

Pakistan's New Taliban

Managing another threat to stability.

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As president Obama mulls sending more troops to Afghanistan, he faces a reluctant Congress, unpersuaded Americans, and wary allies, who are all raising the quintessential question: why are we there? The one-word answer: Pakistan. If preventing September 11–type attacks is the goal, then no other country's stability is more important. But even as the old guard of the Pakistan Taliban is pushed out of the Swat Valley, Pakistan is in danger yet again. A new, more virulent faction is emerging in the volatile center and south—which, if left unchallenged, has the potential to destabilize the nuclear-armed country.

The new faction is an outgrowth of the old Pakistani Taliban, which made its debut in 2006, and was composed of the residual members of the 1980s Soviet-hating Afghan mujahedin and then augmented by fleeing Afghan Taliban and Qaeda after 9/11. They frequently shared techniques, arms, money, and recruits with allies in Afghanistan, but focused on controlling the northern border region of Pakistan through shadow governments, in which the Taliban set up their own administrative councils and Sharia courts to try to out-administer the country's official government bodies. By the end of this summer, a U.S.-supported Pakistani initiative had succeeded in driving out the Taliban, which lost territory, public support, and its firebrand leader, Baitullah Mehsud. The bickering group returned to its stronghold in Waziristan, undefeated but contained.

Pakistani military, intelligence, and law-enforcement officials say that within days of the Pakistani Taliban's apparent defeat, the new faction emerged, acutely aware of its weaknesses as well as the opportunities in the center and south of the country. The new Taliban's strategy is to abandon the shadow governments in the north because they had made it vulnerable, attracted little public support, and overstretched its resources. It also plans to decrease the number of suicide attacks, and execute precise attacks on the Army in the north. In the center of Pakistan, it plans to strengthen alliances with ethno-sectarian groups, increase recruitment, target police, and create shadow governments in a part of the country where strong support for such alternative administrative bodies already exists. In the south, it will keep the money flowing by colluding with drug cartels and kidnapping syndicates. The goal: open multiple fronts in the center and south to relieve pressure on the north, spreading the Pakistani military thin. The jackpot, Pakistani officials say, is another Mumbai-type attack in India.

There are signs the strategy is working. Although the Pakistani military continues to squeeze the new Taliban in the north, it is making significant inroads in the country's central province of Punjab, in

Baluchistan, and in the port city of Karachi. And in a country rife with ethnic, sectarian, and class divisions, it has jettisoned non-useful allies and increased ties with Punjabi groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Sipah-e-Sahaba, which are notorious for terrorist attacks in Islamabad, Kabul, and Delhi. Now the situation in Pakistan's center and south is similar to what the north looked like two years ago, before the Taliban slowly out-administered the state. Amid multiplying radical madrassas and training camps run by Taliban allies, the Pakistani police, civilian intelligence, and judicial institutions are barely holding on. Thus, this new Taliban team is more dangerous than the old in its ability to give protection to terrorists.

To counter this, Islamabad has recently doubled police salaries and introduced sweeping changes to antiterrorist laws to give more power to the police and courts. The Supreme Court is implementing reforms that will allow the courts to compete with the Taliban's. Now Paki-stan needs to streamline intelligence cooperation on information-sharing and forensics. The U.S. should increase Pakistan's police budget and deploy U.S. Army police trainers, who have had significant success in Iraq and Afghanistan. A U.S.-Pakistani joint plan calls for sending a special force of 10,000 police officers to the north to "hold" territory, but the program should be expanded by bringing in 40,000 more officers for Pakistan's center and south. But the window of opportunity is running out fast: now is the time for effective police action to nip the new Taliban in the bud.

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