially since Fallon held the post for less than a year. With two wars under way and a crisis looming in the Levant, Fallon either resigned in protest or was forced out. The question is why.

The reason is not Iraq, where responsibility and accountability have been shifted squarely to Gen. David Petraeus. Our eyes fall upon the great failure of Fallon's tenure and the far eastern reaches of his area of responsibility: Afghanistan and Pakistan. Fallon's role is largely irrelevant. The underlying issues of Afghanistan and Pakistan predate his tenure. However, the situations in the two countries deteriorated under his supervision.

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In Afghanistan, despite its vaunted success, the 2001 U.S. invasion was never really all that successful. The Taliban abandoned Kabul and largely declined to fight, despite some skirmishes and battles with al Qaeda supporters and other hardliners. When Washington turned its attention to Iraq, it left a NATO alliance intending to reconstruct the fractured country and a relatively modest military contingent to hunt al Qaeda and Taliban forces.

But the Pentagon never really addressed the complex underlying issues of terrain, ethnicity, tribal loyalty and religious extremism that have left the country war torn for three decades. The only central government Afghanistan has ever known has always relied on tribal loyalty and large military forces. These underlying issues were not clearly evident after U.S. forces kicked in the door in Afghanistan. U.S. forces found calm, since the Taliban declined to fight, and proceeded with reconstruction as Washington's focus shifted to Iraq.

But the Taliban resurged. And in their decentralized, factionalized way they began to make a nuisance of themselves. Then they began adopting tactics that had proven successful in Iraq, like the improvised explosive device. Meanwhile, extremist elements from Pakistan began to pour over the border.

But this was not a one-way vector, and the jihadist insurgency in Afghanistan spilled over into Pakistan, where the insurgency is not only operating from a comparative safe haven, but is compounding political instability in Islamabad and exacerbating the tensions within Pakistani society.

Under Fallon's tenure, in other words, if it did not all come crashing down, it certainly did become apparent to everyone in Washington that the persistent stalemates that had been easy enough to ignore thus far ♦ the military stalemate in Afghanistan and the political stalemate in Pakistan ♦ had become unacceptable and unsustainable.

Fallon's "resignation" was about these very unaddressed problems. Stratfor's strategic perspective does not often fall to individuals; we see larger forces at work in the world. Fallon did not matter. But the empty seat at CENTCOM is likely to be an exception. Not simply because it is one of the most crucial posts in the U.S. military today, but because of the shift in focus Fallon's removal entails and especially because of the two individuals at the top of the list to replace him: Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis and Petraeus himself.

Petraeus was one of the architects of the "surge" strategy and has overseen its successes thus far. He was also a principal force behind the Army's new counterinsurgency manual. Mattis is something of a legend in the Marines. Not only did he lead Task Force 58 into Afghanistan in 2001, he commanded the 1st Marine Division in Iraq and later the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force during the surge. Petraeus and Mattis worked closely on the new counterinsurgency manual.

These two individuals matter because since Sept. 11, 2001, they have both solidly established their core competency as counterinsurgency. They do not hesitate to wield military force, but they understand that oftentimes in counterinsurgency the real trick is not bringing that firepower to bear.

The appointment of either man to the top post at CENTCOM has serious implications for the

conduct of operations in Afghanistan and the situation in Pakistan. (In the event, Petraeus got the job) No two contenders for the job are more likely to forgo the current stalemate in Afghanistan and come at the problem with renewed intensity. Indeed, it is the first real telling potential shift in the command of Afghan operations, perhaps since 2001. And neither contender is likely to sit by and let Pakistan continue to simmer, either.

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