

The War on Terror and the Crisis in Pakistan

Written by Ben Foulon

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BEN FOULON, JUL 8 2009

Ever since the shocking, saddening events of September 11, 2001, U.S. policy has been dominated by an array of initiatives known collectively as the “war on terror.” Though enacted with good intentions, the “war on terror” has generated more controversy than it has palpable results. It has embroiled the United States in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and has left it increasingly isolated in international affairs.[1] It has undermined the foundations not only of American ideals but of American law as well.[2] All the while, Islamic extremism has arguably gained in popularity, and the very groups that are responsible for the September 11th terrorist attacks – Al Qaeda and the Taliban – have eluded destruction and are more powerful than ever.

How ironic it would be if the most direct consequence of the “war on terror” was the overthrow of a government by Muslim extremists and the destabilization of a nuclear-armed country. With the Taliban gaining full control of the Swat Valley in Pakistan last February[3] and advancing to within 60 miles of Islamabad just a few months ago[4] – moving much faster and over a wider area than in any of their previous incursions – such a catastrophe seems to be looming just over the horizon.

Pakistan has long been the geopolitical thorn in the side of the “war on terror.” The South Asian Muslim nation had been the Taliban’s most valuable supporter[5] prior to the September 11th attacks, and after the NATO invasion of Afghanistan, the remnants of the Taliban were able to avoid total destruction by migrating across the porous Afghan-Pakistani border and finding refuge in the mountainous, loosely governed regions of Pakistan’s northwest.[6] Although the United States was able to coax an ambivalent Pakistan into supporting its “war on terror,” the Pakistani Army was unwilling and unable to launch a concerted offensive to eradicate the Taliban once and for all.[7] As a result, Taliban militants were able to regroup and begin their expansion inside Pakistan that now has brought them within 60 miles of Pakistan’s capital.

Although the Taliban had no presence in Pakistan before 2001, the radical Muslim Pashtun group did have several advantages upon arriving in Pakistan that would make it easier for the group to reorganize and spread within the country. It had a much better knowledge of the mountainous terrain than did NATO forces or Pakistani forces and officials, most of who came from Punjab or Sindh, far from the northwest. It also had the support of local Pashtuns, who lived on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border. Such knowledge and support was crucial in enabling the Taliban to escape into Pakistan and find relative security and support upon arriving.[8]

After settling down and regrouping, the Taliban set about expanding ever deeper into Pakistan. With over a decade of experience in building grassroots support and in governing gained through their rise and time in power in Afghanistan and with nearly two decades of experience in guerilla warfare gained fighting the Soviets and other Afghans during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the Afghan Civil War, respectively, Taliban militants were skilled at taking over a country from the bottom up.[9]

In addition to using their stringent religious doctrine to appeal to die-hard Muslims, members of the Taliban have been able to prey off growing popular dissatisfaction with the corruption and incompetence of local and national Pakistani officials, the inefficiency of domestic institutions like the judicial system, and the gap between the rich and the poor, among other things, by offering themselves and their law as suitable alternatives to the current structure of Pakistani government and society.

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Although the Taliban's rule seems iron-fisted and strict, it at least seems efficient and consistent with some sort of doctrine (albeit a radical one). By contrast, the Pakistani government seems inefficient and corrupt, and its primary purpose seems to be to serve the interests of those in power; the two most powerful politicians in Pakistan, President Asif Ali Zardari and Nawaz Sharif, as well as Zardari's famous widow (and claim to fame) Benazir Bhutto, were all indicted on corruption charges at some point in their lives.[10] Considering that the two most powerful parties in Pakistan – the PPP and the PML-N – have been headed since their inception by the Bhuttos (from Sindh) and the Sharifs (from Punjab),[11] respectively, Pakistani elections seem more like instruments of dynastic rivalry than a mechanism of popular sovereignty.

The inefficient and biased local and national judiciary systems are just a couple of examples of Pakistan's domestic institutions being hampered and distorted by the rampant favoritism and corruption in the Pakistani government. Indeed, most proponents of a Sharia Law system are not in favor of the Taliban's extreme interpretation of Islam but rather view such Islam-based courts as a practical alternative to the current judicial mess.[12]

The same families that control the political parties control most of the wealth and land of Pakistan as well.[13] The Sharifs, for instance, were some of the first and are now some of the richest industrial magnates in Pakistan, owning the large Ittefaq conglomerate based in Lahore.[14] Most of the other Pakistanis live in poverty in the poor rural areas or the slums. The corrupt political system seems to perpetuate the dominance and wealth of the semi-aristocratic families at the expense of everyone else.[15]

The great many poor and dissatisfied people in Pakistan have provided fertile ground for Taliban recruitment and expansion for the past seven years, to the point that the Taliban now poses a serious challenge to the existence of the Pakistani state. The degree of Pakistani discontent and the ruthlessness with which the Taliban has exploited such dissatisfaction have been matched by Pakistan's inability to definitively roll back or crush the Taliban at any stage of its expansion. The Pakistani Army, more concerned with India and unwilling to commit troops to a thorough counterinsurgency campaign, has only sporadically fought the Taliban.[16] Left with little muscle to resist the Taliban, local and national officials have had to resort to making truces with the Taliban in order avoid total capitulation.[17]

Such a cyclical process of Taliban aggression, brief Pakistani retaliation, and truce has been immensely frustrating for the United States, as it has undermined the true front line of the U.S. "war on terror." Out of each cycle, the Taliban has emerged stronger, with more land, more recruits, and more confidence.

The events of the first half of 2009 seem to follow the pattern of the Taliban expansion cycle, with the Taliban transgression into Swat, the truce, and the subsequent Taliban incursion into Buner. But the swiftness and forcefulness of this latest Taliban offensive, as well as its proximity to the Pakistani capital, are troubling even by Pakistani standards. President Obama, to his credit, has acknowledged the gravity of the worsening situation in Pakistan and has realized that someone somewhere must do something to stop the advance of Taliban militants, lest they reach Islamabad by year's end.

However, President Obama is also beginning to realize that the United States has very limited options with which to influence the situation in Pakistan, none of which have worked well lately. U.S. drone aircraft strikes in Northwestern Pakistan and NATO raids across the Afghan border – either of which could be considered an overstepping of U.S. authority and a violation of Pakistan's territorial integrity – have done little more than anger the locals and encourage the Taliban to advance into the heart of Pakistan.[18] There has been almost no way for the United States to monitor or control billions of dollars in aid it has sent to Pakistan,[19] and neither money nor harsh words have been able to compel the Pakistani government into sustained or predictable action.

The lack of cohesion between the different wings of Pakistani authority has made it very difficult for Pakistan to carry out any such sustained or predictable action against the Taliban. The Pakistani government, headed by President Zardari, would very much like to prevent the Taliban from reaching the seat of government in Islamabad. However, unlike General Musharraf's previous administration, the current government does not have the unquestioned loyalty of the Pakistani Army,[20] which makes it very difficult for the government to force the army to take action against the Taliban. Unfortunately for the government, the Pakistani Army would rather not launch operations against the

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Taliban, being more concerned with India to the east, particularly in light of heightened tensions with India after the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in November 2008. Indeed, it seems unclear if the army would defend the current government if it came close to being overthrown as long as the likely successor was not pro-Indian.[21]

In addition to the government and the army, the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) (incidentally the agency which originally supported the Taliban)[22] has its own agenda, specifically concentrating on undermining the Indian-ruled portion of Kashmir.[23] To this end, the ISI has covertly supported militant Punjabi groups operating in Kashmir. Such groups have been hard to control, though. The group responsible for the Mumbai attacks, Lashkar-e-Taiba, was one such group.[24] Others are suspected to have links to the Taliban.[25]

With so many different branches of government working at cross-purposes, it is no wonder that the money and rhetoric of the United States have had little success in compelling Pakistan to counter the Taliban.

As grim and as frustrating the situation is, there have been some encouraging signs as of late. The Taliban seems to have moved too fast and too forcefully in its latest push, as it has generated a lot of public backlash recently. A video of a woman getting publicly flogged for a minor crime has sparked particular anger among Pakistanis this past year.[26] In addition, the Pakistani government, alarmed at the proximity of the Taliban to the capital and embarrassed by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's assertion that it was "basically abdicating to the Taliban,"[27] has gone off on every limb available to get the army to retaliate against the Taliban. For the moment, whatever the government did seems to be working: for nearly a month the Pakistani Army has carried out operations in the Swat Valley against the Taliban, including in Mingora,[28] Swat's largest city.

It is unclear how long the current Pakistani counteroffensive will last, though, as the Pakistani Army has never sustained a campaign against the Taliban for more than a few months. Indeed, much of the fighting has been done by Pakistani paramilitary forces, which is a sign that the Pakistani Army may not be ready or willing to commit to a long fight. Moreover, the fighting in Swat has caused over 2 million people to become refugees,[29] and if the government does not adequately accommodate such people, then they could become the Taliban's newest recruitment pool.

It is critical, then, for the United States to try to compel Pakistan to not let this window of opportunity close as previous ones have but rather to take advantage of such opportunity to turn the tide against the Taliban.

In order to begin to permanently roll back the Taliban, the Pakistani government must give the Pakistani people confidence that it can effectively provide for them and can rule fairly and efficiently.

The capitalist governments of Western Europe faced similar challenges after WWII, when Communist parties were growing in appeal among disillusioned Europeans in the wake of the war's utter devastation. At this critical juncture in history, the United States undertook a massive aid operation known as the Marshall Plan in which it funded reconstruction programs designed by individual Western countries. In this fashion, the United States helped Britain, France, Italy, and most other European countries to rebuild their infrastructure and lay the foundations for future prosperity. In enacting such recovery plans, the Western European governments regained the confidence of their citizens and halted the spread of Communism.

President Zardari has requested on occasion for Pakistan to receive a Marshall Plan of its own.[30] But what President Zardari envisions is largely an extension of the existing aid sent to Pakistan – aid that disappears off the radar once in Pakistan. What distinguished the original Marshall Plan from subsequent aid programs – and which has also made it by far the most successful of such programs – is that it required each European government to come up with its own specific recovery plan and means of implementing such a plan.[31]

A true replica of the Marshall Plan – in which the Pakistani government would design its own specific development program and detail exactly where and when money would be spent before receiving U.S. funding – may be exactly what Pakistan needs. The responsibility of having to come up with and execute plans for reform and development could compel the Pakistani government to root out corruption and increase efficiency. Holding the Pakistani

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government to a specific, detailed spending program, perhaps with inspections or Congressional benchmarks, would allow the United States to ensure that its aid was being put to its intended uses.

If designed and implemented correctly, this new Marshall Plan would not only help develop and reform Pakistan but would also help alleviate the discontent among the Pakistani public that the Taliban has been able to benefit so greatly from. The sight of the Pakistani government actively developing and reforming its country would greatly improve its standing among its people, who are unaccustomed to such action from its government. If the government became less corrupt and more efficient in the process of designing and executing such development and reform programs, it would also improve its standing among Pakistanis, who have grown cynical in the wake of past and ongoing government corruption. The positive economic impact such programs would have and the influx of jobs they would likely provide would also ease the discontent of the Pakistani public and may make them have more faith in the current system and be less enthusiastic of looking for a new system, which the Taliban has been offering.

Such a plan, provided it is done right, would be in the interest of many powerful figures and institutions in Pakistan. President Zardari should be very receptive to such a plan, as it would allow him to regain credibility with the public that he has all but lost in the wake of the episode with Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry and Nawaz Sharif last March.[32] The Pakistani Army should also support such a plan, as it would increase the legitimacy and popularity of the government, which would lessen the chance of insurrection; as non-chalant as its attitude toward the government is, the last thing the Pakistani Army wants to deal with is a full-blown rebellion or civil war. Moreover, if the Taliban attacked government workers trying to work on development projects, it would greatly harm the Taliban's reputation among the Pakistani people and would provide easy justification for further retaliation against the Taliban.

Getting powerful regional leaders, particularly Nawaz Sharif – the “Lion of Punjab”[33] and President Zardari's chief political rival – to approve of a Marshall Plan for Pakistan would be more difficult, as President Zardari would likely want to use his own people to execute the programs he designs so as to undercut his regional rivals. When reviewing such programs, then, the United States should insist on having some regional authorities carry out such programs as a condition for providing funding.

There is no better way of undermining the Taliban in the long term than to alleviate the discontent of the Pakistani public. A true Marshall Plan for Pakistan would do just that.

In addition to trying to set up a Marshall Plan for Pakistan, the United States should also strive to work together with other regional powers, such as China and Russia, to put more forceful pressure on Pakistan and to jointly try to counter the Taliban. It is in interest of all three countries to prevent the Taliban from toppling the Pakistani government. A major Taliban victory in Pakistan may spur on Muslim extremist groups in China, who are mainly Uyghurs fighting for an independent nation in Xinjiang,[34] a region that has been independent from China for most of history and has been part of modern China for barely 60 years.[35] To this point, Muslim extremism in China has been relatively low-key, serving more as an excuse for Chinese crackdowns in the region than as a legitimate threat to Chinese security.[36] However, a major Taliban victory could provide momentum and encouragement to Uyghur Muslim extremists, and should Taliban militants manage to take control of the Chinese border with Pakistan, they could send support through to Xinjiang – the part of China that borders Pakistan – and could help the Uyghur Muslim extremists become a formidable force. In addition, a civil war in Pakistan could lead to refugees pouring into China from Pakistan. China does not even want to entertain such possibilities, and so should be willing to work with the United States to stop the Taliban. As Pakistan's steady ally since the Cold War, China should have a fair ability to compel Pakistan to counter the Taliban.

Although perhaps it should not be as worried as China, Russia should nevertheless be concerned about the growth of the Taliban and the possibility of the collapse of the Pakistani government. Muslim extremists in Chechnya and other Russian-controlled Caucasian regions could be encouraged by a major Taliban victory. In addition, the destabilization of Pakistan by the Taliban could lead to a further destabilization of Afghanistan by Afghani Taliban, which could cause refugee flows and headaches for the neighboring Central Asian states, which Russia would like to retain as its sphere of influence. Indeed, Russian troops stationed on the Tajikistan border could get caught up in a mess in neighboring Afghanistan.

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The United States should reach out to China and Russia on the basis of having a common interest in defeating the Taliban and try to facilitate cooperation and joint action in the region to stop the Taliban. For starters, the United States, China, and Russia should put pressure on India to ease tensions with Pakistan that have been especially high since the Mumbai attacks. As India's steady ally since the Cold War, Russia should have a fair amount of influence over India, and surely the last thing India wants is for a radical Muslim group to take over Pakistan and its nuclear weapons. Getting India to do as little as tone down its rhetoric and assure Pakistan it has no intentions of war and wants friendship and cooperation could help diffuse tensions. Getting India to restart talks on Kashmir would have an even greater effect at lowering tensions. If tensions between India and Pakistan could be reduced, then the Pakistani Army would feel more comfortable about moving troops away from the Indian border (where most of them are now stationed) to Pakistan's northwest to fight the Taliban.

The United States should also try to get an alternate supply route to Afghanistan through Russia and the Central Asian states. The United States could make the point to Russia that the more powerful the Taliban is in Afghanistan, the more powerful it will be in Pakistan. With the Taliban now in control of most of Northwestern Pakistan, it is able to threaten the current supply routes into Afghanistan, which pass through Pakistan. With the help of Russia, who has considerable influence over the Central Asian states, the United States would probably be able to get a new supply route through Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan into Afghanistan, or perhaps through some other route in the same general region.

The United States should also try to get China and Russia to apply joint diplomatic, rhetorical, and possibly economic pressure on Pakistan. The combined weight of these three powers may be more effective than unilateral U.S. pressure in compelling Pakistan into action against the Taliban. China and the United States in particular could orchestrate joint economic sanctions or incentives to try to put more pressure on the Pakistani government.

Most importantly, the United States, China, and Russia, along with India, should go about sharing intelligence to try to pinpoint the location and status of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the four should also consider devising a coordinated strategy to eliminate such weapons or confront a new Pakistani regime if the worst should befall the current Pakistani government. The last things any of these countries want are more unaccounted-for nuclear weapons, particularly when they or their allies could be potential targets.

There are some who believe that the Taliban has no chance of toppling the Pakistani government. There are others who believe that it is only a matter of time before Taliban militants follow in the footsteps of the other great revolutionaries of history and take over all of Pakistan. Both views are inaccurate, and resigning to either is a disservice to the victims of the September 11th attacks and the thousands of others who have died trying to prevent Muslim extremists from ever threatening the United States again. The reality is that, over the course of the past decade, the Taliban has grown stronger and stronger in Pakistan to the point that, despite still controlling a minority of Pakistan, the Taliban now poses a serious threat to the existence of Pakistan. It is also true that the Pakistani government, for a variety of reasons, has been unable to effectively counter the rise of the Taliban up to this point.

The United States must realize that, in the next few years, there is a realistic chance that the Taliban could destabilize or even take over Pakistan. It must recognize the international repercussions of either event, particularly the possibility of unaccounted-for nuclear weapons, and must begin to think about how to react to either event. However, President Obama and the United States must also continue to recognize that a Taliban takeover is not imminent, nor is it certain, and the United States must also realize that, while its influence is not as great in Pakistan as it is in other countries, it is not non-existent either. President Obama must exhaust every reasonable, feasible option to prevent the Taliban from going the extra 60 miles to Islamabad. He must be tenacious and resourceful, yet smart; he must be wary of damaging long-term relations and should not address this problem unilaterally, as did his predecessor. He must act within U.S. limitations, but he must act now; the window of opportunity provided by the Pakistani Army may not last long, and given how far the Taliban has come, it may be the last one.

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