

PAKISTAN AFTER BIN LADEN

Following the discovery and killing of Osama bin Laden close to Islamabad, Pakistan's role in counterterrorism needs to be assessed ever more critically. The country has actively targeted jihadist groups that threaten its own interests, while being slow to act against militants who threaten Western interests in South Asia. Despite large amounts of US financial and military aid, the country's security establishment continues to nurture anti-US sentiments. Although Washington has no easy solutions, it can insist that further aid to Pakistan will be conditional upon progress in combating international, and not just domestic, terrorism.



Activists shout anti-American slogans while holding an image of US President Obama during a protest in Multan, 8 May 2011
REUTERS/Stringer Pakistan

Early on the morning of 2 May 2011, US Navy commandos raided a house in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Inside was the world's most wanted terrorist – Osama bin Laden. After killing him, the commandos seized large quantities of data stored in electronic as well as paper records, which were flown to the US for evaluation by intelligence analysts. One of the most pressing questions presently being examined by these analysts is to what degree bin Laden might have had ties to elements within the Pakistani security establishment.

Although this issue has long preoccupied Western governments, it has recently gained urgency owing to the circumstances of bin Laden's killing. Abbottabad is a

garrison town with a strong military intelligence presence. Given that since 2001, Pakistani officials had repeatedly insisted that the al-Qaida chief was not within their jurisdiction, his final whereabouts demand explanation. His discovery near a major Pakistani military base implies that either Pakistani security officials are incompetent, or that they knowingly sheltered an international terrorist fugitive.

The Abbottabad raid has heightened international, and particularly US, suspicions of Pakistan's commitment to counterterrorism. For some time, Islamabad has been perceived as using radical Islamist groups to further its own regional agenda vis-à-vis Afghanistan and India, in opposition to

Western strategic interests. US diplomatic cables accessed by Wikileaks have documented a trust deficit between Washington and Islamabad. What is now being publicly admitted – that Pakistan and the West might not have convergent security interests – has apparently been privately articulated by US officials for years.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban have remained viable as a military force primarily because of safe havens in Pakistani border areas. Islamabad appears keen to retain the Taliban as an ally against the Afghan government, particularly due to a long-standing border dispute between the two countries. Pakistan also remains slow to act against terrorist groups targeting India. Such inaction is partly driven by strategic calculations. But Pakistan's role in counterterrorism also raises concern in view of growing institutional incapacity caused by jihadist penetration of the Pakistani security establishment, widespread anti-US sentiments, and the creeping radicalisation of Pakistani society. The US government has few options for helping moderate Pakistani leaders navigate through these difficulties, beyond specifying to the military that further financial aid is tied to cooperation in counterterrorism.

Ambiguity towards the Taliban

It remains unclear whether Pakistan is supporting the West against terrorists and radical Islamists out of conviction, or from a desire to extract concessions. Pakistani officials have long claimed that their government is committed to fighting terrorism, and have recently asserted that the

country has lost 35,000 lives to terrorist attacks since 2001. This is a misleading statement: a 35,000 death toll only makes sense if jihadists killed by the Pakistani state are themselves counted as “victims of terrorism”. In actuality, 14,000 civilians, soldiers and policemen have died in terrorist attacks since 2001.

Islamabad appears to be soliciting international sympathy by portraying itself as a victim of terrorism, while pursuing an ambiguous policy towards terrorist groups. Its security establishment has combated Taliban factions that aim to overthrow the established order within Pakistan, but has protected other factions that launch cross-border attacks into Afghanistan. The charge of selective instrumentalisation of jihadism has been levelled against the Pakistani state by local intellectuals, as well as foreign analysts.

Pakistani officials rationalise this differentiated policy towards the Taliban by hinting that while some militant groups threaten the state, others are strategic assets. These officials insist that Pakistan needs to maintain friendly ties with Afghan Islamists in order to counter Indian influence in Afghanistan. They portray Pakistani support for the Taliban as a quest for strategic depth by a militarily weak and geographically vulnerable power.

Of late, this logic been questioned by some analysts. Islamabad already supported the Taliban during the 1990s, when India had no influence in Kabul. Furthermore, the Pakistani army with its nuclear arsenal – the fifth-largest in the world, exceeding even India’s – and its military doctrine of “offensive defence”, does not need and cannot use strategic depth on the western border to fight an enemy in the east. US officials now surmise that Islamabad has exaggerated its fears of Indian intentions in order to gain freedom to pursue an independent strategic agenda in Afghanistan. At the core of this agenda appears to be the historic tension between Kabul and Islamabad over Pashtun nationalism and the legitimacy of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

“Pashtunistan”

Afghan-Pakistani hostility derives from a dispute relating to Pakistani control over more than 100,000 square kilometres of territory between the Indus river and the Khyber Pass. Until the mid-19th century, this region was part of a Pashtun empire

ruled by an Afghan warlord. It then became a buffer zone between India and Afghanistan, under British control. With the creation of Pakistan in August 1947, the Pashtun inhabitants of the region demanded the right of secession. Their claim to a separate homeland called “Pashtunistan” was supported by Afghanistan, which argued that the validity of the British-demarcated border no longer applied, and a new border alignment would have to be negotiated. Pakistan insisted that it had inherited its borders from British India and these were non-negotiable.

Kabul’s response was to oppose Pakistani admission into the United Nations, and relations between the two countries grew acrimonious. A covert war began, with each encouraging insurgencies in the other’s territory. During the mid-1970s, Islamabad supported Islamist guerrillas in Afghanistan, having calculated that they would put religion above ethno-nationalist solidarity. Its activities received a massive boost after 1979 with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when the US and Saudi Arabia were co-opted into financing Pakistani covert operations. The Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) strengthened Afghan Islamist warlords, who also happened to be virulently anti-Western. It continued this policy into the 1990s, eventually helping the Taliban seize power in Kabul.

Pakistan’s quest for strategic depth therefore, seems to arise from its border dispute with Afghanistan. Since there are more Pashtuns in Pakistan than in Afghanistan – 30 million as opposed to 12.5 million –, Islamabad fears the consequences of allowing Pashtun nationalism to fester. To douse Afghanistan’s irredentist claims, it has sought leverage over Kabul by supporting Afghan Islamist groups. This policy has only been moderately successful: Pashtun nationalism remains a powerful latent

force, given the grievances that Pakistani Pashtuns have towards the Punjabi-dominated political establishment in Islamabad. Even the Taliban, when they ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, refused to recognise the current alignment of the border and preferred to remain silent about the matter.

Islamabad’s policy seems to be one of permitting Taliban groups to strike Western interests in Afghanistan, while combating Pashtun rebelliousness within Pakistan. To this end, it has concentrated on containing the Taliban insurgency in the western half of Pakistan. At present, 90 per cent of jihadist violence occurs in this region. The remainder consists of expeditionary strikes by Punjabi jihadist groups sympathetic to the Taliban. With radicalisation now creeping into the ranks of the Punjabi-dominated military however, this situation might be about to change.

Insufficient counterterrorism

Recently, a convicted terrorist in US custody accused serving mid-rank ISI officials of masterminding the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks in India, which killed 166 people, including 25 foreign tourists. US and other Western intelligence agencies treat these accusations as credible, while Pakistan insists that they are not. Irrespective of this specific case, since 2001, several cross-border attacks by Pakistani jihadists have indicated at least partial state complicity. For instance, US officials have accused the ISI of orchestrating a suicide bombing in Kabul in July 2008 that killed 54 people, including two Indian diplomats.

Pakistan has apparently been reluctant to fulfil its obligations under UN Security Council Resolutions 1373 and 1566 and take preventive or punitive action against jihadist groups based on its territory, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). This group has a history of carrying out spectacular attacks

Radicalised Islamic groups in Pakistan and their main targets						
		Main targets				
		Pakistani state	India	Afghanistan	Pakistani religious and sectarian minorities	Western countries / interests
Radicalised Islamic groups	Al-Qaida					x
	Afghan Taliban			x		
	Pakistani Taliban	x			x	
	Punjabi Taliban	x			x	
	Lashkar-e-Taiba		x	x		x

against civilian targets in both India and Afghanistan. Initially perceived as a regional threat, it is now thought to have global ambitions – a list of 320 potential targets compiled by it contained only 20 Indian names, the rest mostly being in North America and Europe. However, Islamabad has been markedly slow to proceed against the LeT leadership and fundraising network, causing analysts to question its seriousness in fighting terrorism.

Such inaction might stem from a view that LeT does not pose a threat to Pakistani interests, and could potentially help them. According to some experts, Pakistani military officers have been indoctrinated since the 1970s to view terror as a legitimate tool of warfare. Many officers appear willing to condone terrorism, even if they do not actively support it. Furthermore, unlike most other jihadist groups based in Pakistan, LeT does not have a strong mobilisational base, having derived its ideology from imported Saudi influences as opposed to indigenous South Asian ones. Although it has a large operational network, its ideological pedigree might not be sufficiently strong to pose a domestic security threat to Pakistan.

Creeping radicalisation

Apart from the disturbingly selective approach that Pakistan seems to have towards counterterrorism, there are two additional trends that are worrying. First, there has been a growing infiltration of jihadists into the Pakistani military, as reflected in the emergence of inwardly-focused terrorist plots among armed forces personnel. These uniformed jihadists are suspected, among other things, of sabotaging military aircraft used in counterinsurgency operations, planning assassination attempts against senior officers, and providing informational and logistical support to specific terrorist attacks. The May 2011 assault upon a naval base in Karachi for instance, is believed to have been facilitated by Islamist sympathisers familiar with the installation's topography.

Second, there has been growing anti-US sentiment creeping into the armed forces. This has partly to do with the fact that the inflated privileges enjoyed by high-ranking military officials have stirred disenchantment among the lower ranks. Pakistani generals are now coming under pressure from subordinate ranks to prove their nationalist credentials or risk being branded as corrupt despots reliant on US patron-

age. It is no secret that US preferences influence key appointments within the military. By taking a hard line against the West, the top leadership now seeks to re-establish its authority.

To some extent, both trends reflect a creeping radicalisation of Pakistani society. This broader phenomenon can be partly explained by the scale of political and economic challenges that the country faces and the inability of successive governments to surmount them. Pakistan has a high population growth rate, combined with falling economic growth. An unsustainable military budget, which consumes roughly 23 per cent of government expenditure, has repeatedly pushed the country to the edge of bankruptcy. Previous financial crises during the 1990s and 2000s were weathered by international loans. However, with the current global downturn, this largesse has dwindled, bringing fiscal pressures into sharp focus.

Furthermore, Pakistan's state education system is ill-equipped for training the country's young population for employment within the global economy. A high school dropout rate, coupled with an educational curriculum that narrates history in xenophobic and militaristic tones, has set many teenaged youths on a collision course with modernity. These individuals gravitate towards militant Islam, seeing it as a simpler and surer route to social progress than mastering "foreign" educational concepts.

Difficult choices

The West, and particularly the US, are confronted with harsh realities in dealing with Pakistan. A weak commitment to combating international terrorism coexists with widespread sympathy and in some cases, active support for terrorist groups. Opinion polls consistently report that most Pakistanis rate India and the US as bigger threats to their country than the Taliban or al-Qaida. Many respondents have also expressed sorrow at bin Laden's death.

US-Pakistani relations had deteriorated well before the killing of bin Laden. Signs of a new Pakistani hawkishness became evident in early 2010, when authorities arrested a Taliban leader in the city of Karachi. Initially portrayed as a sign of Pakistan's sincerity in fighting terrorism,

the arrest turned out to have a troubling backstory. The Taliban official had been secretly negotiating with Kabul for a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan. When the ISI learnt of these talks, it sabotaged them by making the arrest. In doing so, it sent a clear message to Washington and Kabul that it would not countenance any peace deal that was not brokered with its involvement.

Some months later, in October 2010, a temporary blockade was imposed upon supply convoys travelling through Pakistani territory to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The blockade coincided with a spike in militant attacks against the convoys. Then, in December, an intelligence war broke out between the ISI and the US Central Intelligence Agency. The ISI leaked the name of the CIA station chief in Islamabad, forcing his withdrawal from the country due to safety concerns.

Tensions generated from this episode had hardly receded when, in January 2011, a CIA contractor was arrested in Pakistan on murder charges. The ISI used public anger over the incident to bring pressure upon its US counterpart. It demanded that it be kept informed of CIA operations in Pakistan, including those aimed at terrorist groups. From these incidents, it appears that the Pakistani security establishment is keen to underscore the extent to which Western security interests and counterterrorist efforts rely on its goodwill.

With the discovery of bin Laden's hideout in Abbottabad, and growing suspicions that he was sheltered by elements within the Pakistani security establishment, fresh debate has broken out in the US over how to deal with Pakistan. There are no easy choices. However, Washington retains a powerful lever in the form of foreign aid – Islamabad cannot do without it. The Pakistani security establishment is prone to viewing such aid as an entitlement for past services rendered, rather than advance payment for future cooperation. US officials need to explicitly attach conditions to further aid payments. They need to emphasise that any Pakistani efforts to leverage jihadist attacks in either Afghanistan or India for strategic benefit would backfire on Islamabad. Having already been placed on a US watchlist of states suspected of supporting terrorism in the

“There has been jihadist infiltration of the Pakistani military.”

early 1990s, Pakistan should be wary of being similarly tarnished again.

Furthermore, US officials can declare their commitment to ensuring civilian supremacy over Pakistani decisionmaking. Although such a pronouncement would infuriate the army leadership, which jealously guards its state-funded perquisites, long-term economic dependence upon the West would force it to compromise. Finally, the US needs to scale down its expectations of Pakistani security cooperation in the long-term. As the world's sixth-most populous state and a nuclear power, Pakistan is too important to be allowed to fail. Nevertheless, its importance is derived more from its potential to indirectly pose a threat to the West through jihadist groups operating from its territories than from any strategic prospects of constructive engagement. Thus, while continuing to work with Pakistan, the US and the West in general need to pursue closer ties with other regional players in South and Central Asia, thereby reducing dependence upon Islamabad.

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