



US/PAKISTAN: ISI reform is urgent but faces hurdles

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EVENT: Gunmen on August 26 attempted to assassinate the principal officer of the US consulate in Peshawar.

SIGNIFICANCE: The shooting followed suicide bombings carried out by the Tehrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP) outside the Pakistani Ordnance Factories in Wah on August 21. These strikes highlighted perennial questions concerning the effectiveness, reliability and loyalty of Pakistan's premier intelligence agency -- the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

ANALYSIS: Pakistan's coalition government continues to ask Washington for more socio-economic aid and counter-terrorism support, but the United States has become impatient with Pakistan's fractious inter-party politics and policy perplexity. Washington's concerns are centred on certain elements inside Pakistan's Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and part of the vast ISI 'alumni network', which it views as in urgent need of reform.

US view of ISI. The administration of President George Bush is pushing Islamabad to reform the ISI by removing possibly compromised agents, enforcing tight information control systems, enhancing background checks, increasing surveillance of the ISI alumni network, and prosecuting those who leak sensitive material:

- Washington argues that while the ISI has on occasion acted on US-supplied actionable intelligence by catching/interdicting militants, it remains unwilling to reciprocate by openly sharing its own intelligence with the United States (see [US/PAKISTAN: Strained ties in urgent need of repair - August 15, 2008](#)).
- The ISI has a dismal record in specific investigations, such as the July 7, 2005 London bombings and the hunt for Osama bin Laden.
- It has repeatedly refused to allow US intelligence agencies to interrogate certain Islamist militants, ISI agents, and members of its vast ISI 'alumni network', which are alleged to have contact with al-Qaida and the Pakistani Taliban.
- At times the ISI has misdirected US intelligence in pursuit of its own strategic objectives, such as obscuring linkages between the ISI and the Pakistani Taliban; ISI considers some Taliban groups to be vital to Pakistan's long-term national security.

ISI's defenders. Pakistani military and civilian leaders categorically deny these US charges, and consider the ISI to be the first line of defence for Pakistan's national security -- particularly regarding intelligence-gathering against India. Islamabad also maintains that the Directorate has an indispensable role in eradicating terrorist organisations, due to its current and former linkages with certain militant organisations in Afghanistan and elsewhere, as a consequence of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan almost three decades ago:

1. **Storied past.** Created in 1948 to improve intelligence coordination, the ISI expanded financially and militarily into an internationally renowned intelligence agency in 1979 when the Soviets attacked Afghanistan. Pakistan's government argues that ISI has ably protected Pakistan's vital national security interests, first against Soviets and then against India, and continues to provide useful intelligence against terrorists who want to gain access to Islamabad's nuclear weapons technology.
2. **Officer purges.** Since the 1990s, under pressure from the United States, successive Pakistani military and civilian leaders sought to reform the ISI by trimming militant-friendly elements. After the September 11, 2001 attacks then-General Pervez Musharraf abruptly removed many intelligence officers with strong ties to the Taliban and al-Qaida.
3. **Government resolve.** The present Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP)-led coalition government in Islamabad, led by Asif Ali Zardari, argues that it lost one of its most powerful civilian leaders to terrorism -- Zardari's late wife, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Consequently, it maintains that Islamabad's determination to interdict militants and uncover their alleged links with certain ISI elements is unquestionable.
4. **Reform drive.** In late 2002, Pakistan's military began to assemble a separate intelligence corps dedicated to intelligence-gathering and analysis. In the past, many ISI officers were recruited on short-term contracts -- usually three-year spells -- with very low merit standards. The new corps employs more highly qualified intelligence officers on a full-time basis, with better pay and benefits; many have received training from the US intelligence community. This corps is separate from, but answerable to, the ISI.

5. **Proof of success?** Islamabad argues that increased militant attacks on military and intelligence targets, such as the bombing outside the weapons factory in Wah, shows that ISI reform is breaking the old ISI-militant nexus.

Tripartite reform drive. There have been several recent collaborative efforts between the US, Afghan and Pakistani intelligence services:

- Tripartite discussions between Washington, Islamabad and Kabul have emphasised increased sharing of actionable intelligence.
- In response to calls from the United States and Afghanistan for further ISI reform, the Pakistani military committed to additional house cleaning.
- While Pakistan's new civilian leaders publicly failed to bring the ISI under direct civilian control, they have insisted on more civilian oversight through the office of the prime minister and the Ministry of Interior. Second-tier agencies such as Military Intelligence (MI) and the civilian Intelligence Bureau (IB) will also be involved in a broad oversight role.
- Washington has offered to increase its involvement in training intelligence officers, which Islamabad is expected to accept.

Indian concerns. India-Pakistan relations are currently under strain due to alleged ISI involvement in the bombing of the Indian consulate in Kabul, and increased militant attacks inside India. Pakistani Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani recently met his Indian counterpart, Manmohan Singh, and pledged to conduct an independent investigation into the Kabul bombing. Gilani also promised to increase collaboration between the two countries on militant organisations operating in the disputed region of Kashmir, and in investigating ISI's suspected links with the Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI). Delhi suspects that SIMI was involved in recent attacks in Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, and Mumbai.

Outlook. Effective ISI reform requires the determination of the civilian government and the cooperation of the military authorities - in a climate of relative political and economic stability (see [PAKISTAN: Coalition split points to turbulence ahead - August 26, 2008](#)). Significantly, facilitating ISI reform requires more than increased pressure from Washington. It may also require further US confidence-building steps, such as sharing actionable intelligence, and agreeing a joint military counter-terrorism strategy.

CONCLUSION: Effective and verifiable Pakistani intelligence reform is a prerequisite for sustainable US-Pakistani progress on the counter-terror front. However, success depends on the ability of Pakistan's civilian government to oversee a historically independent and recalcitrant intelligence agency with strong ties to militant organisations -- a very difficult task in the current political and economic climate.

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