



US/PAKISTAN: Strained ties in urgent need of repair

Friday, August 15 2008

EVENT: Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, who has been the focal point of US-Pakistan relations since the September 11, 2001 attacks, may resign within days, according to media reports.

SIGNIFICANCE: Political and economic instability precipitated by the government's moves to impeach Musharraf have allowed al-Qaida and the Taliban to strengthen their grip in the tribal areas and attract more foreign recruits. In turn, this has stimulated more unilateral US air strikes, and further complicated Washington's ties with Islamabad.

ANALYSIS: While the new Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led government pushes President Pervez Musharraf to resign under the threat of impeachment, the United States is increasingly frustrated by Islamabad's lack of commitment to pursuing Washington's counter-terrorism policy priorities (see [PAKISTAN: Musharraf lacks allies in impeachment fight - August 11, 2008](#)). The trust deficit between the two countries is widening, allowing al-Qaida and the Taliban to regroup and grow.

Supposedly shared goals. US-Pakistan relations are primarily based on several supposed mutual security interests, namely:

- destroying al-Qaida's base of operations in the federally administered tribal areas (FATA);
- staunching the flow of recruits to al-Qaida, the Taliban and other militants by providing socio-economic development alternatives and opportunities -- eg improved schools, hospitals, roads, and electricity service;
- helping Islamabad defeat al-Qaida's propaganda by promoting public awareness of Pakistan's need to fight the war on terror for its own national interest;
- allowing Pakistani troops to concentrate their efforts on securing FATA, by helping to contain separatist militants in Baluchistan and Sindh, and avoiding India-Pakistan tensions;
- protecting Pakistan's nuclear assets against the possibility of terrorist attack or infiltration; and
- strengthening the current civilian coalition government, the Pakistan military's unity of command, and Islamabad's overall strategic focus on FATA.

Policy frustration. However, mutual recriminations, growing mistrust and frustration over the poor security situation in FATA has created serious bilateral fissures. Several acute problems have emerged in recent weeks:

1. **Increased foreign infiltration.** The influx of foreign fighters (from Uzbekistan, Chechnya, Turkey, Iran, Egypt and even Iraq) into FATA is increasing. These swelling numbers have provoked numerous US missile attacks -- which sometimes kill militants, but also often increase local support for them on the ground. US intelligence analysts suggest that the relative increase of stability in Iraq, and the opportunity directly to attack US and NATO forces in neighbouring Afghanistan, accounts for the increase in foreign infiltrators. Pakistan's inability to halt this influx has frustrated US commanders, but US violations of Pakistan's airspace during unilateral strikes, and the resulting collateral damage, have inflamed Islamabad and weakened an already shaky coalition government.
2. **ISI perfidy?** Some US and Western intelligence agencies suspect that high-ranking members of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate have maintained ties with the Taliban in eastern and south-eastern Afghan provinces and FATA. Suspicions that some ISI agents may be abetting al-Qaida or the Taliban have reduced the exchange of actionable intelligence between Kabul and Washington, and Islamabad.

There are also suggestions that ISI may have abetted the recent bombing of the Indian consulate in Kabul, despite strong US support for (India-friendly) Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Remarks by Karzai and some US commanders supporting the notion of sending US or Afghan troops into FATA have likewise infuriated the Pakistani military.
3. **US impatience.** A lack of counterinsurgency training and equipment for Pakistani troops has stimulated a large US training and weapons programme targeting the Special Services Group (SSG) -- Pakistan's Special Forces -- and the Frontier Corps militia. However, US commanders are unwilling to wait for the Pakistanis to crush FATA militants; they have increased unilateral air strikes and drawn-up plans for US Special Operations Forces-led search-and-destroy missions inside the tribal areas. (A suspected US missile attack killed six foreign militants in FATA on August 14 -- Pakistan's Independence Day.) These interventions are bound to create further local hostility.

US/PAKISTAN: Strained ties in urgent need of repair - p. 2 of 3

4. **Growing distrust.** With Musharraf's eclipse, it is unclear to US military commanders in Afghanistan who is in charge of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy, which has inhibited the creation of a long-term joint approach. For their part, Pakistani military commanders remain wary of a perceived lack of long-term US staying power and commitment to the region, which reduces their inclination to cooperate.
5. **Civilian government weakness.** The civilian coalition government in Islamabad has been distracted by the vicissitudes of Pakistani politics and a declining economy. This has ceded counterinsurgency policy to a cautious Pakistani military command.
6. **Growing 'blowback'.** In the last several months, the Pakistani Taliban -- Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP) -- has responded to Islamabad's military crackdown through suicide bombings in urban areas beyond FATA, and cleverly targeted social welfare projects such as schools for girls. The militants' new schools are filling a void. Frustrated by a worsening security situation, the United States is wary of directing more development aid to FATA.

Restoring confidence. Achieving mutual security goals, in the face of serious challenges, will require both countries to make difficult choices:

1. **Potential Pakistani steps.** Restoring political and economic stability, controlling ISI, and forming a unified strategic front against terrorism are necessary prerequisites for the long-term rehabilitation of FATA:
 - Strengthening border security and improving intelligence might help stem the inflow of foreign fighters.
 - ISI may need to be significantly reformed. The new government could appoint a commission co-chaired by a senior civilian and a military leader to review how government control is exercised, and provide strict guidelines for adhering to government policy.
 - When the crisis over Musharraf's impeachment/resignation ends, the coalition government could review its counterterrorism policy in consultation with NATO and Kabul and create a new, more effective, multi-faceted approach involving military, diplomacy, socio-economic and constitutional remedies. (Washington has sought to move in this direction over the past year) (see [US/PAKISTAN: Policy reforms seek to stem terrorism - May 1, 2008](#)).
 - Congress is increasingly suspicious that Islamabad could use US military aid against India, rather than FATA terrorists. Addressing this concern is urgent for Islamabad.
2. **US steps.** It is increasingly clear that, pending an improvement in Islamabad's political stability and intelligence reform, US unilateral military action has been counterproductive. Training Pakistani troops increases trust; circumventing the Pakistani military undermines it:
 - **Fewer unilateral attacks.** Many unilateral US strikes are tactically successful, such as the recent attack that killed a top al-Qaida chemical weapons specialist. However, collateral damage greatly increases local support for terrorist groups and suicide bombings in Pakistan, and weakens the coalition government. In exchange for embarking on ISI reform and improving Pakistani counter-terror training, Washington could coordinate its attacks and share intelligence with the Pakistanis.
 - **Border moves.** Washington could push Kabul to settle its long-term border dispute with Pakistan, and explore the possibility of mining/fencing the border in certain hot spots -- in consultation with Islamabad.
 - **More development aid.** There is a case for increasing socio-economic aid and development in key areas, such as FATA, lest the Taliban fill the void.

Outlook. If such mutual confidence-building steps are undertaken, relations may improve. However, these will be very difficult to implement, in the context of the continuing military campaign in Afghanistan, increasing evidence of al-Qaida strength, and Pakistani political instability.

CONCLUSION: A reduction in political and economic instability and reforming Pakistani intelligence agencies are crucial to the success of the US counter-terror effort. However, success depends on building verifiable trust between US and Pakistani forces -- an objective that will be exceptionally difficult in the face of further terror attacks and unilateral US strikes inside Pakistan.

Keywords: NA, Pakistan, United States, Afghanistan, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Russia, Uzbekistan, international relations, politics, aid, foreign policy, military, security, terrorism, economy, education, growth, nuclear weapons, regional, welfare

US/PAKISTAN: Strained ties in urgent need of repair - p. 3 of 3

Word Count (approx): 1200