

WebMemo



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U.S. Strategy Must Address Afghan–Pakistan Tension

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Heightening tensions between U.S. and Pakistani forces along the Afghan-Pakistani border threaten to play into al-Qaeda's agenda of fueling anti-American sentiment among the Pakistani population and causing confusion within the ranks of the Pakistani military about the primary threat to their country. Coalition military strategy must preserve the ability of military forces to defend themselves and defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Additionally, this strategy must promote cooperation with Pakistan to jointly address transnational terrorist threats in the region. Finally, the U.S. must proactively support a comprehensive regional strategy that enhances cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Americans under Fire—Pakistan at Risk. U.S. officials admitted yesterday that Pakistani forces fired in the direction of two U.S. reconnaissance helicopters flying near the border, an altercation that prompted U.S.-led forces to return fire from their positions in Afghanistan. The incident follows several weeks of escalating tensions between the two militaries as the U.S. steps up the frequency of its Predator missile attacks against terrorist targets in the tribal areas and recently allowed U.S. ground forces to raid a suspected terrorist hideout in South Waziristan. The U.S. strikes have helped eliminate key terrorist targets and likely disrupted terrorists' ability to plan, train for, and conduct lethal operations against Coalition forces and the civilian population in Afghanistan. The U.S. previously avoided sending ground forces into Pakistan without Islamabad's permission to prevent the potential for serious deterioration in U.S.–Pakistan ties and destabilization of the central government.

Ideally, Pakistani forces would deal with the terrorist threat in their tribal areas, while Coalition forces defeat them in Afghanistan. Pakistani government peace deals earlier this year worsened the situation in the tribal areas, however, and led to an upsurge in attacks in Afghanistan. Moreover, Pakistan has failed to completely sever links to deadly terrorist networks in the region, and well-sourced media reports indicate its intelligence service may have been involved in the July 7 bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul. All of this likely convinced the Bush Administration to finally give the green light in July for more aggressive U.S. military action to degrade the terrorist threat in the region.

Proportional Self-Defense. The U.S. may need to continue to rely on unilateral military action in the tribal areas to protect its troops fighting across the border in Afghanistan as well as to prevent a potential future catastrophic international terrorist attack. But the U.S. must carefully calibrate its military action, recognizing that each unilateral strike—especially if it involves civilian casualties—undermines U.S. broader goals of garnering cooperation from Pakistani leaders and preventing the strengthening of radical forces within Pakistani society.

The U.S. and other coalition forces have a right to self-defense, but the U.S. should also be guided

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by overarching policies that acknowledge that the global war on terror will be won by gaining the support of local populations and through close cooperation and coordination with governments also threatened by the terrorist scourge.

Incoming commander of U.S. Central Command General David Petraeus said yesterday that a comprehensive approach was needed to quell the war in Afghanistan, including reconciliation with the population and “absolute engagement” with Pakistan. He also noted that Pakistan faces an existential threat from terrorism and called for “coordination, cooperation, and constructive dialogue” with Islamabad.

Manage Tensions and Step Up Regional Diplomacy. Pakistani civilian and military leaders must be clear with the Pakistani population that the greatest threat to the future of the country comes from terrorists like those who perpetrated the bombing of the Marriott hotel in Islamabad on September 19. For its part, the U.S. needs to use discretion in carrying out unilateral strikes, recognizing that they also undermine long-term U.S. objectives of building a partnership with Pakistani leaders against the mutual terrorist threat and preventing the strengthening of radical forces within Pakistani society.

Allowing tensions to build between U.S. and Pakistani military officials helps al-Qaeda by fueling anti-Americanism and strengthening support for its radical supporters in Pakistan; such tension serves neither American nor Pakistani national security interests. Military cooperation between Islamabad and Washington must remain strong and retain trust to ensure accurate intelligence sharing that is so critical to defeating terrorist threats. The U.S. and Pakistan must close the gap that al-Qaeda is attempting to wedge between them by doing the following:

- The two countries must engage in direct and respectful dialogue that seeks to address each side’s core concerns.
- Pakistan must demonstrate more clearly that it is taking steps to uproot the terrorist safe haven in the tribal areas, while the U.S. must be willing to address Pakistan’s concerns regarding the situation inside Afghanistan.

The U.S. must better integrate its policies toward both Afghanistan and Pakistan and focus more attention on building better ties between them. Their antagonism is driven in part by Afghanistan’s failure to formally recognize their international border and Pakistan’s continued support of Taliban elements that tap into the Afghan Pashtun population’s sense of alienation from the central government. There is an opportunity with the establishment of a new democratic government in Pakistan for the two sides to manage their regional rivalry through confidence-building measures—including trade, economic, and cross-border initiatives—that can begin to douse the fires feeding extremism and terrorism. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has agreed to meet with new Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari in Turkey for the second trilateral meeting of the three countries. This is a positive initiative that the U.S. should strongly support.

Initiatives such as the establishment of Reconstruction Opportunity Zones (ROZs) in the border regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan can also help defuse regional tensions. ROZ legislation now before the U.S. Congress has been supported jointly by Pakistani Ambassador to the U.S. Husain Haqqani and Afghan Ambassador to the U.S. Said T. Jawad. The two leaders have called for expeditious passage of this legislation that would create industrial zones to produce and export textiles and other items to the U.S. duty-free. Most importantly, they argue, the establishment of ROZs in these regions would draw the Afghan and Pakistani economies closer together, increasing their cooperation and integration. Initiatives like ROZs will give each country a vested interest in the stability of the other and help defuse conflict that fuels support for radical ideologies and terrorism.

Winning the global war on terror will require far more than capturing and killing terrorists. U.S. strategy must allow our forces to defend themselves and proactively go after the enemy. At the same time, it will require the U.S. to engage in more robust regional diplomacy to defuse deep-seated animosities and to generate economic and trade initiatives that build support among local populations for uprooting the terrorists among them.

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