

Pakistan's Record on Terrorism: Conflicted Goals, Compromised Performance

On June 24, 2003, at a Camp David meeting with President General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, President George W. Bush declared that key al Qaeda terrorists had been successfully neutralized thanks to “the effective border security measures and law enforcement cooperation throughout [Pakistan], and ... to the leadership of President Musharraf.” Although Osama bin Laden was still at large, Bush nevertheless concluded that “the people reporting to him, the chief operators of al Qaeda, people like Khalid Sheik Mohammed, are no longer a threat to the United States or [to] Pakistan, for that matter.”¹

Barely four years later, the administration has been compelled to revise the president's earlier, more optimistic assessment. Faced with a dramatic resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and a steady reconstitution of the al Qaeda network in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, a July 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) concluded plainly that al Qaeda “has protected or regenerated key elements of its homeland attack capability, including: a safe haven in ... [the FATA], operational lieutenants, and its top leadership.”²

That the rejuvenation of al Qaeda and the Taliban is due in large part to their ability to secure a sanctuary in Pakistan has incensed Americans across the political spectrum. Because Washington has provided Islamabad with almost \$10 billion in overt security and economic assistance since 2002

Ashley J. Tellis is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He is also a member of TWQ's editorial board. He thanks Alyssa Ayres, Chris Fair, Jack Gill, Frédéric Grare, Neil Joeck, Dan Markey, Jessica Mathews, and George Perkovich for their most helpful comments on the manuscript. Thanks are also owed to Sam McCormally for research assistance. This article previews a larger monograph, *Pakistan and the War on Terror: Conflicted Goals, Compromised Performance* (Carnegie Endowment, 2008).

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and continues to compensate the Pakistani military for its counterterrorism efforts with roughly \$1 billion in annual reimbursements, many U.S. leaders are beginning to wonder whether Pakistan is in fact doing its part in the “war on terror.”³

The growing dissatisfaction in the United States about Pakistani performance in counterterrorism operations is premised largely on the assumption of Islamabad’s mendacity, that Musharraf’s regime, despite being well compensated and its habitual claims to be performing at par, is willfully neglectful of its commitment to root out al Qaeda and Taliban cadres operating from its territory for a combination of strategic and ideological reasons.⁴ The reality, however, is more complex. Although Pakistani performance in the war on terrorism has undoubtedly fallen short of what is expected in the United States, Islamabad’s inability to defeat the terrorist groups operating from its soil is rooted in many factors that go beyond its admittedly serious motivational deficiencies to combat terrorism.

An analytical understanding of the problems associated with Pakistani performance in the combined counterterrorism operations is essential if the United States is to avoid becoming locked into the paralyzing choice either of coercing Pakistan with varying degrees of discrimination, as urged by many voices in the current political debate, or standing steadfast and providing publicly uncritical support for Musharraf, as the Bush administration has done so far.

Pakistan’s Four-Part Approach to Counterterrorism

Although Pakistan has been a front-line state in the war on terrorism since the tragic September 11, 2001, attacks, there is no doubt that Musharraf initially cast his lot with the United States mainly as a result of deep fears about what U.S. enmity might imply for Pakistan’s long-standing rivalry with India, efforts at economic revival, nuclear weapons program, and equities in the conflict over Kashmir.⁵ Desiring to protect Islamabad’s interests in these areas and to avoid becoming a target itself in the campaign against terrorism, Musharraf reluctantly cut loose Islamabad’s ties with the Taliban, a force it had nurtured, trained, and equipped for almost a decade in its effort to secure control over Afghanistan. Islamabad then stood aside as the U.S.-led coalition assisted Pakistan’s detested antagonist, the Northern Alliance, to rout its own clients and their al Qaeda accomplices and seize power in Kabul.

The U.S. inauguration of the “global war on terror” compelled Musharraf to make good on his “principled” decision to join the U.S.-led coalition. This inevitably required him to confront the sources of terrorism that had developed within Pakistan, most of which ironically resulted from his own army’s previ-

ous decisions to nurture radical Islamist organizations because of their utility to Islamabad's military campaigns in Kashmir and Afghanistan.⁶ Four different terrorist groups were implicated in this regard: domestic sectarian groups, anti-Indian terrorist groups, the Taliban, and al Qaeda.

Musharraf first targeted the domestic sectarian groups engaged in violent bouts of bloodletting within the country. Although many of these groups had enjoyed the support of the Pakistani government, the military, and the intelligence services, their unexpected growth in power during the 1990s had become not only an embarrassment to their sponsors but also a serious challenge to domestic order in Pakistan.⁷ As analyst Christine Fair summarized, "The scale of sectarian violence in Pakistan is staggering, with hundreds of people killed or injured in such attacks each year."⁸

Confronted by such challenges, Musharraf was only too happy to exploit the opportunities offered by the war on terrorism to crack down on these groups and suppress them once and for all. He did so, however, only selectively, focusing the government's energies primarily on those groups whose objectives were out of sync with the military's perception of the national interest, those engaging in jihadi violence within Pakistan rather than in support of Islamabad's external ambitions vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan. Using the entire panoply of coercive state capabilities, these entities were therefore put down with a heavy hand through arrests, targeted assassinations, and aggravated intergroup massacres.

The second set of groups, the terrorist outfits operating with Pakistani army and Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISID) support against India, was treated in a remarkably different way compared to the "antinational" sectarian militants. These groups were the long lances in the Pakistani campaign to wrest the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir from India. Beginning in the late 1980s, the Pakistani military had financed, trained, and armed these cadres and launched them on their murderous missions into Kashmir and elsewhere inside the Indian union. Because the struggle for control over the disputed Himalayan state was fully underway by the time the war on terrorism was inaugurated, these terrorist groups were more or less exempted from Musharraf's domestic campaign against violence and extremism. This exclusion was justified both on the strategic rationale that Pakistan's participation in the war on terrorism was intended, among other things, to protect its freedom of action in Kashmir and on the repeated, though fraudulent assertion that these groups, far from being terrorists, only personified the legitimate Kashmiri struggle for self-determination against India.⁹

Four different terrorist groups in Pakistan were implicated by the 'global war on terror.'

Musharraf focused on groups engaging in jihadi violence within Pakistan.

This charade was rudely interrupted by the December 13, 2001, terrorist attack on India's parliament, after which, in response to New Delhi's subsequent military mobilization, U.S. diplomacy compelled Pakistan to initiate a series of measures to restrict the activities of its terrorist clients. The implementation of these actions, however, was at best half-hearted and inconsistent. Consequently, to this day Musharraf has not sought to eliminate the Deobandi

terrorist groups operating against India. He only modulated their activities, depending on the extent of satisfaction he derives from the prevailing state of diplomatic relations with India and the progress secured in the ongoing Indian-Pakistani peace process.

The third group relevant to Pakistani operations against terrorism consisted of the Taliban, that is, the Pashtun remnants of the regime ejected from power in Kabul. After

their defeat at the hands of the Northern Alliance, many in the rank and file withdrew to their villages in the southern and eastern Afghan provinces, as well as along the border areas on the western side of the Durand line separating Afghanistan from Pakistan.

Given their significance as high-value targets, however, the core Taliban leadership, along with those Pakistani Pashtuns who had joined their movement, crossed over the Afghan-Pakistani border into the relative safety of the FATA. Because most of the Taliban's fighters were originally mobilized by the Pakistani ISID from the Ghilzai confederation of Pashtuns that dominates southeastern Afghanistan and from other Pashtun tribes inhabiting the FATA, their return to these ancestral lands was not surprising. In fact, all the evidence relating to the incidence of terrorist attacks since 2001 suggests strongly that the war-fighting cadres of the Taliban remain in these areas.

The exact location of the supreme leadership of the Taliban movement, however, cannot be established with any comparable clarity. Irrespective of where Mullah Muhammad Omar and his closest associates found shelter in the immediate aftermath of their defeat, Afghan military and civilian intelligence officials as well as NATO commanders today believe that this coterie eventually found refuge in Quetta in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, where they continue to operate to this day.

Because the Pakistani state was most intimately involved in the creation of the Taliban before its fall, Musharraf's antiterrorism campaign after the September 11 attacks deliberately avoided any concerted targeting of this group, in particular its senior leadership.¹⁰ No other explanation is consistent with the fact that while Pakistani military, intelligence, and paramilitary forces

operating in the border areas apprehended scores of al Qaeda operatives, including numerous key individuals in the al Qaeda hierarchy, only a handful of senior Taliban leaders have been killed or captured in southern Afghanistan or in the FATA.

This asymmetry in seizures is all the more odd because, prior to Operation Enduring Freedom, Pakistani military and ISID liaison elements were deeply intertwined with all levels of the Taliban command structure and its war fighters in the field. In contrast, the Pakistani intelligence relationship with al Qaeda in Afghanistan was far more tenuous, yet its military forces have apprehended far more al Qaeda cadres than Taliban operatives.

These successes against al Qaeda have invariably been attributed by Pakistanis, including Musharraf, to the fact that it was always easier to identify the ethnically alien al Qaeda elements along the frontier in comparison to the Taliban who, being ethnically Pashtun, were able to disguise their identities by assimilating into the larger tribal population.¹¹ This explanation, although partly true, is also disingenuous because the Pakistani ISID was deeply involved in the recruitment, training, arming, and operations of Taliban fighters at multiple bureaucratic levels. Moreover, it also maintained the most intense liaison relationships with the Ghilzai tribes whose population was disproportionately represented in the Taliban. Because protecting these relationships was deemed to be especially critical for Pakistan's national security interests after the Northern Alliance victory in Kabul, the large number of Taliban foot soldiers that made their way into the FATA were primarily ignored by Pakistani counterterrorism operations as long as they did not engage in any untoward activities that either called attention to their presence or magnified the troubles confronting the Pakistani state.

Such an approach could not be extended to the fourth group, al Qaeda, which had also taken up sanctuary in the FATA. Although al Qaeda continued to have sympathizers within the extreme fringes of Pakistani society even after the September 11 attacks, the Pakistani military establishment did not enjoy the luxury of slackening in its campaign against this target because of the consequences for U.S.-Pakistani relations at this time. Bilateral ties were just recovering after a decade of U.S. disfavor, and Washington had just embarked on a ferocious campaign against al Qaeda worldwide. Most senior Pakistani military officers were also genuinely horrified by the attacks and, fearing for their own country's future, supported Musharraf's decision to engage and destroy this terrorist organization of global reach.

Terrorists operating against India were more or less exempted from Musharraf's campaign.

The Pakistani military accordingly began to prosecute the war against al Qaeda with great vigor, if not always with finesse, through multiple instruments.¹² These included providing the United States with facilities and access to carry out Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and conducting various law enforcement and internal security operations, sometimes in cooperation with their U.S. counterparts, aimed at interdicting terrorist financing and apprehending and rendering terrorist targets for prosecution abroad.

Pakistan has apprehended scores of al Qaeda operatives, but only a handful of Taliban leaders.

Most importantly, in December 2001 the Pakistani military initiated Operation al-Mizan, a large-scale effort that involved moving major military formations into the FATA, an area in which regular army units had not been ordinarily deployed for decades. These infantry forces joined the Frontier Corps regiments, the paramilitary formations usually present in the region, both as a show of force

to reassert the strong state presence that historically was lacking and to apprehend the al Qaeda elements that had taken shelter within the area.¹³

This military operation, which took the form of a gigantic cordon-and-search maneuver, had several consequences. First, it resulted in the capture of numerous al Qaeda operatives—some 700 at last count—who have since been turned over to the United States. Second, it forced some though by no means all senior al Qaeda operatives such as Khalid Sheikh Muhammad and Ramzi Binalshibh to disperse further inward into Pakistan, where their insertion into less ideologically congenial surroundings and their need to rely on more complex means of communication further increased their susceptibility to detection and arrest. Third, the dramatic incursion of the Pakistani state in the FATA made conditions sufficiently inhospitable for al Qaeda such that its senior leadership and cadres were compelled to relocate under fire from South to North Waziristan and beyond, from which they operate to this day. This forced displacement had the beneficial effect of disrupting many planned terrorist operations. On the other hand, the dispersal of the organization's leadership in the northern FATA, where the terrain is especially inhospitable, the population is violently pro-Taliban, and the presence of the Pakistani army is especially thin, has inadvertently made the task of destroying the al Qaeda core all the more difficult.¹⁴

In any event, these outcomes suggest that although Pakistan began as a reluctant entrant into the global war on terrorism, it has since become an active participant in the struggle. More than 85,000 Pakistani troops remain deployed along the Afghan-Pakistani border, and more than 600 of them have

already sacrificed their lives in counterterrorism operations, as compared to 479 U.S. casualties in Operation Enduring Freedom. Further, Islamabad itself has now become a victim of terrorism as a variety of groups, ranging from those previously nurtured and now discarded by the Pakistani state to more distant beneficiaries of past Pakistani policies such as al Qaeda, seek to wreak revenge against institutions and individuals whom they had previously counted among their sponsors and friends.

That Pakistan has made significant contributions to defeating various terrorist groups is therefore undeniable, yet its larger campaign against terrorism has also been conspicuously selective and perhaps self-serving. Although it has secured major gains in eradicating some domestic, antinational sectarian terrorist groups and has contributed disproportionately to the ongoing campaign against al Qaeda, it has been much more reticent to conclusively eliminate those terrorist entities operating against India in Kashmir and elsewhere and against Afghanistan in the FATA, as well as those groups operating against Afghanistan that routinely transit back and forth to the southern and eastern Afghan provinces.¹⁵ The protection of the terrorist infrastructure that supports these groups has produced undesirable blowback effects because the actors traditionally involved in perpetrating terrorism in Kashmir increasingly assist the Taliban and al Qaeda in operations, not only against Afghanistan but also the United States and even Pakistan itself.

Motivational and Institutional Complexities

The Afghan government's dissatisfaction and, now increasingly, the American polity's displeasure with Pakistan's performance in counterterrorism operations is conditioned considerably by the perception of Pakistan's unwillingness to crack down on terrorism comprehensively. This is a serious but, in actuality, complex charge. By all accounts, Musharraf himself is strongly committed to purging both al Qaeda and the Taliban. He has repeatedly identified the "Talibanization" of Pakistan as the most pressing threat facing his state, but whether this translates into a decision physically to apprehend or eradicate the Taliban cadres, especially its leadership, is less clear.¹⁶

The nucleus of military officials around Musharraf appears to reflect his own sinuosity. Although all senior Pakistani military officers are agreed that the al Qaeda presence in the FATA must be eliminated, the diversity of views with regard to the Taliban is considerable. Many feel that the optimal outcome for Pakistan would be simply a Taliban that progressively loses its effectiveness and support, thereby fading into obscurity, a finale that would spare them the distasteful obligation of having to turn their guns against their old clients. Others are conflicted about these reactionaries for different reasons.

Al Qaeda's dispersal in the northern FATA has inadvertently made destroying it more difficult.

To begin with, many officers are disenchanted by Washington's approach to managing the larger issues associated with Afghanistan's political reconstitution. Since the emergency *loya jirga* held in 2002 and the subsequent Afghan presidential election of 2004, these officials have been dismayed by what they perceive as U.S. partiality toward the Durrani Pashtuns, who have traditionally been the privileged political elite in Afghan society and from whose ranks emerged President Hamid Karzai. The calculated neglect of the Ghilzai Pashtuns in contrast, who are primarily a rural and uneducated peasantry and who constituted a critical source of manpower for the Taliban cause, grates many Pakistani national security managers. Not only do they believe that the continuing alienation of the Ghilzai feeds the Taliban ranks, but it also represents an enduring and deliberate disregard of their own clients in intra-Afghan politics. This latter consideration is significant because it has the effect of portraying Islamabad as feckless and incapable

of influencing U.S. policy in directions more helpful to its friends, despite Islamabad's large investments in the U.S. war on terrorism.

When these concerns are added to other strategic calculations about protecting the Taliban as a hedge against either the failure of the Karzai regime in Kabul or the dreaded prospect of increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan, the senior leadership of the Pakistani military, as well as Musharraf, believe they have good enough reasons to avoid targeting the Taliban comprehensively in the manner sought by Kabul and Washington.¹⁷ The dangers of a heightened and targeted anti-Ghilzai campaign leading to political mobilization that renews the demand for an independent "Pashtunistan" further exacerbates the fears of senior Pakistani military officials.¹⁸

Although ambivalence about the Taliban at senior levels in the Pakistani military thus has both strategic and self-interested dimensions, other, more prosaic, but tactically important considerations also play a role. Recognizing that the Taliban are essentially Ghilzai Pashtuns with deep ties to the tribes that have dominated the FATA for centuries, many Pakistani commanders are afraid that any continued, large-scale military presence in the area, especially if exemplified by massed infantry operations of the kind mounted in 2002–2004, will only further inflame tribal sensitivities and diminish the cooperation between tribal leaders and the armed forces that is absolutely necessary if the latter are to apprehend the terrorist elements located in their midst. Because such embitterment has already occurred, impeding the success of antiterrorism operations, the leadership of the Pakistani military remains

continually fearful that any further aggravation could lead to even greater tribal support for terrorist groups closeted in the area and to systematic denial of access to the military units tasked for operations therein.¹⁹

The most problematic elements within the Pakistani state, however, are probably the ISID officers in the field who were tasked with managing the liaison relationship with the Taliban over the years. Some simply feel loyalty to their old clients. Others are content to exploit their leadership's own ambivalence about the Taliban. Still others are prepared to disregard leadership directives that enjoin interdicting the Taliban either for nationalist, ideological, or personal reasons if they believe they can get away with it. Whatever the cause, the field operatives of the ISID are widely perceived in Afghanistan and the United States as being less than fully committed to targeting the Taliban leadership in the manner required for the success of counterterrorism operations in the FATA and beyond.²⁰

By all accounts the Pakistani army is a professional and bureaucratically efficient organization. Consequently, the notion that ISID officers might be undermining policies pursued by the corporate leadership of the Pakistani army cannot be reconciled with the image of the Pakistani army as a tightly centralized organization unless due credit is given to three realities.²¹ First, the ISID, like many other intelligence organizations worldwide, has considerable operational latitude. The implementation of many ISID operations is typically not regulated by "detailed control" but "directive control" in which field officers have the flexibility to accomplish strategic goals without having to secure prior approval of every particular from their superiors.

In addition, because ISID is simultaneously an external intelligence organization and a coercive instrument for implementing the preferences of military authoritarianism in Pakistan, Musharraf's management of this organization historically was manifested primarily through the promulgation of broadly defined policies. These policies were then implemented by a chain of subordinates who acted on their understanding of his strategic intent, which served to protect him from detailed knowledge of what may frequently have been highly problematic activities, be they illegal, out of Musharraf's control, or both.

Whatever the real explanation for ISID recalcitrance may be—the truth probably implicates a complex mixture of factors—the Pakistani campaign against the Taliban is hobbled by convolution and hesitation. Over the last several years, this has resulted in a deepening entrenchment of the Taliban and its sympathizers throughout the seven administrative agencies of the FATA and a growing expansion of their influence in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan.²² The Taliban movement and its sympathizers have moved beyond the traditionally stateless regions close to the Durand Line and into more settled areas within Pakistan. More ominously, what began as local-

ized terrorist operations now threatens to evolve into a mature insurgency with the militant opposition able to eject government forces from a given territory, hold ground against state opposition, and coerce any local opponents into cooperating to sustain the newly secured safe haven.²³

Undoubtedly, the survival of the Taliban sanctuary in the FATA, to include the talibanization of the area more generally, has been singularly responsible for the continuing regeneration of al Qaeda as an organization because it has permitted the leadership and the operatives of this terrorist group, who are relatively smaller in number, to safely “dissolve” into a larger environment either that is hospitable to them directly or that protects them by disguising their presence amidst a larger pool of Taliban adherents.

Societal and Operational Challenges

Another equally important source of inadequacy has been the operational complexity of the counterterrorism operations themselves and Pakistan’s myriad weaknesses in coping with these challenges. These difficulties, three of which are illustrated in the discussion that follows, only complicate the challenges caused by the larger problem of whether Pakistan believes eliminating the Taliban decisively is in its national interest.

POOR TACTICAL INTELLIGENCE

First, Pakistan’s inability to secure the tactical intelligence required for successful counterterrorism operations against key Taliban and al Qaeda elements in the FATA has now become painfully obvious. Although the ISID and the army’s director general of military intelligence have primary responsibility for the collection of targeting intelligence in the FATA, their ability to carry out these tasks has been severely hampered in recent years in part because many Pakistani intelligence officers are simply sympathetic to radical Islamist elements. Even when this is not the case, however, state intelligence activities have been hindered by the peculiarities of the political structures in the FATA and the corrosive changes that have been occurring therein.

Although the tribal areas are physically located within Pakistani territory, they are not governed either by Pakistani laws and regulations or by the political institutions normally associated with national politics. In fact, the relationship between these tribal areas and the Pakistani state is regulated mainly by formal treaties, a link that resembles one existing between coordinate political entities, not super- and subordinate. These treaties not only guarantee the tribes’ immunity to the codified laws and regulations that govern political life in the rest of Pakistan, but also bestow exclusive responsibility on them for the

management of their own internal affairs. Most of the governing rules in the FATA are essentially unwritten, being based on a combination of *rewaj* (tribal customs) and *Shari'a* (Islamic law).

The foundation of maintaining order and authority in such a system, which is anchored in custom, tradition, and legal practices going back to the British Raj, lay in the inculcation of harmonious relations between the political agent—a midlevel civil servant ultimately responsible to the federal government in Islamabad—and the tribal *maliks*, or elders, who manage tribal affairs on a day-to-day basis. The ties between the agents and the *maliks* were critical to the production of good intelligence. The agents kept the government up to date about developments along the frontier, and the *maliks* used the subventions provided to buttress their own influence, access, and standing with the tribes they supervised.²⁴

A considerable diversity of views exists among senior military officers about the Taliban.

Over the last several decades, the FATA have witnessed a steady social transformation that resulted in the traditional authorities, the political agents, and the *maliks* being slowly supplanted by new religious leaders, the *maulvis*, who viewed issues of political loyalty primarily through religious or ideological lenses.²⁵ The rapid demise of the old social order thus made the long-standing Pakistani human intelligence collection apparatus dramatically ineffective, as the radicalized *maulvis*, viewing the protection of the Taliban and al Qaeda cadres in the FATA as a politico-religious obligation, appear determined to deny the Pakistani state the necessary information required to apprehend these targets. The widespread outcry in the frontier areas against the U.S. war in Iraq, coupled with the growing perception that Musharraf's prosecution of counterterrorism operations represents illegitimate support for a U.S. administration involved in a global anti-Muslim crusade, has only strengthened the determination of the *maulvis* and the new Islamists, who have filled the "power vacuum"²⁶ caused by the demise of the agent-malik relationship in the FATA, to protect the terrorist targets sought by Pakistan and the United States.²⁷

The limitations of Pakistani technical intelligence collection in the context of counterterrorism operations do not help matters. Pakistan does have an impressive range of national collection capabilities. For the most part, however, strategic intelligence collection in Pakistan is disproportionately oriented toward targeting India.²⁸ Islamabad is certainly capable of monitoring the communications devices used by the Taliban and al Qaeda if these devices resemble those supplied by the ISID to various Kashmiri terrorist groups and

recovered over the years by the Indian military. These low-power devices used for tactical communications, however, may defeat even technically competent surveillance if the latter is not positioned in close proximity to the threat. Furthermore, the use of more sophisticated technologies can elude even skilled surveillance systems, especially if these are not available or dedicated full time to the mission. Finally, the increased use of the Internet by Taliban and al Qaeda operatives, including the growing utilization of encryption software, makes it difficult for the ISID to monitor such communications systematically given Pakistan's relatively low technological capacity.²⁹

In principle, U.S. advantages here could serve to compensate, but the growing appreciation of the capabilities of U.S. assets has led Taliban and al Qaeda to rely increasingly on more primitive but secure means of communication, such as "snail mail" and human couriers, for their operational planning. This denies both Pakistan and the United States the kind of targeting data that might otherwise have become available through technical intelligence.³⁰ Recognizing these problems, Pakistan has begun the arduous task of rebuilding both its technical and human intelligence collection assets in the FATA. The latter capabilities are indeed the most critical, but these also take the longest to mature and to yield fruit.

SOCIAL DISRUPTIONS

Second, the arrival of the Pakistani army in strength in the FATA has resulted in social disruptions that have undermined its counterterrorism effectiveness. Although Musharraf's insertion of the army's 11th Corps and the Special Services Group battalions into the autonomous areas was a brave and necessary decision, it has nonetheless eroded the delicate compact that previously existed between the FATA and the Pakistani state. The resulting alienation and resentment on the part of the indigenous population has led to significant counterterrorism problems. The Pakistani army, which draws its cadres largely from outside the FATA, has often been stymied by their inability to secure the cooperation of the local populace, which views the army today as an unwelcome intruder. The Special Services Group is very effective in tactical counterterrorism operations but, being an elite unit, is far too diminutive to make a difference at the theater level.

The Frontier Corps, which is composed primarily of tribal levies and is the resident paramilitary force, could be potentially most effective, but it is often compromised by its close ties with the local inhabitants. Riddled with sympathizers, inadequately motivated, suspicious of Islamabad's and Washington's intentions, and poorly trained and equipped for counterterrorism operations, yet present in strength throughout the FATA, the Frontier Corps represents

the perfect exemplar of the structural challenge facing Pakistan's counterterrorism effort. Its best local units, the ones that share affinities with the tribes they patrol and consequently the forces likely to secure potentially the best intelligence, are also the fighting elements least able or willing to cope with the battle-hardened terrorists against whom they are deployed.³¹

Unfortunately, the infantry elements of the Pakistani army that have been pressed into the fight have their own problems as well. Unlike the Indian army, which now has considerable counterterrorism skills thanks to two decades of combating Pakistani-supported subconventional conflict, the infantry battalions of Pakistan's 11th Corps are configured primarily as strategic reserves for possible conventional warfare against India. Counterterrorism operations are not their forte, and although they have done a decent job in "learning by doing," they still betray a proclivity for operational responses that, although sensible against a conventional adversary, are less than effective and perhaps even counterproductive when dealing with irregular forces: large unit deployments, intense and sometimes indiscriminate employment of fire, and sledgehammer cordon-and-search tactics.³²

The hostile terrain in which counterterrorism operations are conducted and the unexpectedly heavy firepower that Taliban and al Qaeda terrorists have mustered in the past have been the two factors most responsible for the military's recourse to the relatively coarse counterterrorism tactics that are invariably derided. Harsh, rugged, and inaccessible mountainous terrain characterize the general geography of the area. These mountain ranges function as complex barriers that break up the terrain into numerous tiny basins or valleys. The size of settlements is generally very small, ranging from literally a few dozen people in some instances to a few thousand at most in the largest hamlets. The lines of communication between these outposts are invariably tenuous, extending along the ridgelines of the adjacent mountains or traversing them through numerous passes and trails, many of which support only pedestrian traffic or pack animals. Many of these routes are so intestinal and insignificant that they are often known only to the locals.³³

This terrain produces three significant operational consequences that have great impact on the conduct of military operations. First, the isolation of the small hamlets amidst craggy geophysical features make it virtually impossible for outsiders to monitor any personnel movement to or from these locations, especially if the transit occurs on foot, by animal, or by isolated vehicular traffic. This is especially true if the movement concerned occurs in adverse

The survival of the Taliban in the FATA has been responsible for the regeneration of al Qaeda.

The demise of the old social order made Pakistani human intelligence collection ineffective.

weather or at night. Second, the consanguine character of the tribal populations living in these areas implies that strangers cannot travel within the area without being readily detected. Safe passage in such circumstances usually occurs only when the local inhabitants are persuaded about the alien's peaceful intentions if individuals known to the resident tribes vouch for them. Third, the distances between the populated outposts can be significant given the absence of paved or metalled roads. Consequently, quick movement across

the terrain invariably requires either strenuous marches on foot or off established paths or the use of animals, accompanied by guides in most cases. In several locations, vehicular traffic is in fact possible but makes covert entry and exit through such access routes difficult.

The lessons offered by the army's engagements since 2002 are stark and clear: unless the tribal populations that reside in the FATA are sympathetic to the government and are willing to warn the army of the militants' presence in

their midst or desist from alerting the terrorists to the military's anticipated arrival in their hamlets, counterterrorism missions will fail or be condemned to rely on even greater applications of brute force for their success.

The inevitable but unintended consequence of implementing such solutions has been significant collateral damage among civilians in the tribal areas. The resident tribes have reacted to these losses by mounting violent attacks on and repeatedly seizing Pakistani troops and paramilitary forces deployed in the area. The more extremist outfits, including al Qaeda elements, have sought to exact their revenge by undertaking lethal suicide attacks against Pakistani military and intelligence personnel within the FATA and deep inside the nation's heartland in an effort to compel Musharraf to terminate his counterterrorism operations conclusively. Throughout Pakistani society in general, weariness with the counterterrorism operations being waged on Pakistani soil is growing.³⁴

Musharraf has attempted to cope with this increasing national fatigue and to circumvent the problems caused by his army's operations, minimize its casualties, and soothe the roiling political environment in the tribal areas by episodic strategies of appeasement built around "peace accords" with the pro-Taliban locals in South and North Waziristan.³⁵ Under these accords, the indigenous residents were tasked with preventing cross-border movements of terrorists into Afghanistan and further attacks on Pakistani civilian and military targets. They were also to ensure the ejection or the surrender of all foreigners from the FATA, in exchange for which the Pakistani army would

withdraw to its barracks, suspend its combat operations, and defer to the tribes to resolve disputes relating to the status of particular individuals.

Musharraf's understandable objective in pursuing such a solution was to restore the status quo ante, holding the tribes responsible for maintaining peace and security as they had done traditionally, but that strategy was doomed to fail because it did not appreciate the extent of radicalization in the FATA and the tribes' new determination to protect their al Qaeda and Taliban cortege against the Pakistani government and the United States, which were viewed as greater threats.

OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

Third, the operational context surrounding the counterterrorism effort in the tribal areas and in Afghanistan has changed considerably to the disadvantage of the Western coalition since Operation Enduring Freedom began in 2001. To begin with, the Taliban movement, which was never a tight and cohesive political entity in any case, has become an even looser network of affiliated individuals and groups since it was forced from power in Kabul. Today, the Taliban "alliance" can be characterized as a disparate congeries of several elements united only by a common religious ideology, a desire to regain power in Afghanistan or in their local areas of operation, and a deep antagonism toward the United States and its regional allies.

Several distinct elements can be identified in the current Taliban coalition: the leadership council centered around Mullah Omar, other war councils, Taliban cadres, tribal networks of former mujahideen commanders, and "Pakistani Taliban" commanders. Moreover, many drug lords in eastern and southern Afghanistan are either taxed or willingly contribute revenues that are indispensable for the Taliban war against Kabul. Sundry former anti-Soviet commanders control small groups of fighters and are engaged primarily in criminal activities while offering their services as guns for hire. Disaffected Afghan Pashtun tribes, most conspicuously the rural Ghilzai, feel disenfranchised in the current governing arrangements and subsequently continue to support the Taliban with manpower and sanctuary within Afghanistan. Finally, al Qaeda, although distinct from all the foregoing groups in that its focus of operations remains the global jihad, nonetheless collaborates with the Taliban to assist the latter in recovering control of Kabul while continuing to preserve a sanctuary in the FATA in the interim.

The implication of such a diverse target set is that destroying the "Taliban" today has become much more difficult because its previously weak hierarchical structure has become even more diffuse with truly diverse entities coordinating as necessary, but each also carrying out their own local agendas. The complexity of Islamabad's relations with many of the constituent elements in

the Taliban coalition does not help. Although Islamabad may readily cooperate in targeting some of the Pakistani Taliban commanders, the drug lords, the petty anti-Soviet commanders, and al Qaeda elements, the ties nurtured by its military and intelligence services with the Taliban leadership and the tribal networks of key former mujahideen commanders make these targets relatively inviolate, at least in the near term. Therefore, winning the war on terrorism in Afghanistan will require combating all of these targets as well as dealing with the sanctuary enjoyed by various militant groups in Pakistan.

Consequences of U.S. Neglect

The Bush administration itself bears some responsibility for reinforcing Musharraf's original instincts and entrenching what has now become the enduring Pakistani calculus. Although Bush affirmed in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks that his war on terrorism would be total and that states supporting terrorist groups would be required to divest themselves of these entanglements decisively or face the United States' wrath, his own administration never implemented his stirring vision with regard to Pakistan. Rather, during the Indian-Pakistani crisis of 2001–2002—a key moment of truth for Pakistan for its future course in the war on terrorism—successive U.S. intermediaries visiting the subcontinent pursued an approach that only permitted Islamabad to conclude that the war on terrorism was in fact eminently “divisible.”³⁶

By not pressing Pakistan to relinquish all of its terrorist clients once and for all during that crisis, as Washington had previously compelled Islamabad to forsake the Taliban on September 13, 2001,³⁷ the United States lost a momentous opportunity to help Pakistan rid itself of its long addiction to terrorism. Instead, the administration's diplomacy, by declining to hold Musharraf accountable for breaching his serial promises to end Pakistani support for terrorism, enabled Islamabad to infer that so long as operatives belonging to “terrorist groups of global reach,” meaning al Qaeda, were being regularly apprehended by Pakistan, the ISID's links to and protection of other regional terrorist organizations would not become a critical liability in U.S.-Pakistani relations.

The liberties thus afforded Pakistan to sustain its ties with local Kashmiri terrorist groups during the initial phase of the global war on terrorism consequently reinforced its inclination to treat the Taliban remnants similarly. This blunder had fewer consequences as long as the Taliban movement was in remission, but it has proven to be a most costly lapse on the part of the United States. The sanctuary afforded by Pakistan to the Taliban and especially its leadership since 2002 has only permitted the group to rejuvenate and once again to begin offensive operations in Afghanistan that in effect threaten to undo the gains secured by the early victories in Operation Enduring Freedom.³⁸

U.S. neglect of the early Pakistani decision to ignore the Taliban as a target of counterterrorism operations can be explained only by the administration's single-minded concentration on al Qaeda.³⁹ By failing to recognize that the early immunity provided to the Taliban would eventually complicate the effort to defeat al Qaeda, if for no other reason than that these two groups remain geographically comingled and Taliban endurance in southern and eastern Afghanistan and in the FATA is an essential precondition for al Qaeda's survival, the administration lost an opportunity to consolidate its political and military gains in Afghanistan while compelling Pakistan to hasten its march away from extremism.

Although the administration has since 2005–2006 begun to press Musharraf to actively interdict the Taliban, it is not certain that, even if responsive Pakistani counterterrorism actions were to be mounted today, they would be as effective as they could have been if they had been undertaken in the president's first term. Pakistan's own current intelligence capabilities on the Taliban are probably not as strong as they were when Mullah Omar and his associates were first ejected from Kabul.

The probable atrophy of Islamabad's connections during the last several years, the strong and growing antagonism within Pakistan toward Musharraf's counterterrorism policies in the FATA, and the increasing opposition from fundamentalist political parties and their social bases of support toward Musharraf's policies all combine to increase the risk that belated Pakistani actions against the Taliban and its leadership may end up being far less successful than they otherwise might have been if executed a few years earlier.

There is a growing weariness with counterterrorism operations waged on Pakistani soil.

U.S. Policy Options

Clearly, the status quo is becoming increasingly untenable, but there are no good and radically different alternatives to the policies currently being followed. The present approach, which consists of the United States shoveling large quantities of economic and military assistance as well as counterterrorism compensation funds in exchange for what are increasingly viewed as meager Pakistani counterterrorism successes, will soon reach the limits of political acceptability, if it has not already.⁴⁰

Even the administration, which has been Musharraf's strongest bastion of support, has begun to chafe privately about Pakistan's performance or the lack thereof.⁴¹ This dismay has only been exacerbated by Musharraf's backsliding

on democracy, his most recent imposition of the state of emergency, and the turmoil arising from the odious assassination of Benazir Bhutto. The executive branch has been neither ignorant of nor oblivious to Pakistan's counterterrorism shortcomings, but it has sacrificed its ability to secure stronger Pakistani cooperation by speaking in discordant voices that fail to convey a clear and insistent message. It fails to maintain the proper balance between public praise and private pressure and has become trapped in a policy cul-de-sac that emphasizes inalterable political support for the person of Musharraf rather than

Destroying the 'Taliban' today has become much more difficult.

support for him as a means to accelerate the political transformation of Pakistan and secure victory in the war against terrorism.

Blindly persisting with the current policy, therefore, will set the stage for a convulsive dénouement in U.S.-Pakistani relations if any of the terrorist elements currently operating in the FATA manage to unleash a catastrophic attack on the United States. Although the dangers posed by such a contingency are ap-

preciated by the administration, the relative unattractiveness of all the other alternatives to the status quo only end up reinforcing its unpalatable and risky durability.

For example, Congress in 2007 took the first tentative steps toward an alternative strategy of conditionality by withholding some military assistance, limiting the use of other funds strictly to counterterrorism and law enforcement activities, and demanding that the administration certify that Pakistan was in fact making progress on restoring democracy and defeating terrorism as the price for continued U.S. assistance.⁴² Other analysts have proposed even stronger forms of conditionality, such as smart sanctions directed at the Pakistani army, in an effort to make it more conscientious toward its counterterrorism obligations.⁴³ Although these alternatives are no doubt well intentioned, it is uncertain whether they are likely to be more successful than the status quo.

The Pakistani polity in general and the army and intelligence services in particular, despite benefiting greatly from the most recent bout of U.S. assistance, are still deeply suspicious of long-term U.S. intentions in the region. Many in the armed forces especially feel that they are already paying disproportionately for what is Washington's war and that they will be compelled to cope with the long-term effects of the turmoil in the FATA and Afghanistan well after the United States has departed the region.

This fear, unjustified though it may be, already conditions Islamabad's reluctance to battle the Taliban more energetically. Although enlightened Paki-

stani military officers, including Musharraf and the new chief of army staff, General Ashfaq Kayani, recognize that defeating the Taliban and al Qaeda is consistent with Pakistan's own self-interest in principle, they also believe that the intensity of counterterrorism operations cannot be increased beyond what the domestic political traffic will bear. A "war of all against all" in the FATA and elsewhere would only exacerbate the internal polarization of Pakistani society, embolden the radical fringe within Pakistan to mount even more violent acts of terrorism in response or in sympathy, and threaten the security and the well-being of the still largely moderate Pakistani population.

Any strategy of strong conditionality, even if only carefully targeted at specific institutions such as the army and intelligence services, would further deepen the resistance within these establishments against effective counterterrorism operations and deeper collaboration with the United States. The likelihood that the most important constituencies in Pakistan would view conditional assistance and targeted sanctions as confirming the U.S. view of Pakistan as an unreliable ally is what prevents the administration from even contemplating a shift away from the current status quo.

A third approach that has been articulated in recent months, especially by some Democratic presidential hopefuls, is for unilateral U.S. military action against terrorist groups within Pakistan. Unfortunately, none of these advocates have explained how it would be integrated with the existing patterns of interaction with Pakistan, which are based on the premise that although Islamabad is still simultaneously part of the problem and part of the solution to terrorism, it is basically a friend of the United States that must be helped to wean itself away from its existing dalliances with terrorism while being assisted to protect itself from any terrorist depredations in the interim.

This premise underlying the current policy is possibly fallacious, but the advocates of unilateral military action nonetheless bear the burden of clarifying how their preferred policy prescription would advance the goals of effectively eradicating the Taliban and al Qaeda and assisting the transformation of Pakistan into a successful moderate Muslim state. Such clarification is imperative because any policy based on the announced threat of unilateral military action within Pakistan and possibly against Pakistani forces is only likely to deepen the already strong suspicion within the Pakistani military about U.S. regional goals and strengthen their resentments toward the United States.

If such a policy is nevertheless declared, despite all its disadvantages, it will not endure. Rather, it will result only in becoming a waypoint along a very slippery slope toward a fourth policy alternative, designating Pakistan as an adversary. Whatever Islamabad's failings may be, the prospect of having to treat a large and precariously poised Muslim state with nuclear weapons and an unsavory record of proliferation activities as a mortal adversary should give

pause to even the most jaded politicians. In fact, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration did contemplate how to deal with a collapsing Pakistan that might lose control of its nuclear arsenal and in the process lash out at the United States.⁴⁴

What Should the United States Do?

This net assessment of choices confronting the United States suggests that there are no good alternatives to the current policy. It is not surprising, then, that dealing with Pakistan has become a source of great frustration to those inside and outside of government. Although Pakistani prevarication on counterterrorism is clearly one important reason for the lack of accomplishment and ought to remain a source of continuing concern, there are no easy solutions to this problem.

It is possible, perhaps even likely, that Pakistani officials who fulfill their counterterrorism responsibilities half-heartedly understand this dynamic very well and, accordingly, seek to exploit the U.S. aversion to a conflictual relationship with Pakistan to play both ends against the middle: collecting U.S. aid while protecting their terrorist clients because they are convinced that Washington would not risk the bilateral relationship by taking stronger measures to end this charade. It is also easy to understand why critics of the administration's policies, suspecting that this is in fact the calculus of many senior Pakistani military officials, advocate a more confrontational response because Pakistan's failure to perform already places Islamabad at odds with Washington.

The critics' recommendations would be justified if the senior leadership of the Pakistani military was clearly pursuing such a deliberate and calculated strategy to undermine U.S. interests. On this central question, however, the evidence is not clear. Rather, it suggests that although some elements in Pakistani society, including in the army and in the ISID, would be content to see the United States fail because of what is perceived to be its myriad transgressions against Muslims worldwide, the majority of senior Pakistani military officers support the operations aimed at defeating al Qaeda and all terrorism in principle, even if their fears about its domestic repercussions and larger U.S. goals, coupled with their pursuit of narrow regional interests, prevent them from offering their cooperation more wholeheartedly.

If this is a more accurate reading of reality, then the goal of U.S. policy must be to convince these elites that the conclusive defeat of even their erstwhile clients is in their own enlightened self-interest. If interest does not move them sufficiently, then perhaps fear should. In this context, U.S. policymakers should not only remind their Pakistani counterparts that Islamabad enjoys the

administration's unqualified support, but they should emphasize that the growing U.S. discontent about Pakistani performance indicates that Washington's attitudes toward Pakistan could change quickly if a future catastrophic terrorist attack on the United States was made possible by Pakistani negligence or connivance.

Admittedly, this solution is not entirely satisfying because it still condemns the United States to some variation of the status quo—"shifting gears, but not reversing course,"⁴⁵ as former Department of State official Daniel Markey has phrased it. Yet, it is a variation that could make all the difference. Although this and perhaps even the incoming U.S. administration will not enjoy the luxury of changing present U.S. policies toward Islamabad radically, that is, offering substantial assistance in exchange for continued Pakistani contributions to counterterrorism, it is worth introducing some modifications to the current approach.

First, the United States should speak clearly and forcefully in private to Musharraf and his cohort about U.S. frustrations with Pakistani counterterrorism performance to help them appreciate the prospective consequences of continued inaction for Pakistan and for U.S.-Pakistani relations. The current approach of "praising in public, pressuring in private" risks degenerating into a policy of "praising in public, acquiescing in private," through which the threats to U.S. counterterrorism objectives and to improved U.S.-Pakistani relations are not effectively conveyed to Musharraf.

The United States has never replicated the tough message sent to Pakistan on September 13, 2001, even though senior U.S. policymakers have at times been extremely aggravated by Pakistan's counterterrorism failures. A continued unwillingness to confidentially send Islamabad necessary messages of "tough love" will not only contribute to prolonging the deficiencies in Pakistani counterterrorism effectiveness but will, even if only inadvertently, conduce to the eventual meltdown in bilateral relations in case of a future attack on the United States.

Second, Washington should demand that Islamabad start systematically targeting the Taliban leadership as part of the current counterterrorism concept of operations. Although the administration has succeeded in persuading Pakistan to step up its efforts at interdicting border crossings, Afghan and NATO officials assert that a significant number of successful insurgent infiltrations still occur at official crossing points along the Afghan-Pakistani border. This suggests that Pakistani border patrols are ineffective or in collusion with at

U.S. actions during the 2001–2002 Indian-Pakistani crisis helped shape Pakistan's calculus.

least some of the infiltrators, even if some others would inevitably succeed in covertly eluding border surveillance.

Islamabad has attempted to combat such crossings by building additional border barriers and by ambitiously attempting to fence some sections of the frontier itself. Yet, the Indian experience in Kashmir reveals that border fences erected in hostile terrain are conspicuously ineffective in preventing insurgent infiltration, even if the threat of colluding security forces is entirely discounted. Although the administration should continue to press Islamabad

to improve its border control efforts, it ought to dissuade Pakistan from overinvesting in initiatives such as fencing, especially if these are undertaken at the expense of targeting the Taliban leadership, which continues to operate from within Pakistan and in urban areas that are far removed from the border itself.

Third, Washington should restructure the current counterterrorism intelligence liaison relationship between the United States and

Pakistan to permit the CIA and the components of Operation Enduring Freedom to acquire greater insight into the existing terrorist networks operating within Pakistan. As Steve Coll elaborated in his history of U.S.-Pakistani collaboration during the anti-Soviet jihad, the ISID has been traditionally successful in preventing its foreign intelligence partners from securing any access to its clients, assets, and networks, even when these were funded substantially by outside sources.⁴⁶ There is no reason to believe that this pattern of operations has changed fundamentally today, and if so, the U.S. intelligence community still fails to reap the benefits of U.S. covert assistance to Pakistan.

Fourth, the United States should continue to assist Pakistan with the technology and training to prosecute small-unit counterterrorism operations more effectively. Much of the technology at issue is not particularly cutting edge and consists of transport helicopters, field radios, early-generation night vision equipment, and tactical vehicles. Such transfers should be sustained and supplemented by increased training, but only as long as key units such as the Special Services Group continue to perform as resolutely as they have in the past. The improved training contemplated for the Frontier Corps and other paramilitary organizations charged with border patrol should also be accelerated.

Also, in this context the current U.S. military proposal to enlist and arm some key tribal leaders in the FATA to fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban ought to receive careful and serious consideration.⁴⁷ Although such programs always have risks, the dangers are potentially worth the benefits. Identifying groups that oppose the insurgents and assisting them remains a good way to

There are no good and radically different alternatives to current U.S. policies.

channel their frustration with the Taliban insurgency and the ongoing conflict and incorporate them into the struggle against the more obdurate and intransigent al Qaeda terrorists.

Fifth, Washington should shift to an alternative modality of disbursing coalition support funds to Pakistan in which reimbursements are tied to specific tasks and linked to the performance of specific objectives.⁴⁸ The current system of simply cutting checks for whatever bills are presented monthly by Islamabad as the costs borne for counterterrorism engenders institutional corruption in the Pakistani military, destroys the integrity of the U.S. assistance program, and is unfair to the American taxpayer.

Sixth, the United States should integrate the ongoing political transition in Pakistan, including the growing national clamor for a genuine return to democracy centered on an abiding rule of law, into the larger war on terrorism. Although the legitimacy of Musharraf's rule and the character of Pakistan's governing arrangements were not initially central to the war on terrorism or to Islamabad's counterterrorism performance, both of these variables have now become important to Pakistan's ability to win the struggle against Islamist extremism. This does not require the administration to jettison Musharraf, as is often suggested, but it does require the United States to secure his participation in orchestrating an orderly political transition toward democracy in Pakistan.

These improvements to current U.S. policy vis-à-vis Pakistan are indeed admittedly modest in comparison to some of the more drastic alternatives reviewed earlier. Yet, they ought to help remind Islamabad that if another attack were to compel Washington to shift to some more radically different strategy entirely, it would be even more painful for Pakistan than it would for the United States. Continuing on a course of action that would end up testing this proposition is neither in Pakistan's nor the United States' interest. The necessity for a pointed reminder is therefore all the more urgent because, even if the current regime centered on Musharraf is replaced, the radical transformation of Pakistani motivations and performance in the counterterrorism arena is not assured.

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