

NATOS's greatest challenge: the Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus

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Pakistan, a country that Newsweek headlined in late 2007 as "the most dangerous country on earth", has become perceptibly more dangerous. When on September 20 a ton of explosives was detonated by a suicide bomber inside the security gate of the Marriot hotel in Islamabad, killing at least 53 people and injuring 266 more, it was the worst bombing ever in Islamabad and came eleven months after the most deadly attack in Pakistan's history when on October 18 2007 a suicide bomber killed 136 people and wounded another 450 as Benazir Bhutto arrived in Karachi. The blast this time occurred within a few hundred meters of the prime minister's house, where Pakistani government leaders were dining after the president's address to Parliament. Many analysts believe that the bombing was probably a retaliation for recent Pakistani military operations which killed scores of Islamic extremists in the district of Bajaur in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

The situation has become critical because of the expanding presence of Taliban and other religious militants throughout Pakistan, including the cities, but especially along the frontier with Afghanistan. The borderlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan are a festering problem because of the lack of Pakistani control over its side. These tribal areas have become an extensive safe haven for insurgents linked to Al Qaeda and the Taliban, who infiltrate Afghanistan to join forces with the insurgents there and are attacking targets in Pakistan with increasing frequency and deadliness. While not all militants are Taliban and have separate agendas, they all share (now also with a great number of Pakistanis) a profound hatred of the US and its regional allies. The Taliban also work closely with Al Qaeda leaders in the tribal regions, planning attacks together and pooling their skills.

Washington believes it would be much easier for the US, NATO and the Afghan army to address the Afghan security issue head-on if support from the Taliban across the border in Pakistan were eliminated. But the US has been frustrated by the perceived unresponsiveness of Pakistan to the border situation and the evidence of collusion between Pakistan military and intelligence (ISI) officers and Islamic militants. On the other hand, Pakistani military operations in the tribal areas are interpreted by many Pakistanis as evidence of Islamabad's submissiveness to Washington's war (and hegemonic) plan for the region. The Marriott bombing seemed designed to send a message to both Washington and Islamabad that there were serious consequences for a US enlargement of the Afghanistan war into Pakistan and for Islamabad's cooperation with the Americans, especially in the borderlands.

Another development, the US use of air strikes against militants inside Pakistan, has become an explosive issue. Thus, at the same time that Pakistan faces strong US pressure to crack down on Islamist extremists, the Zardari government is bombarded with daily criticism that it is allowing the violation of Pakistani territory by the US. Relations with Washington reached a low point when President George Bush inflamed anti-American sentiment in Pakistan with his September announcement that an official policy had been in place since July, permitting US cross-border raids into Pakistan. President Asif Ali Zardari, while pledging government resolve to deny extremists the use of Pakistani soil to carry out terrorist activities in any neighbouring country, pointedly warned the US in turn that Pakistan would spare no cost to defend its borders against any incursion by another country. To loud expressions of approval in the legislature this past week, Zardari declared: "We will not tolerate the violation of our sovereignty and territorial integrity by any power in the name of combating terrorism."

At this point there are no easy solutions for the political-military crisis in Afghanistan and Pakistan and we should be sceptical of those who propose any. But some things are reasonably clear. Over the past four years, more of the same military strategy has only expanded the insurgency and weakened the governments in Kabul and Islamabad. On the other hand, while it may indeed be very late to salvage the mission in Afghanistan, NATO has too much at stake to concede anything now. Thus, for the immediate future, the war will likely continue to produce more bloodshed and chaos in the region and little other positive results.

The receding possibility that the situation can be turned around will depend on developing and executing a new overall strategy that describes some middle course between victory and withdrawal.

New thinking would place less emphasis on troop increases and counterinsurgency as a whole, stressing a more careful, precise and sophisticated approach to the antiterrorism campaign in which the costs of alienating the local population are more seriously and effectively calculated. While they operate in Afghanistan's Kunar province their base is in Shamshatu Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province and in effect an autonomous enclave within that country.

In Pakistan a new strategy must somehow devise a means to seal the border without further antagonising and alienating the Pakistani population and destroying forever the chance of cooperation with the new government there. And finally, Western governments should mount a concerted diplomatic effort to find a regional solution. This would provide the US with a credible answer to the growing number of people who believe the US invaded and occupied Afghanistan as part of a hegemonic design for the region. Diplomacy should involve all relevant countries including India, Russia, the Central Asian Republics of the former USSR and Iran. Finally, any new thinking must be implemented quickly; time may be running out for both the possibility of stabilising Afghanistan and Pakistan and for the patience of European populations in supporting an unending war.

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