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After Pakistan Election, U.S. Should Still Press Counterterrorism Agenda

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Pakistanis deserve credit for braving this weekend's polls in the face of a ruthless campaign of bombings and shootings against candidates, election workers, public rallies and polling booths. With a fairly robust voter turnout of around 60 percent and marking the country's first successful democratic transition, the elections represent a boost for civilian—over military—rule.

The vote does not represent, however, a clear-cut rebuttal of the extremists' agenda and will not make it any easier for the U.S. to press its counterterrorism objectives in Pakistan. Nevertheless, the U.S. should continue to seek to shape Pakistan's anti-terrorism policies in a more helpful direction by conditioning military aid and sales and making clear that Washington remains committed to a stable and democratic Afghanistan even as it withdraws combat forces.

Compromising with Terrorists. The Pakistan Muslim League/Nawaz (PML/N), led by two-time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, is set to win the most parliamentary seats, although it may fall short of obtaining the number necessary to obtain a majority (136). The PML/N will likely bring in independents or smaller parties to form a coalition government.

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which is led by President Asif Ali Zardari and has held power the last five years, fared relatively poorly, winning only about 30 seats—about a third of the seats it took in the last election.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by former Pakistani cricket star Imran Khan, is likely to win the third largest number of seats, so far claiming 26.

Both the PML/N and PTI benefitted during the election campaign from their support for policies that are soft on terrorists. In the six weeks before the elections, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) took responsibility for attacks that killed scores of election workers and candidates mainly from the secular-leaning parties. The TTP avoided targeting the PML/N and PTI, which pronounced their support for compromise, rather than confrontation, with the group.

The PML/N's and PTI's support for negotiations with the TTP and failure to denounce the attacks on the secular-leaning parties allowed the terrorists to influence the democratic process in their favor by silencing those who oppose their extremist ideology, even though they were unable to derail the elections altogether. The PML/N and PTI played into the TTP's strategy of using violence to intimidate civilians and impose its agenda.

Pakistan is home to a plethora of terrorist groups that keep the region on tenterhooks, threaten the stability of the Pakistani state, and contribute to the spread of global terrorism. Pakistani military leaders have turned a blind eye to groups such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attacks that killed over 160, including six Americans. Moreover, the Pakistani military refuses

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to disrupt the Haqqani network of militants in the tribal border areas, even though the group has killed scores of Americans in Afghanistan and facilitates the TTP in its efforts to target the Pakistani state.

It is surprising that Sharif and Khan voiced support for negotiations with the TTP when Pakistani leaders have such a poor track record in their efforts to make peace deals with militant groups. The most disastrous attempt at peacemaking with militants came in 2008–2009, when Taliban fighters took control of the Swat Valley and then sought to make inroads in other parts of Pakistan. The military finally regained control of the Swat Valley through force in mid-2009, but its initial appeasement of the militants had allowed them to entrench in society and emboldened them to try to gain more territory.

Persevering with U.S. Counterterrorism Goals. Pursuing U.S. counterterrorism objectives in Pakistan will not be any easier after this election and could even become more difficult. Sharif campaigned on a policy of reordering ties with the U.S. and convincing Washington to end controversial drone strikes against terrorists in the Afghan–Pakistani border areas. Khan was even more strident in his calls to end counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S., even threatening to shoot down U.S. drone aircraft.

Sharif may temper some of his election rhetoric against U.S. policies in recognition of Pakistan's need to retain American support with the international financial institutions on which Pakistan will rely to bail out its faltering economy. But he will be constrained by Pakistani public opinion, which blames U.S. policies for Pakistan's problems.

In light of the direction of Pakistani politics revealed by this election campaign and outcome, the U.S. should accept that Pakistan will likely be an even less reliable counterterrorism partner moving forward. Nevertheless, the U.S. should continue to try to shape Pakistani counterterrorism policies in a more helpful direction, especially with regard to the future of Afghanistan. More specifically, the U.S. should:

- **Condition future military aid and sales on Pakistan demonstrating its use of leverage with Pakistan-based Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network leaders to force them to compromise with the U.S.** and Afghan authorities. Although Pakistan released several Afghan

Taliban leaders from jail last December, there are no indications that it tried to build on this initiative to facilitate peace in Afghanistan.

- **Cooperate more closely with other regional partners that share U.S. counterterrorism goals.** While it may be more expensive to ship military equipment out of Afghanistan through the Northern Distribution Network rather than through Pakistan, it would help create leverage with Islamabad. Pakistan stands to gain significant economic benefits if the U.S. relies on its routes to execute its military withdrawal from Afghanistan.
- **Make clear that it remains committed to a stable and democratic Afghanistan even as it withdraws combat troops.** The U.S. should prioritize completion of the Bilateral Security Agreement with Afghanistan, which would allow the U.S. to retain a force presence in Afghanistan after 2014 and commit to working with the other NATO countries in funding the Afghan army over the next several years. Many Pakistanis believe the U.S. withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan will translate into Washington completely turning its back on the country. Another Pakistani assumption is that as American officials oversee the withdrawal from Afghanistan, they will forget that Pakistani policies have contributed to undermining stability there. The U.S. should be clear that its relationship with Pakistan will continue to be based at least in part on whether Pakistan plays a helpful role in preventing the re-establishment of a terrorist safe haven in Afghanistan.

Staying a Rocky Course. Pakistan's first successful transition from one democratically elected government to another is an important marker for the evolution of democracy in the country. However, it will not make U.S. efforts to garner Pakistani counterterrorism cooperation any easier. The U.S. should continue to use a combination of incentives and disincentives to encourage Pakistan to play a more active and effective role in countering extremists on its territory.

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