

PAKISTAN: ANATOMY OF A CRISIS, SKELETAL OPPORTUNITIES

Heightened levels of political instability, cross-border insurgency, regional conflict and terrorism all make Pakistan an urgent challenge for policy makers. An Islamic coup or a breach of nuclear security is not on the cards, but stabilizing Pakistan will remain a long and complex task. Until the international community finds a way of making civilian-military co-existence in Pakistan an agent for stability as part of a broader strategic realignment across the region, Islamabad will continue to undermine the security environment across South Asia while remaining a key emitter of global terrorism.



Protests against first drone attacks in the tribal areas under President Obama, 25 January 2009 Reuters

Since gaining independence in 1947 from British India, Pakistan has remained a garrison state, dominated by a strong military on the one hand and increasingly autonomous insurgency groups on the other. Democratically elected governments have periodically established themselves within this construct, but have been dismissed by the military at times of its choosing. Relations between Pakistan and the West have also been strategically contingent rather than structurally sound, not least because alliances have always been entered for different reasons, leading to mutual disappointment on either side. This was first seen in the Cold War, when Pakistan joined US-led alliances ostensibly as an insurance policy against its confrontation with India, while the US saw Pakistan as an outpost in its containment of the Soviet Union. Once Moscow decided to leave neighboring Afghanistan in 1989, Pakistan lost its “strategic resonance”, only to be regained in 1998 (and not in a favorable way) following Pakistan’s nuclear tests, which marked the nadir of relations between Islamabad and the West.

The attacks on 11 September 2001 changed the political currents once more. The US “rediscovered” Pakistan’s frontline role encompassed in the “war on terror” to stamp out the presence of al-Qaida and the Taliban in the region. Even the revelation that Pakistan had leaked nuclear secrets to Libya, North Korea, and Iran via the A.Q. Khan network in 2004 was insufficient to dint relations; the US has provided Islamabad with no less than US\$12bn in non-conditional military and economic aid since 2001, while affording Pakistan major non-NATO ally status. Yet despite all this, instead of becoming a bulwark against jihadists, Pakistan now constitutes a major security threat, with its influence being felt on a regional level in India and Afghanistan (particularly as Afghanistan now directly “competes” with Kashmir through the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) and the Swat Valley in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) as the citadel of Indian-Pakistani strategic rivalries), but also at the global level in the context of international terrorism and protracted insurgency campaigns across much

of its territory, which the Taliban and al-Qaida will continue to exploit.

The fact that Islamabad has been, and continues to be, the architect of its own demise by supporting many of these groups, supposedly to further its interests over India and Afghanistan, is particularly concerning, as it underlines the degree to which Islamabad’s regional interests are strategically misaligned of those of the West. Countering India rather than stabilizing Afghanistan remains the order of the day for Pakistan, a strategy that will continue to engender terror attacks at home and abroad as proxy groups and insurgency campaigns gain strength and develop autonomous agendas. Washington is thus undertaking a reappraisal as to what kind of strategic realignment is needed to promote Pakistan as an agent for regional stability, and whether it should persist in giving military aid to Pakistan or put greater emphasis on supporting the fragile democratic government of Ali Asaf Zardari that replaced General Pervez Musharraf’s rule in 2008.

The difficulty is that the military remains Pakistan’s only stable and powerful institution: any policy changes must therefore still be carefully calibrated to ensure that some semblance of a semi-stable Pakistan is maintained, without destroying long-term prospects towards transformation into a cohesive and well-governed state. Further state deterioration would deal a severe blow to NATO’s engagement in Afghanistan, further undermine the ongoing “war on terror”, increase tense Indo-Pakistan relations, and destabilize what remains a lynchpin nuclear-armed state sitting at the



strategic crossroads between South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia. In effect, the “loss” of Pakistan is not an option.

Identifying the real risk

Despite this concerning picture, amid the chaos of Islamabad’s politics, two risks are persistently overstated by the media: namely the dangers of an Islamic revolution and of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists. Election results in Pakistan underlined the fact that support for Islamists remains limited, with around 10–15 per cent of the vote considered the historic norm. This sits well below populist sentiment elsewhere, and certainly would be insufficient to launch a Sunni revolution against other competing elements of the state, most notably, the military that has long championed itself as bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism. By a similar token, the notion that the military would allow religious extremists to seize control of nuclear weapons, or indeed, actively hand them over misses the entire institutional grounding of the military and its strategic position. Terrorism remains an instrument of the state, not its ultimate master.

The snag with viewing the military as an agent of stability in Pakistan is that what it might notionally offer as a bulwark against nuclear catastrophe or an Islamic coup, it has consistently taken away by its persistent support of terrorist groups throughout much of its short history. Even under Musharraf, Pakistan was always highly selective in its counterterrorism strategy. Al-Qaida and the Pakistani Taliban have taken some hits, but Islamabad has never managed to end the support of its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) or certain sections of the military for the Afghan Taliban and ethnic-Pashtun groups hiding in Pakistan. The military has simultaneously fuelled insurgents in Kashmir for

its own strategic ends as part of its elusive search for “strategic depth” in the region and indeed, continues to do so in the NWFP, FATA, Kashmir, and Afghanistan. But the associated rise of political violence and increased autonomy of insurgent campaigns not only in the Pashtun badlands, but more broadly across Pakistan, now casts a long shadow on the overall security environment. This will not only continue to drive regional instability from Kashmir to Kabul, but offers considerable opportunities for extraterritorial terrorist groups such as al-Qaida to exploit as state control ebbs. Insurgency campaigns and growing terrorist networks thus constitute the main threat to and the main threat emanating from Pakistan for the international community to address.

Insurgency campaigns “hit home”

On assuming office, Zardari was instantly dealt a sharp reminder of the risks posed by Islamic extremism. A massive suicide bomb was detonated at the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad in September 2008, where his newly formed cabinet had been expected to dine. Taliban factions were sending a clear message; not only do they control large swathes of the NWFP and the FATA, but they are more than capable of orchestrating large-scale attacks in the capital. Pakistan thus runs the risk of being impaled by the same groups it strategically fostered to fight its proxy wars, which has now resulted in over 2,000 Pakistani deaths since 2001. This has left sections of the military sharply conflicted as to whether it should increase its counterterrorism operations across the board, or continue its current *modus operandi* of selective measures against selective groups depending on their perceived strategic utility to the “national interest”. Nowhere is this more relevant than over the November 2008 Mumbai attacks orchestrated by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT, an ongoing ISI “client”

in Kashmir) given that the attacks were designed to pile even more pressure on Islamabad from Washington and New Delhi at a time of economic crisis and political turmoil.

But those assuming that terror attacks will act as a centripetal force to bring greater levels of counterterrorism cooperation between and within India and Pakistan should think again. Beyond short-term concerns about a potential domestic backlash if a major counter-offensive were launched, as far as core sections of the Pakistan military and ISI are concerned, the overall strategic balance still rests with using jihadist groups as a “rational” instrument of foreign policy to offset India’s growing regional ambitions and to act as a hedge against any longer-term US exit strategies from Afghanistan. This not only applies to Kashmir in the east, but also to the western Afghan border, where the Durand Line, a remnant of British colonial rule, remains contested as the formal border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ongoing instability across the frontier serves to keep Afghanistan, India, and the US positions unsettled, but also undermines the autonomy of the Pakistan civilian government in the FATA while notionally buttressing the praetorian power of the military. It also offsets not only alleged Iranian-Russian designs aimed to undermine Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan, but also the potential dismemberment of the Pakistani state – a strategic aim that the “US-Indian-Afghan” alliance supposedly shares, according to key sections of Pakistan’s military-intelligence elite.

Given this strategic outlook, the military will not only desist from eliminating all the terrorist groups that threaten Afghan, Indian, US, and even Pakistani security, but will continue actively to promote the NWFP and FATA as staging areas for militants to contest asymmetric warfare in Afghanistan and Kashmir in the interest of mitigating broader strategic concerns. Until Western policy-makers understand this mindset, it will be impossible for them to deliver the kind of strategic guarantees Pakistan would need to shift its counterterrorism “offensives” from a process of political window-dressing into a strategic reality. This raises the awkward, but critical question of what Pakistan will want to engage in the process, and what the international community can realistically deliver.

A three-pillar approach

In one respect, the timing of this question could not be worse, given the increasingly hawkish rhetoric coming out of India post-Mumbai as elections approach in May

2009. But by the same token, it makes it even more urgent to reconsider strategic options in South Asia to avoid a short-term catastrophe and foster longer-term stability. As far as engagement with Pakistan is concerned, this will need to entail three core pillars of regional strategic guarantees, greater emphasis on supporting Pakistan's democratic credentials, and continued, but far more conditional support of the Pakistan military to affect positive change. None of this will be easy.

In terms of the regional pillar, relations between India-Pakistan are now on a knife edge. Should the "next Mumbai" prove to be just around the corner then Delhi would exact a heavy response. This would be understandable from a political and deterrence-based perspective, but it would ultimately be self-defeating. It would deliver exactly what the LeT want – a further deterioration in Indo-Pakistan relations – and put greater pressure on the Zardari government. Large sections of the Pakistani military would also have little problem giving up the fight against fellow Muslims in the tribal areas to redeploy against the traditional Hindu enemy in the east. This would inevitably have serious implications for US strategy on the Afghan-Pakistan border.

Yet it is this border and the US strategy towards it that could create even further difficulties in Pakistan. Washington's decision to bomb Taliban and al-Qaida targets inside Pakistan's borders remains a high-risk, low-return option (not least since it jeopardizes NATO supply routes to Afghanistan), as would any further military intervention in terms of further undermining US support in the region. Similarly, if the US steps up its campaign in Afghanistan without political settlements involving the Taliban, then the pressure on Pakistan will become intense as insurgents flock for sanctuary east of the Durand Line. Should Washington use further military action against them without properly consulting Islamabad, then a collapse of US-Pakistan relations and the fall of Zardari might not be far away.

Instead of treating Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India as three separate problems with entirely separate solutions, the US would be far better served by quite literally holding fire and making clear its long-term political commitment to Pakistan. This will need to be followed by concerted diplomatic efforts to resolve the disputes over Kashmir in the east and the Durand Line in the west in order to shore up the FATA – efforts that would

require India and Pakistan toning down their strategic rivalries in each respective theater. Such solutions would have sharp detractors on either side of the lines, but until a more formal demarcation is made, it will be impossible for internal or external players to stabilize the region. This approach would also need to be underwritten by broader strategic guarantees as to Pakistan's territorial integrity from the US and other states with significant interests in the region such as Russia, China, and even Japan and Saudi Arabia (both of which maintain strategic relations with Islamabad) in order to improve the respective bilateral relations between Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan. Depending on political developments in Iran, the US could also push for some kind of statement of intent as to Tehran's designs on Afghanistan to complete the geo-strategic jigsaw. In addition, Washington should clarify its own interests in South Asia amid supposed linkages to accessing Central Asian energy reserves and Chinese containment strategies. To put it another way, if the Obama administration wants to see the greater Middle East (including Afghanistan and Pakistan) as an integrated whole, it must recognize its own position within it.

Domestic pillars are important

Inevitably, this will all entail much cajoling and back-channel diplomacy to orchestrate such a strategic shift, and would certainly not come without vested interests and additional "policy costs". But without such broad strategic guarantees and settlements, Pakistan's strategic balance will not be tilted in favor of comprehensive counterterrorism activities. That said, such calculations shouldn't be used as an excuse for the West not to lay the foundations for the other two domestically focused pillars, irrespective of the limited impact they will have without broader strategic realignment in place.

The main domestic pillar, and the main thrust of Western policy, must be to work with Pakistan's civilian government to fight extremism in civil society; the other, to cooperate with the military to help purge it of extremist sympathizers and to provide support for insurgency campaigns through consistent pressure and incentives. This will entail a variety of objectives, outcomes, and timeframes for success that, no doubt, will be inherently contradictory. But it remains crucial that both the military and civilian government be kept in play to maintain at least some semblance of stability and counter-insurgency capability in Pakistan,

with the added prospect of longer-term democratization.

The Biden-Lugar bill recently tabled in the US Congress should hit many of the right notes in trying to shift the "transactional" relationship between Washington and the Pakistan military to a deeper and broader engagement with the population by way of US\$7.5bn of aid over a five-year period. Beyond the headline figures, it remains important that from a civilian perspective, aid should focus on developing institutions rather than individuals, and that it addresses areas of core concern for the population ranging from energy and food shortages to rising unemployment and mass poverty. More favorable terms of trade for the Zardari government would also deliver much-needed economic gains amid Pakistan's ongoing financial crisis. Meanwhile, the military must face stringent conditionality requirements on aid tied to long-term (rather than "set piece") counterinsurgency activities. Pressure should also be applied behind closed doors, not only to persuade all sections of the military that counter-insurgency measures are in their interests, but that a failure to act now could come with grave implications later if major terror attacks continue to be exported from Pakistani soil. On the plus side, US support for enhancing Pakistan's counter-insurgency capabilities and strategic interests in the region, could yield positive reactions.

Whether the West likes it or not, Pakistan remains an enormously flawed, yet its most strategically crucial ally in South Asia. Continuing to point out Pakistan's obvious, and indeed many counter-insurgency flaws is easy, but a failure to engage with Pakistan effectively not only on a military, but also at the civilian level as part of a broader strategic realignment in the region could prove to be a costly mistake. The biggest cost of all is if a major terrorist attack takes place in the US derived from Pakistani origins. In such an event, 2009 could very quickly resemble 2001 as a new page on the 'war on terror' is turned, and with it, a redefinition of Pakistan's "strategic resonance" once again.

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