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U.S.–Pakistan Relations: Assassination, Instability, and the Future of U.S. Policy

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The dramatic events in Pakistan during the last 10 months, punctuated by the December 27, 2007, assassination of liberal politician and two-time Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, cast doubt on the future stability of the country and raise questions about U.S. policy options for helping tame the growing unrest. In addition to frequent civil protests deploring President Pervez Musharraf's heavy-handedness toward the judiciary, violent conflict has escalated, including a bloody confrontation last July between Pakistani military forces and Islamic extremists at a mosque in the heart of Islamabad; a spate of suicide bombings that have left over 600 Pakistanis dead in six months; and a growing presence of Taliban-backed extremists in the northwest part of the country, particularly in the Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan.

A Delicate Situation

Conventional wisdom holds that in this part of the world stability and democracy are mutually exclusive. But in the case of Pakistan, it is increasingly clear that holding fair and transparent elections provides the best chance for stabilizing the country. Ultimately, a popularly elected civilian government working hand-in-hand with a strong military focused on its primary mission of battling extremists will provide stability and security for the Pakistani people. There has been some discussion of the formation of a national unity government in the run-up to an election, but such a step should only be pursued with the full agreement of the major political parties and with the understanding that it would help restore democratic rule. A major

Talking Points

- The dramatic events in Pakistan during the last 10 months, including the assassination of two-time Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, cast doubt on the future stability of the country.
- Washington should increasingly view President Musharraf as a transitional figure whose influence is likely to decline in the months ahead and reach out to a variety of civilian leaders.
- To support fair and transparent polls on February 18th, the U.S. should call on Musharraf to lift media curbs; release all activists, lawyers, and politicians detained during emergency rule; and re-establish the independence of the judiciary.
- Despite frustration over lack of Pakistani success in uprooting terrorist safe havens along the border with Afghanistan, the U.S. should refrain from cutting military assistance and develop a forward-looking strategic approach to improving U.S.–Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation.

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complicating factor for the election process is the continuing campaign of suicide bombings, including last week's attack in front of the Lahore High Court that killed dozens of police officers.

A flawed election viewed as rigged by Musharraf would lead to further civil unrest that could bring Pakistan to a dangerous tipping point. The violent protests and arousal of ethnic tensions sparked by the Bhutto assassination demonstrate the state's fragility. Pakistan has held eight elections in its 60-year history, but next month's may prove to be the most important one yet. President Musharraf's credibility has plummeted in the eyes of most Pakistanis, and his regime's handling of the Bhutto assassination has only compounded his problems. Video footage of the attack shows Bhutto was probably killed by a bullet, rather than from a head fracture, as initially claimed by the Interior Ministry. The contradictory statement has fueled public mistrust of the Musharraf government, which was already running high due to his imposition of emergency rule in early November last year.

The situation in Pakistan is fluid and delicate. The U.S. should refrain from making abrupt policy changes, and instead remain engaged with both civilian politicians and military leadership in an effort to ensure Pakistan weathers the current tumult.

Washington should increasingly view Musharraf as a transitional figure whose influence is likely to decline in the months ahead. The U.S. relationship with Pakistan will likely go through an adjustment period as Washington shifts from dealing mainly with Musharraf to a more broad-based government run by civilians. The U.S. needs to exercise patience as Pakistan seeks to resolve its domestic turmoil, encouraging the democratic process and criticizing any further attempts by Musharraf to undermine it.

Confronting Extremist Threat

The Bhutto assassination demonstrates the extent to which the Musharraf government has failed to rein in extremism and terrorism in the country. Three years ago Musharraf articulated a goal of "enlightened moderation" for his country, but his actions have not lived up to his words. Instead of taking an unambiguous approach to Islamic extremism by closing down religious schools that

preach hatred of the West and applying the rule of law equally to all terrorists, his government continues to distinguish between homegrown and foreign-born extremists and to jail more peaceful democratic activists than violent militants.

Confronting terrorism and extremism in Pakistan will be a long-term and multi-pronged effort. In the immediate term, the U.S. and Pakistan need to work cooperatively in addressing the terrorist safe haven along the border with Afghanistan, which constitutes a threat to worldwide security. Al-Qaeda and Taliban-backed terrorists in this region seek to destabilize both Afghanistan and Pakistan and to project terrorism throughout the world through both operational support and ideological inspiration. The Pakistani approach of pursuing tactical peace deals with the terrorists in this region has proved futile. Washington and Islamabad need to develop a strategic approach to the problem.

The Pakistan Army has had some recent success in confronting Taliban-backed extremists in the Swat Valley region of the Northwest Frontier Province and must now focus on replicating those advances in the Tribal Areas. Pakistani success in confronting the terrorist scourge lies in the hands of the Army, now led by General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani. Kiyani has a reputation for being a serious, professional soldier uninterested in meddling in Pakistan's internal politics, which may facilitate U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation. Next month's election of a new parliament and Prime Minister is unlikely to impact substantially the overall approach of the military leadership in dealing with the terrorist safe haven along the Afghanistan border.

Pakistani officials in the past have tried to separate the Pakistani radicals from al-Qaeda's global objectives and negotiate with Pakistani Taliban leaders to pacify the situation. The government has tried to pursue peace deals with local tribal leaders to rein in al-Qaeda activities along the Afghanistan border, but these deals backfired by emboldening the terrorists and allowing them to strengthen their influence in the region. Musharraf's attempt to find a non-military solution to the terrorist problem in the border areas was probably aimed at avoiding upheaval in the Army: One-quarter of Pakistan's soldiers share an ethnic Pashtun identity with the

region's inhabitants. The precariousness of the situation in the northwest became clear in early November, when Musharraf freed 25 Taliban militants to secure the release of some 200 Pakistani soldiers being held hostage by Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Masood.

Remaining sympathies and links between elements of the Pakistani security establishment and militant groups that previously fought in Kashmir or with the Taliban in Afghanistan hamper Pakistan's ability to gain the upper hand against the extremists. The mid-December escape of terrorist Rashid Rauf (allegedly involved in the 2006 plot to blow up planes flying between Washington and London) from Pakistani custody is emblematic of the murky relations between Pakistan security agencies and international terrorists. Rashid Rauf is connected by marriage to Masood Azhar, head of the Jaish-e-Mohammed, a Pakistani terrorist group operating in Kashmir with links to Pakistani intelligence. Rauf's mysterious escape raises questions about Pakistan's overall commitment and ability to bring to justice international terrorists with local ties. Although Pakistan's senior army leadership almost certainly recognizes the problem, they have yet to address the issue in a forthright and systematic manner.

The implications of the Red Mosque showdown in July for Pakistan's future are far-reaching. Most of the suicide bombings over the last six months are likely retaliation for the Pakistani military operation at the mosque, which resulted in at least 100 deaths. The revenge suicide bombings throughout the country and the recent confrontation between Taliban-backed militants and the Pakistan Army in the Swat Valley are changing the dynamics between Pakistani religious parties and their former Taliban benefactors.

The phenomenon is similar to the "Anbar Awakening" in Iraq, in which the harsh tactics of al-Qaeda fighters led to a backlash from the Sunni tribes. According to recent media reports, the leader of the

religious party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) Fazlur Rehman is trying to disassociate himself from the new generation of Taliban that is targeting the Pakistani state. One reason for the JUI's shifting position is that militants themselves are now lashing out against the same Islamist parties that supported them in the past.¹ The major difference from the situation in al-Anbar, however, is that rather than Sunni tribes, the Pakistan Army is directly confronting the Taliban militants in the Swat Valley.

The growing cleavages between the Pakistani religious parties and the militants targeting the Pakistani state will assist the Pakistani Army's efforts to uproot the terrorists along the border with Afghanistan. The U.S. military should stand ready to assist the Pakistanis with any equipment or training necessary to fight these terrorists who now seek to destroy the state of Pakistan. Direct and uncoordinated U.S. military intervention in the Tribal Areas would likely have disastrous consequences. Such military intervention risks further destabilizing the Pakistan government and tipping the political balance in favor of religious extremists. The U.S. must follow the Pakistan Army lead, demonstrating that it values the stability of the Pakistani state and a cooperative relationship with the Pakistan Army.

Dealing effectively with the terrorist problem also requires Pakistani leaders to take an unequivocal stand against the threat and back up their public statements with actions. Benazir Bhutto had campaigned on a promise to steer her country away from extremism. This was a message that resonated with the Pakistani people and one that was ridiculed by some of Musharraf's closest supporters. In late October, for example, then Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid said during a press conference, while referring to Benazir Bhutto, "Those who try to raise the flag of imperialistic policies would have to face suicide attacks."² Statements like these bolster the cause of the terrorists and contribute to Bhutto supporters' suspicions of government complicity in her murder.

1. Nicholas Schmidle, "Next-Gen Taliban," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 6, 2008, at www.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/magazine/06PAKISTAN-t.html?ex=1357189200,01/11/08 (January 15, 2008).
2. "Pakistani Daily," *The Nation*, October 24, 2007, at www.nation.com.pk/daily/oct-2007/24/index8.php, 11/21/07 (January 15, 2008).

As Pakistan works to combat extremism, it should consider adopting policies to deprogram or de-radicalize militants that pose less of a direct security threat. Singapore launched in 2003 “The Religious Rehabilitation Group,” in which volunteer clerics lead weekly one-on-one counseling sessions with detainees to expose them to the distortions of the radical Jemaah Islamiyah doctrine.³ Indonesia has been experimenting with similar de-radicalization programs for the last three years using reformed, high-profile prisoners to convince radicals of the error of their ways through the force of argument.⁴ These are serious efforts worthy of a careful assessment by Pakistani authorities.

U.S. Assistance Programs

Washington should continue to provide robust economic and military assistance programs to Pakistan, but improve the way it monitors and leverages this aid. The Bush Administration’s recent decision to begin programming through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) the \$200 million annual direct cash transfer was a welcome development. Providing this aid in the form of socio-economic projects that directly impact the lives of average Pakistanis, rather than through cash transfers to the Musharraf government, constitutes a major improvement in how the U.S. disburses and administers its large-scale assistance programs to Pakistan.

The majority of this assistance should go toward public education to boost current U.S. aid to the education sector, which now stands at about \$60 million annually. Only about 42 percent of Pakistani children between the ages of five and nine attend school, and adult female literacy is only about 40 percent.⁵

Recent calls to cut military assistance, on the other hand, are unhelpful. The U.S. already cut F-16 sales to Pakistan once in the past, and doing so again will only confirm for many Pakistanis that the U.S. is a fickle partner not to be trusted. Cutting

U.S. military assistance to Pakistan would demoralize the Pakistan Army and jeopardize our ability to garner close counterterrorism cooperation, thus playing into the game plan of extremists seeking to create a sense of chaos in the country.

Tribal Areas

The Bush Administration’s commitment to provide \$750 million over five years to develop the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is a step in the right direction. Broad-based economic development of this impoverished area is necessary to uproot extremism. USAID has implemented assistance programs in the FATA for several years, including road building and school construction, and through opium cultivation eradication programs that were successful in the 1980s. USAID and the government of Japan are currently rebuilding 130 schools in the FATA. Although the U.S. will have to provide aid initially through Pakistani government channels, especially in areas where security is an overriding issue, USAID should seek out potential non-governmental organizations that could work in these areas so that eventually it can work through them rather than relying solely on the local administration.

Over the long term, U.S. assistance should encourage political reform that incorporates the institutions of the tribal lands fully into the Pakistani system. Some have argued that the Pakistan military is loath to implement political reform in these areas, and that only the democratic parties would move in this direction. Political parties are currently prohibited from operating in the FATA, while a political agent, or federal bureaucrat, runs the affairs of each of the seven FATA agencies.

There are 12 seats reserved for FATA members in the National Assembly (the lower house of parliament) and eight in the Senate. However, parliament has no authority to legislate on matters concerning FATA, and the FATA legislators wield little authority.⁶ The Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) has petitioned

3. Simon Montlake, “U.S. Tries Rehab for Religious Extremists,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 9, 2007 at <http://w3.nexis.com/new/results/docview.do?risb+21,01/11/08> (January 15, 2008).

4. International Crisis Group, “Deradicalisation and Indonesian Prisons,” Asia Report No. 142 (November 19, 2007).

5. James R. Kunder, “U.S. Assistance to Pakistan,” testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, December 6, 2007.

the Supreme Court to enforce the Political Parties Act in the FATA that would extend Pakistan election laws to the region and encourage political activity. The petition claims that since the political parties are not allowed to field candidates for elections, the mosques and madrassahs (religious schools) have been able to assert undue political influence in the region.⁷

Nuclear Issues

Preventing Pakistan's nuclear weapons and technology from falling into the hands of terrorists is a top priority for the U.S. While there is no immediate threat to the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons during the current political transition, Washington will need to be diligent in pursuing policies that promote the safety and security of Islamabad's nuclear assets. The results of investigations into Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan's nuclear black market and proliferation network demonstrate the devastating consequences of nuclear proliferation by individuals with access to state-controlled nuclear programs.

Although A.Q. Khan avoided engaging al-Qaeda on nuclear issues, earlier revelations about a group of former Pakistani military officials and nuclear scientists who met with Osama bin Laden around the time of September 11, 2001, remind us of the continuing threat of the intersection of terrorism and nuclear weapons in Pakistan. On October 23, 2001, acting on an American request, Pakistani authorities detained Bashiruddin Mahmood and Abdul Majeed, two retired Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) officials. Since their retirement from the PAEC in 1999 they had been involved in relief work in Afghanistan through a non-governmental organization they established called Ummah Tameer-e-Nau (UTN). In November 2001, the coalition forces found documents in Afghanistan relating to UTN's interest in biological weapons. This prompted Pakistani security forces to arrest seven members of UTN's board, most of

whom were retired Pakistani Army officials and nuclear scientists.⁸

Recent media reports reveal that the U.S. has been assisting Pakistan in improving the safety and security of its nuclear weapons during the last six years.⁹ This kind of cooperation is possible because the Bush Administration carefully nurtured relations with Pakistan, including through provision of military hardware and military-to-military exchange programs.

Recent media hype surrounding the issue of the safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, including statements about the possibility of the U.S. seizing Pakistani nuclear assets, is damaging to the bilateral relationship. The current civil unrest does not directly endanger the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. The main threat stems from the potential of al-Qaeda penetrating the system clandestinely through retired officials with extremist sympathies, as in the UTN case cited above.

For this reason, it is more important to focus on helping Pakistan institute procedures, such as improving its personnel reliability programs, than to discuss openly plans for emasculating its nuclear capabilities. Former Deputy Director of the CIA John McLaughlin summed up the situation well when he said recently that he was confident "that the Pakistanis are very serious about securing this [nuclear] material, but also that someone in Pakistan is very intent on getting their [sic] hands on it."

Recommendations

Pressure Musharraf for Free Polls. The U.S. must make up for lost time in its support of Pakistan's civilian politicians and civil society. For too long, U.S. policymakers have equated the political survival of President Musharraf with success in the War on Terrorism, and have avoided dealing with civilian leaders.

When Washington finally began to shift its policy last year and support Benazir Bhutto's return to Pakistan, it made the mistake of picking favorites

6. International Crisis Group, "Pakistan's Tribal Areas: Appeasing the Militants," Asia Report No. 125, (December 11, 2006).
7. "BB Moves SC for Politicking in FATA," *Daily Times*, July 31, 2007, at www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007%5C07%5C31%5Cstory_31-7-2007_pg1_6 (December 11, 2007).
8. Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 154–155.
9. David Sanger and William Broad, "U.S. Secretly Aids Pakistan in Guarding Nuclear Arms," *New York Times*, November 18, 2007.

and failed to support the return of the other major opposition leader, Nawaz Sharif. The U.S. must support the *process* of democracy and not any particular individual or party. The Pakistani people, by and large, do not support extremist policies and would likely vote into power one of the mainstream democratic parties—so long as they have a range of political choices and perceive the elections as transparent and free.

A popularly elected civilian government could provide a public mandate for fighting terrorism and extremism. Musharraf's loss of public support and his close association with the U.S. and its counterterrorism policies has translated into a loss of public support for fighting terrorism in general.

To support free polls, the U.S. should publicly call on Musharraf to lift media curbs; release all activists, lawyers, and politicians detained during emergency rule—including President of the Pakistan Supreme Court Bar Association and PPP leader Aitzaz Ahsan; work with the political parties to ensure the neutrality of the election commission; re-establish the independence of the judiciary; and lift unnecessary restrictions on international observers, such as banning exit polling.

Develop a Strategic Approach to Defeating the Taliban and Use Tough Diplomacy to Bring Islamabad on Board. While continuing large-scale military and economic assistance programs to Pakistan, the U.S. should use tough and reasoned diplomatic persuasion to convince Islamabad to work closely with the U.S., not only against al-Qaeda but also against the Taliban. U.S. officials should emphasize that U.S.–Pakistan cooperation against al-Qaeda and their Taliban supporters will serve Pakistan's long-term strategic interests. Convincing Pakistan on this front becomes much more difficult if we start cutting military assistance programs at the same time.

We must avoid repeating past mistakes. In his new book *How We Missed the Story: Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and the Hijacking of Afghanistan*, author Roy Gutman details many of the mistakes made by U.S. officials in developing policy

toward Afghanistan and Pakistan in the run-up to the 9/11 attacks.

In Gutman's book, a senior retired Pakistani Army official notes that U.S. policymakers could have convinced Pakistani military officials to adopt a tougher policy toward the Taliban in the late 1990s. He said that top U.S. officials should have sat down with Pakistan's top military strategists and convinced them that the Taliban was ultimately a threat to Pakistan itself. The senior retired military official noted that Pakistan at the time feared that putting pressure on the Taliban would provoke an extremist backlash, but that well-argued outside persuasion could have coaxed Pakistan into "extricating itself to the winning side."¹⁰

Gutman provides several examples of a fragmented U.S. policy toward the terrorist threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan throughout the 1990s and the lack of a strategic, diplomatic approach to achieve the goal of defeating al-Qaeda and its Taliban affiliates. To develop such a strategy, it is important to understand the symbiotic relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The Taliban receives valuable assistance from al-Qaeda in fighting coalition forces in Afghanistan, while al-Qaeda relies on the Taliban support to sustain a safe haven in the Pashtun-dominated areas of Pakistan.

While it is possible to peel off "guns-for-hire" that may not be ideologically motivated by anti-West pan-Islamism, it would be folly to believe the U.S. or Pakistan can convince the Taliban leadership to break its relationship with al-Qaeda. As Gutman notes, "pursuing patient diplomacy with the Taliban in 1999—even after top U.S. officials knew that bin Laden had effectively hijacked the regime...sent a signal of indecision and weakness to both Mullah Omar and bin Laden."

In many ways, we are in the same diplomatic position that we were during the late 1990s with Pakistan. We need Pakistan to crack down harder on Taliban elements within its borders, but its fears that this will cause a backlash in Pakistan and its mistrust of U.S. objectives in the region are hampering our ability to obtain full Pakistani cooperation.

10. Roy Gutman, *How We Missed the Story: Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and the Hijacking of Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2008), pp. 163–164.

It is essential that the U.S. and Pakistan develop a strategic dialogue on defeating the Taliban/al-Qaeda phenomenon and view the issue in a context that also addresses Pakistan's strategic stakes vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The Bush Administration's recent plan to send 3,000 additional U.S. Marines to Afghanistan is an important signal that the U.S. is committed to stabilizing Afghanistan and ensuring that a moderate, pro-West regime succeeds there.

Build up Pakistan's Capability to Confront Terrorists and Focus on Developing Tribal Areas.

The U.S. will need to build up Pakistan's capacity to take on the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the Tribal Areas and focus substantial attention on developing these areas economically. Washington must convince Islamabad to work more closely in joint efforts that bring U.S. resources and military strength to bear on the situation in North and South Waziristan and employ a combination of targeted military operations and economic assistance programs that drives a wedge between the Pashtun tribal communities and the international terrorists.

A large-scale U.S. troop invasion of Pakistan's Tribal Areas could have disastrous consequences for the Pakistani state and would not provide a lasting solution to the problem. A more effective strategy involves working cooperatively with Pakistan's military to assert state authority over the areas. Once they are secure, substantial assistance should be provided to build up the economy and social infrastructure.

Washington's pledge of \$750 million to develop the Tribal Areas over the next five years is welcome, but the aid should not be delivered until it is clear the Pakistani authorities have the upper hand in the region and can ensure the aid does not fall into the wrong hands. This will require U.S. access to the region and a clear commitment from the Pakistan government to counter Taliban ideology.

The U.S. should conduct counterinsurgency training programs for the Pakistan military, especially the Frontier Corps, whose troops know the terrain of the FATA but have little counterinsurgency training. This training will build trust and stronger ties between the U.S. military and its Pakistani counterparts, as well as better prepare the Pakistan Army to fight al-Qaeda in the Tribal Areas.

To address rising Islamic extremism, Washington should encourage the Pakistan government to enforce the rule of law against militants who use the threat of violence to enforce Taliban-style edicts, and to close down madrassahs that are teaching hatred against the West that leads to terrorism. The Pakistan government also needs to take steps to root out from the security establishment any remaining pockets of support for militants, including those with links to the Kashmir insurgency or the Taliban. Without a complete break from Islamist militancy, Pakistan's security apparatus will be increasingly unable to protect Pakistani citizens from terrorist violence, leading to further destabilization of the country.

Maintain Robust Assistance Programs. The U.S. should refrain from cutting assistance to Pakistan because it sends a wrong signal at a time when we need to demonstrate that the fight against terrorism is a joint endeavor that benefits Pakistan as much as it does the U.S. and the global community. Given the abrupt cutoff of U.S. aid to Pakistan in 1990 because of nuclear concerns, the U.S. lost valuable leverage with Pakistani leaders and created a feeling of mistrust between our two countries that still plagues the relationship.

Because of the 1990 aid cutoff, Pakistan views the U.S. as a fickle partner that could exit the region at any time. This lack of faith in U.S. commitment to the region hurts our ability to garner the kind of counterterrorism cooperation we require from the Pakistani government. Pakistani soldiers are dying in the battle against terrorism, and average Pakistanis are beginning to question whether these sacrifices are being made solely at the behest of the U.S. rather than to protect their own country. Conditioning assistance only fuels the idea that Pakistan is taking action to fight terrorism under coercion, rather than to protect its own citizens.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the U.S. must remain closely engaged with Pakistani civilian politicians and the military leadership during this time of political transition. The U.S.-Pakistan relationship is crossing over troubled waters, and anti-Americanism is reaching the boiling point. A strong U.S. public stance supporting the *process* of democracy without focusing on any one particular leader or party

would help calm the situation. Despite frustration over lack of Pakistani success in uprooting the terrorist safe haven in the border areas, the U.S. should refrain from cutting military assistance and develop a forward-looking strategic approach to improving U.S.–Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation.

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