



US/PAKISTAN: New counter-terror strategy is emerging

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EVENT: Pakistan's new parliament will review the country's participation in the 'war on terror', former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday told visiting US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte and Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher.

SIGNIFICANCE: The US officials' visit has been received coolly, underscoring Washington's difficulties in dealing with a new government that is keen to reconsider counter-terrorism policy and hostile to key US ally, President Pervez Musharraf. Deteriorating security in Pakistan has compelled Washington to exert more pressure on Islamabad, but questions remain over the best strategies to tackle extremists.

ANALYSIS: The new Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP)-led government taking shape in Pakistan faces a broad range of challenges and is under particular pressure to tackle terrorism more effectively (see [PAKISTAN: PPP comes to power with mandate for change - March 25, 2008](#)). The United States is increasing targeted military aid, providing trainers and supporting counter-terrorism in Pakistan through the use of unmanned aircraft (Predator 'drones'). Given the electoral losses suffered by Islamists in the volatile north-west of the country, Pakistani civilian and military leaders, backed by Washington, see an opportunity to go beyond short-term counter-terrorism tactics to establish a more multifaceted, sustainable counter-insurgency strategy.

Shared security interests. US-Pakistani ties are based on several largely -- albeit imperfectly -- shared security interests. They include:

- interdicting al-Qaida and Taliban-linked militants in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the North-western Frontier Province (NWFP), northern Baluchistan and cities such as Quetta and Karachi;
- helping Islamabad gain local support for the 'war on terror';
- assisting the country to protect its nuclear arsenal from the risk of terrorist attacks; and
- facilitating the transition to democracy -- the better to secure the first three objectives.

Security policy revisions. Despite these shared interests, Islamabad's security policy under President Pervez Musharraf produced mixed results (see [US/PAKISTAN: Long-term policy requires major rethink - January 3, 2008](#)):

1. **Lessons learned.** In most of the last six years, Pakistan's counter-terrorism policy has been dominated by military action, focused on the extermination of terrorists. Such operations were accompanied -- unsuccessfully and inconsistently -- by various shifting counter-insurgency strategies emphasising economic development and political reconciliation.

While nearly half of the detainee population at the US detention facility at Guantanamo Bay consists of al-Qaida or Taliban operatives captured in Pakistan -- including Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, the alleged operational mastermind behind the September 11, 2001 attacks -- Islamist militants remain active along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Islamabad had pursued an inconsistent policy of occasional engagement with Taliban figures (al-Qaida's patrons), in the hope of brokering a political solution to the violence, which has not paid many dividends. It has also faced a cutback in human intelligence resources, and has failed to 'sell' the war to the Pakistani people (see [PAKISTAN: Al-Qaida goes from strength to strength - September 20, 2007](#)).

2. **From counter-terrorism to counter-insurgency.** Last autumn, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, army chief of staff and former head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), implemented a more cautious, but potentially more effective, counter-insurgency strategy (see [PAKISTAN: New army chief will focus on morale, image - November 28, 2007](#)). Kayani's plan involves a greater reliance upon:

- credible human intelligence;
- winning over local support, and
- coordinated activities with US trainers in Pakistan, and intelligence and military personnel in Afghanistan.

As a result, Kayani has been able to make some progress -- notably against militants in Swat (NWFP), where the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-Shariat-e-Mohammadi has long had a stronghold (see [PAKISTAN: Islamabad faces homegrown Taliban threat - February 6, 2008](#)) -- although military operations in tribal areas appear to have provoked suicide attacks on the army/police in Rawalpindi and Lahore.

3. **US trainers.** Many Washington-based security analysts believe that the current US plan to increase its involvement in the training of Pakistani troops -- paratroopers, Special Forces, and the Frontier Corps -- could be a step in the right direction (see [PAKISTAN: Corps is ill-equipped for 'war on terror' - December 11, 2007](#)). However, these schemes have two serious vulnerabilities:

- Training alone without swapping military hardware and intelligence across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border would not produce sustainable counter-insurgency successes.
- In addition, an actual or perceived unilateral US attack on Pakistan's tribal areas would be exceptionally counterproductive.

New civilian leadership. Pakistan's new civilian leaders appear to share, at least in principle, the military's dedication to wiping out pockets of terrorist militants:

- **Anti-militant stance.** Victory for the PPP, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the secular Awami National Party (ANP) in last month's elections was at the expense of Islamist parties at both provincial and national levels. There is no consensus among the winning parties about the nature of the threat posed by terrorism, though they have all indicated that they will pursue negotiations and are wary of the unpopularity of involvement in the US-led war on terror. (The ANP is expected to play a particularly significant role in shaping counter-insurgency policy given its position as lead party in the NWFP assembly.)
- **Course change.** Newly-elected members of the PPP, the PML-N and the ANP share a belief that Musharraf's prior acquiescence in supporting a US policy-centric counter-terrorism strategy was detrimental to Pakistan's long-term stability. US policymakers could placate their fears by seeking to develop a cross-party consensus on long-term US-Pakistan cooperation.
- **Political reconciliation.** Once there is a sharp reduction in terrorist activity, civilian leaders are willing to offer more constitutional autonomy, socio-economic opportunities, and a mutually agreed governance framework to the tribal areas -- one of the principal bases of operations for al-Qaida and the Pakistani Taliban. The National Assembly is likely to be more involved in discussing counter-terrorism strategy.
- **Economic incentives.** Although it may sustain the presence of 100,000 troops in the Tribal Areas, the new government is also expected to privilege economically-based counter-insurgency strategies over brute force. For example, it may ask the military to support Provincial Reconstruction Teams -- which promote stability, infrastructure development and economic recovery -- over large-scale military operations.

Three-pronged approach. Washington may push Islamabad to adopt a three-pronged counter-terror strategy, which will partly build on ideas likely to be favoured by the new government. This will seek to:

- use military force to create and secure 'pockets of control';
- dispatch development teams to build or improve infrastructure in areas of militant activity; and
- oversee political reform.

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Making these strategies work will be difficult, and may depend on implementing all three roughly simultaneously. The effort could also be derailed by a major terrorist incident, increased attacks on Pakistani troops, or a series of suicide attacks in major cities.

Outlook. If the Pakistani military, abetted by the new civilian government, adopts a counter-terror strategy focused more on socio-economic development and political reconciliation, terrorist activity may decrease. Closer US-Pakistan coordination on either side of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, in terms of training exercises and sharing military expertise, would enhance the effectiveness of Pakistan's new security measures. Washington might also broaden its aid policy beyond purely military assistance.

CONCLUSION: A reduction in militancy and terrorist activity within Pakistan is crucial to the success of any US effort to bring stability to the region. However, success depends on moving away from a military-focused strategy, towards a more comprehensive policy encompassing infrastructure-building, economic development and government reform.

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