

WebMemo



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Three Steps to Improve Counterterrorism Cooperation with Pakistan

By Lisa Curtis

Two major terrorism plots in the last six weeks highlight Pakistan's central role in the war on terrorism. One of these plots—a plan to blow up airline flights mid-air between the United Kingdom and the United States—was successfully thwarted because British, American, and Pakistani security agencies worked together. The other—a series of bombings July 11 that killed nearly 200 on commuter trains in Mumbai, India—has been linked by Indian officials to a terrorist group operating in Pakistan. These plots demonstrate the need for more effective engagement with Pakistan that encourages it to widen its terrorism crackdown beyond al-Qaeda to local extremist groups. This approach could reap great dividends in the war on terrorism.

Pakistani cooperation since 9/11 has been critical in helping to degrade al-Qaeda's ability to plan and execute catastrophic acts of terrorism. Islamabad has arrested several key al-Qaeda leaders and conducted military operations in tribal areas along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border over the last two years. These operations have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Pakistani soldiers, which is why Pakistani officials chafe when Western media reports discount their country's contribution to the war on terrorism.

Even so, the airliner plot and the Mumbai bombings, both linked to Pakistan-based terrorist groups, should prompt U.S. policymakers to think more critically about how to work with Pakistan to address the increasingly dangerous problems of extremism and militancy in that country. Tackling

these problems now will determine longer-term success in fighting global terrorism.

A Three-Pronged Approach

First, the U.S. must convince Pakistan to condemn the use of violence for political objectives and to disrupt the operations of groups involved in terrorism, including those operating in Kashmir. Reports emerged yesterday that one of the main figures involved in the airliner plot—British citizen Rashid Rauf, who was arrested in Pakistan last week—had been a member of a Pakistan-based terrorist group that operates in Indian Kashmir, the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JEM). Pakistan has officially banned domestic terrorist groups like JEM and the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LET, now referred to as Jamaat ul Dawa) but has taken little concrete action to stop their activities. Although JEM and LET focus primarily on militancy in Kashmir, their pan-Islamic objectives and anti-West views mirror those of al-Qaeda.

President Pervez Musharraf, the victim of at least two assassination attempts, should understand the danger radical militant groups pose to his country. Yet he continues to distinguish between radical groups fighting in Kashmir and al-Qaeda, in the apparent belief that his country's interests are better

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served if he tackles the Kashmir groups gradually. But time is not on his side. The longer these groups exist, the more support they attract, the more radical they become, and the greater the threat they pose to his country and the international community.

Pakistan's August 9 arrest of LET leader Hafiz Mohammad Sayeed is a step in the right direction, but the government must keep pressuring these groups by shutting down their training camps, restricting their funding sources, confiscating their weapons, and destroying their ability to propagate their extremist, violent message. Firm action against the LET would also help defuse tensions with India, which has repeatedly raised its concerns about the group and suspects it may be linked to the Mumbai bombings.

The same holds for Pakistan's treatment of the remaining Taliban members in the country. In a televised national address last month, Musharraf warned that Taliban elements were trying to threaten Pakistan's moderate, progressive society and vowed to crack down on extremism. The key question is whether Musharraf will follow his words with action.

Second, to improve Pakistani public opinion toward America, the U.S. should structure its assistance programs in a way that demonstrates support for improving the lives of average Pakistanis and doesn't appear to be merely buying regime support for counterterrorism cooperation. U.S. economic assistance to Pakistan since 9/11 has focused largely on debt relief and direct support to the government and, to a lesser extent, on education, health care, and development. The U.S. needs to steer more assistance toward projects that touch the grassroots of society and fortify democratic institutions. Free, fair, and participatory elections next year would open up the political playing field and help limit the influence of anti-West, pro-Taliban parties.

The robust response of the U.S. government to the devastating earthquake that hit Pakistan on October

8, 2005, shows how aid can help shape attitudes toward Americans. A poll conducted by Terror Free Tomorrow, a Washington-based NGO, indicates that the number of Pakistanis with favorable views of the U.S. doubled from 23 percent in May 2005 to 46 percent in November 2005. Yet it shouldn't take a natural catastrophe for the Pakistani people to understand that the U.S. cares about them. U.S. policymakers need to think more carefully about ways to influence public opinion through our multi-year, multi-billion dollar aid program.

Third, the U.S. needs to be more creative in its diplomacy with the Pakistan government to encourage President Musharraf to take actions that may be politically challenging. Washington should leverage its influence more effectively, especially given the Bush Administration's landmark decision to sell F-16s to Pakistan for the first time in 16 years. This significant demonstration of U.S. support for Pakistan's long-term security gives Musharraf ammunition in responding to critics who question the benefits of an expanded relationship with the U.S.

Conclusion

To achieve more successes in the war on terrorism like the foiled airliner plot, the U.S. must continue robust, high-level engagement with Pakistan. One of the chief purposes of this engagement should be to get Pakistan to crack down on domestic groups that propagate violence, undermine values of peace and moderation, and support the destructive and hateful ideology of al-Qaeda. Without a broader view of countering terrorism, President Musharraf will not achieve his goal of an enlightened, moderate Pakistan—and the civilized world will be more likely to suffer further acts of mass murder and destruction.

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