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Capture of Taliban Leader Hints Pakistan Reevaluating Afghan Strategy

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The recent capture of the number two Afghan Taliban leader, Abdul Ghani Bahadur, in Pakistan is a blow to the Afghan Taliban and its ability to coordinate the insurgency in southern Afghanistan. Following months of quiet U.S. pressure on Pakistani officials to crack down on Taliban leaders in their country, Islamabad has come through by helping to capture Bahadur, who was critical in directing and organizing Taliban foot soldiers in Afghanistan.

The U.S. should build on Pakistan's fresh willingness to cooperate against the Afghan Taliban, but it should keep in mind that Pakistan's main objective in the region is to counter Indian influence.

Pakistani Turnaround? Over the last eight years, Pakistani policy toward the Afghan Taliban leadership has been inconsistent and unpredictable. The Obama Administration's increased reliance on drone missile strikes to eliminate Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan's tribal areas is partly a reflection of growing U.S. frustration with Pakistan's lack of action against Afghan Taliban leaders. Pakistani military forces have focused instead on countering the Pakistani Taliban by ousting it from the Swat Valley last summer and launching an offensive against its stronghold in South Waziristan last October.

Until recently, Obama Administration appeals to Pakistani leaders to target militant groups like the Jalaluddin Haqqani network in North Waziristan and Afghan Taliban leaders in other parts of the country had been rebuffed. Pakistani military officials argued that they had their hands full and were reluctant to open another front against the militants.

Pakistani officials have also conveyed their interest in maintaining links to the Afghan Taliban leadership as a way to maintain influence in that country should the U.S. and coalition forces depart Afghanistan prematurely.

Bahadur's arrest will help reestablish Pakistan's counterterrorism credentials with Washington. The Pakistan military leadership may also be seeking to ensure it will have a role in determining the future direction of Afghanistan. While it is too early to say whether the arrest of Bahadur signals a broad transformation in Pakistani thinking toward the Afghan Taliban, it does show at least a willingness to exert influence over the movement at a crucial moment in the Afghanistan war.

It is possible that U.S. arguments about the dangers of harboring extremists are beginning to resonate with Pakistan's military leadership.

Cautiously Encourage Pakistan Cooperation. While the Administration should encourage these signs of fresh cooperation from Pakistan, the U.S. must remain clear-headed about Pakistani goals in the region and accept that Pakistani interests often diverge from those of the U.S. While the U.S. seeks to prevent Afghanistan from again serving as a safe

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haven for international terrorists, Pakistan's primary goal is to curb Indian influence in Afghanistan. Indeed, Pakistani Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani restated in recent press interviews that India remains the primary threat to Pakistan and the focus of the Pakistani military.

Pakistan's fixation on India should give pause to any U.S. policymakers considering Pakistan's expressed interest in brokering peace talks with the Taliban. While reintegration of local Taliban fighters into the mainstream democratic process is indeed part of the overall counterinsurgency strategy, it is necessary to distinguish this process from one that would legitimize the Taliban's ruthless ideology.

The enhanced focus on supporting Afghan-led reintegration has fueled speculation in the region and in some European capitals that the U.S. is seeking a political deal with senior Taliban leaders as part of an exit strategy from the region. Negotiating a political deal with the Taliban leadership (based in Pakistan) before U.S. and NATO forces gain the upper hand on the battlefield in Afghanistan would be a tactical and strategic blunder with tremendous negative consequences for U.S. national security.

The U.S. must continue to assert a vision for the region that strengthens those who support democracy, human rights, and religious pluralism and

weakens those who adhere to destructive, extremist ideologies. The strategy must provide the best chances for achieving U.S. objectives as enunciated by President Obama in his December speech at West Point: "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan."

The U.S. should back with diplomatic and financial support Afghan efforts to pursue reconciliation on the ground inside Afghanistan and at the same time work with Pakistan to squeeze the Taliban leadership that is based there and still closely linked to al-Qaeda. These actions should occur simultaneously so that the local Taliban fighters view the U.S./NATO/Afghan authorities as being on the winning side and at the same time see a process through which they can switch sides.

If, on the other hand, the U.S. appears overly anxious to negotiate with the senior Taliban leadership in Pakistan, this would likely undermine efforts to coax local fighters into the political mainstream, thus jeopardizing General Stanley McChrystal's counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan and prolonging instability in the region.

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