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Strengthening Pakistani Resolve Against the Taliban

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The Bush Administration is redoubling its efforts to stabilize and secure Afghanistan following the deadliest year in the country since the U.S. invasion in 2001. The Defense Department announced last week that it will extend the combat tours of 3,200 soldiers from the Army's 10th Mountain Division to augment U.S. troop strength there, and the Administration is expected to more than triple its request for reconstruction aid from last year's level of \$3 billion in its coming budget proposal. But until the Administration increases pressure on Pakistan to ensure the Taliban finds no safe haven within its borders, its plans to address the growing Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan will have only limited impact.

The effectiveness of U.S. policy toward Pakistan over the next few years will largely determine whether the U.S. prevails in the global war on terrorism. The Pakistan-Afghanistan border area is one of the most dangerous terrorist safe havens in the world. Although Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf deserves credit for helping to apprehend hundreds of al-Qaeda operatives and key leaders over the last five years, the continued presence of Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorists along the Afghanistan border poses a fundamental threat to American interests and the U.S. relationship with Pakistan.

It would be politically risky for Musharraf to crack down on the Taliban. The group was assisted by Pakistan security services in the 1990s and still has close ties to some Pakistani intelligence officers and the religious parties. Musharraf also has to contend with a growing perception that he is doing U.S. bid-

ding in the war on terrorism at the expense of his own country's interests. He suffered tremendous criticism following last October's attack on a terrorist madrassah (religious school) in the Bajaur area of the tribal zones. A suicide bombing that killed over 40 Pakistani soldiers days after the Bajaur attack was widely viewed as retaliation against the Pakistan Army. U.S. officials understand Musharraf's constraints, but they are increasingly frustrated by the continued cross-border movement of Taliban forces.

American intelligence and security officials recently revealed that the "peace deal" Musharraf brokered in the tribal areas last September has failed to stem terrorist activity in the region; indeed, it has led to a three-fold increase in attacks across the border. It was obvious to many observers at the time that the deal was driven more by political imperatives than any calculated strategy aimed at denying safe haven to terrorists. Although Musharraf denied that the pact was made with the Taliban, reports that scores of Taliban militants were released from Pakistani custody should have raised alarm bells in Washington.

In light of growing frustration with Pakistan on the border issue, H.R. 1, passed by the House of

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Representatives on January 4, calls on the U.S. to condition military assistance to Pakistan on Islamabad “making all possible efforts to prevent the Taliban from operating in areas under its sovereign control.” This approach is unlikely to advance American objectives and could well backfire.

Standing as evidence is the decision to halt U.S. aid to Pakistan in 1990 because of concerns over its nuclear program. Most U.S. policymakers acknowledge that this was a mistake, because it cost the U.S. valuable leverage and stoked strong anti-U.S. sentiment that still exists in the country. Public debate on limiting U.S. assistance to Pakistan could actually weaken Musharraf’s hand in convincing his military commanders that the U.S. is a reliable partner.

Islamabad has been most responsive in the past to targeted, hard-headed diplomacy from the highest levels of the U.S. government. Only this type of tough diplomacy will persuade Islamabad that the U.S. will remain in Afghanistan until the Taliban are fully defeated. The U.S. must show its intention to finish the job in Afghanistan by maintaining—and increasing, if necessary—its troop commitments there. The Defense Department’s recent announcement to extend combat tours for 3,200 U.S. soldiers proves that the job there is far from over and that

Pakistan’s full cooperation against the Taliban is more important than ever. The Administration’s expected increase in reconstruction aid to the country is a welcome step that will hearten the Afghans and help dry up local support for the Taliban.

U.S. officials also should take a more direct role in mediating differences between Kabul and Islamabad and help them overcome their mutual mistrust. Part of this effort involves encouraging both sides to pursue the development of cross-border tribal jirgas and greater economic and trade links so that each develops a stake in the other’s stability.

Encouraging Islamabad to tighten its anti-terrorism policies will do more than help stabilize Afghanistan and reduce the threat of international terrorism. It will lead to greater prosperity in Pakistan as the country’s leaders focus on improving trade ties in the region and fostering a society that shuns the Taliban’s extremist ideology. Failure to fully confront Pakistan’s reluctance to crack down on the Taliban would have disastrous implications for the war on terrorism.

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