



# Time to Get Tough With Pakistan

by Jeff M. Smith



**B**ACK IN 2007, commentators were sounding the alarm that Pakistan was approaching a precipice. A lot has changed in two years. Pakistan's problems then—protesters clogging the streets of Islamabad demanding President Musharraf's resignation, and sporadic Taliban raids on coalition forces in Afghanistan—were but a glimpse of the danger ahead. No one could have imagined the speed and intensity with which the Taliban and their allies have since spread east from their sanctuary in the Hindu Kush mountains to threaten an invasion of the Pakistani capital.

Pakistan's deepening disorder coincides with the release of the Obama administration's new "Af-Pak" strategy. Unfortunately, President Barack Obama's "new" approach is wholly inadequate—at least as regards Pakistan. Its drafters have attempted to approach an intractable problem by marginally improving a strategy—providing billions of dollars of aid—that has proved ineffective for the better part of seven years. Part of this dissonance may be attributed to an insufficient apprecia-

tion of the gravity of the threat. Part is due to a poor understanding of the strategic priorities of the Pakistani state itself. After all, in the words of United States' Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, "If Afghanistan had the best government on earth, a drug-free culture and no corruption it would still be unstable if the situation in Pakistan remained as today."

Everyone is familiar with Pakistan's combustible mix of nuclear weapons, underhanded intelligence services and terrorist safe-havens. It's long been clear that al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban have been using Pakistani territory as a safe-haven to conduct attacks on coalition forces in Afghanistan. But it was not until recently, with the rise of the Pakistani Taliban or Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a young and zealous new army of Pakistani Pashtuns formed in 2005, that the Pakistani state has come under threat, presenting the U.S. with a foreign-policy challenge with no peer. The TTP has swarmed out of Paki-

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stan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and the "settled" valleys of Pakistan's east.

Former foot-soldiers from the Afghan civil war of the 1990s, they have invaded the Swat Valley and Buner Province (60 miles from Islamabad) in recent weeks, bringing them within reach of the Punjab—Pakistan's political, cultural and economic heartland, and the domain of its nuclear-weapons arsenal. A brazen attack on a police compound outside Lahore in March, only 20 miles from the Indian border, demonstrated that there is no limit to their reach within Pakistan. Analysts are particularly concerned that their eastward march could bring them in contact with the Kashmiri insurgent groups that operate out of Pakistan's northeast, such as Lashkar e-Taiba, infamous perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai.

Islamabad's response to this "mortal" threat has been tepid—and impotent to date. Several military offensives by the army have been repelled or ineffective (several thousand Pakistani soldiers have been killed) and a series of ill-conceived peace deals have only provided the Taliban more land and breathing space. Only the government has honored them. A series of tribal *lashkars* or local militias formed to oppose the Taliban have failed. The TTP have overturned the traditional tribal hierarchy, beheading tribal elders and granting mullahs unprecedented authority (in Pashtun culture, mullahs historically occupy the bottom of the social ladder). The group has destroyed centuries-old Sufi shrines, symbols of the moderate form of Islam traditionally practiced in Pakistan. They have declared open season on girls' schools and government sympathizers and jeopardized

NATO's favored supply route to Afghanistan, where three quarters of the coalition's supplies pass.

Their successes have created ample breathing space for al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban to conduct operations with impunity: Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman Malik recently broke with official denials and admitted that "10,000 foreign militants" had taken refuge in the tribal areas. Perhaps most worryingly, the TTP's young and zealous chief, Baitullah Mehsud, has threatened to take his jihad to the steps of the White House in an attack that will

*The silence of the two mainstream political parties on Pakistan's Talibanization has been breathtaking.*

"amaze everyone in the world." Meanwhile, the Taliban has solidified its relationship with al Qaeda. What was once an uneasy truce has been transformed into an enduring partnership. Local Taliban commanders now jockey to host bin Laden in their newly liberated territory in Pakistan.

"Like a brother [al Qaeda] can stay anywhere they want," announced Taliban spokesman Muslim Kahn from Swat Valley. "We will help them and protect them."

Several government leaders in the NWFP, headed by the secular Pashtun Awami National Party (ANP), have either capitulated to the TTP, taken to hiding or fled the country. The rest have been brutally murdered. Once thought of as a potential secular bulwark against the Taliban, the ANP is a defeated force. The acting ANP president, Haji Adeel, laments: "Our children were killed. The government had lost its writ. Schools [were] burnt and infrastructure destroyed ... we [have] suffered great losses." Islamabad, however, insists the "peace deals" are working.

Finally, a dark shadow hangs over the slow disintegration of Pakistan. For apathy and negligence are not the military's only

sins in this sad story. Insurmountable evidence points to complicity in the Taliban's resurgence from Pakistan's army and the directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The army chief of staff has been overheard referring to specific Taliban commanders as "strategic assets." The U.S. has intercepted calls from ISI officials tipping off Taliban militants to American tactics and air-strikes. Hamid Gul, former chief of the ISI, proudly roots on the Taliban from the sidelines.

### Misguided Priorities

SECRETARY OF STATE Hillary Clinton has rightly charged the Pakistan government with "basically abdicating to the Taliban and the extremists." The question is, why? Why has Pakistan refused to take this existential challenge seriously? And why has the army maintained links to the Taliban and refused to confront them with force? We are familiar with the historic links between the Pakistan and the Taliban; the U.S. helped fostered them in the Afghan-Soviet war. But why now, when the Taliban have set their sights on their own patrons and brutally murdered thousands of Pakistani civilians and officers, would Pakistan resist confronting this terrorist menace?

It is certainly not due to a lack of capability, as Pakistani officials regularly claim. It's true that Pakistan has a 1,800-mile militarized border with a neighbor against which it has fought three wars. And defending this border does demand a great deal of the military's resources. However, Pakistan has the sixth largest army in the world, complete with advanced U.S. weapons systems and aircraft, nuclear arms, and a million men in active duty and reserve. It is not incapable of preparing a counterinsurgency campaign; it is unwilling. In any event, capability shortfalls can be filled with money, materials and training—all of which the U.S. can provide in abundance.

But the military has refused to devote sufficient troops or resources away from the "Hindu menace" to fight "America's war" against its Muslim countrymen, even if it costs them their country.

Thus, the lack of will is Pakistan's true deficiency and it derives from an ill-conceived and poorly understood strategic calculation. The Pakistani military is motivated to support—or neglect confronting—the Taliban by several fears. Analysts initially clung to the notion that Pakistan, fearing an Indian invasion from the east, looked upon Afghanistan as a source of crucial "strategic depth"; a friendly territory ideal both for guarding a strategic retreat and for launching a countervailing insurgency. As the Taliban have vividly demonstrated, Afghanistan's mountainous territory provides the ideal setting for asymmetric warfare.

However, the strategic depth motivation is but one of many. Pakistan's second impetus for maintaining links with the Taliban is history. History tells the military leadership that the U.S. will eventually leave Afghanistan and that neighboring powers and their proxies will rush to fill the vacuum, as they did after the Soviet-Afghan war. Pakistan wants to ensure that its proxy, the Taliban, is in an advantaged position vis-à-vis the Afghan allies of India, Iran, or Central Asia and Russia.

But Pakistan would appear to bear a heavy cost just to maintain a geopolitical edge in desolate Afghanistan. Indeed, the calculation only comes into focus when one understands that Pakistan fears Kabul as much as it does New Delhi. A strong government in Kabul poses a unique set of challenges for Pakistan. Foremost, it could challenge the Durand Line, the de facto Af-Pak border imposed by the British on a weak Afghan ruler in 1893. Subsequent governments in Kabul have refused to recognize the Durand Line and an assertive Afghan government could breathe life into

old territorial claims.

A challenge to the line is also a symbol for the much bigger claim that Pakistan fears most: a bid for loyalty of the Pashtuns. Since independence Pakistan has battled sporadic claims from the Pashtun community to either join Afghanistan or establish their own independent "Pashtunistan." Islamabad views this ethnic nationalism as an existential challenge; a threat to the territorial integrity and basic foundation of its state. Of course, Pakistan is hypersensitive to ethnic nationalism, having lost half its land mass (now Bangladesh) in a traumatic 1971 war ignited by Bengali nationalism. Ever since, Islamabad has made it a national priority to maintain either a friendly government in Kabul (such as the Taliban) or to ensure Kabul was too weak to court the Pashtuns. For decades, the perpetually unstable Afghanistan obliged. With a strong Kabul, that situation might change. No less importantly, Pakistan fears an unfriendly government in Kabul will strongly ally with India. Islamabad is convinced New Delhi is working to encircle and destroy it.

## A Cancer Within

IF PAKISTAN'S VALLEYS are overrun with Taliban, and its military beholden to a destructive strategic paradigm, Pakistan's political space has been infected by an even more insidious disease. The country's mainstream political discourse all too often displays the same allergy to self-criticism and affection for denial, spin and ignorance made famous on the Arab street. When the Taliban level a marketplace full of innocent Pakistanis, an unconscionable number of Pakistanis—in the media and in the market—are inclined to finger America, India or Israel. Proud claims of responsibility from the Taliban are ignored or conveniently excluded from the nightly news. The less hysterical commentators, meanwhile, portray the casualties as victims of

"America's war," and the public buys it.

The rot runs deep. A 2008 poll by Terror Free Tomorrow revealed that a majority of Pakistanis (52%) blame the U.S. for the Taliban's suicidal campaign against their country. Only 15% actually blamed the militants. Pakistani people, while still broadly moderate (they abhor attacks on civilians and strongly support democracy) have been so inculcated with religious, nationalist, and anti-Indian/American sentiment that they present themselves as easy prey. This phenomenon lies at the core of Pakistan's crippling inertia. It makes political leaders that try to cooperate with America, warm to India, criticize foolhardy peace deals, or rally support against the Taliban unpopular. It stunts the natural outrage that Pakistanis should have directed at their leaders by now.

A lack of political courage is not the politicians only sin. Part of the reason the Taliban has marched so easily into the villages of the east is that they claim to offer something the government has consistently neglected to provide its people: order and justice. The people of the NWFP do not want Taliban-style sharia law (they voted overwhelmingly for secular parties in the latest election), but they are distraught by the corruption of officials, the lack of authority and the ineptness of the judicial system.

The military is equally culpable. Listen to an address from Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ashfaq Kayani to the top military brass and you will strain to hear the Taliban or al Qaeda mentioned once. What you will get in abundance, however, are vague and ominous warnings about "foreign threats," "those who seek to weaken our state" and the need to "safeguard our borders at all costs." It takes a seasoned analyst to decipher whether these ambiguous warnings refer to the U.S. or the Taliban; India or al Qaeda. His audience draws their own conclusions.

The only voices of reason emerge from

distant corners of Pakistan's courageous and liberal media. Unfortunately, the random injections of sanity have proved inadequate to substantively affect the debate. Among the major political parties only Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), a regional party in Sindh, have raised serious alarm over the Talibanization of the country. The former coalition allies of President Pervez Musharraf, with a tainted history of their own, have at least insisted they will never accept the Talibanization of their country and have criticized Pakistan's leaders for appeasement.

In sharp contrast, the silence of the two mainstream political parties, the Pakistan Peoples Party and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz has been breathtaking. They are too busy engaged in petty political squabbles or too fearful of raising the Islamists' ire to bring attention to the systematic destruction of their country. Their strategy to-date has been to ignore the problem. President Asif Ali Zardari, the most outspoken voice against extremism, has been politically neutered; a "pawn" of the U.S. Meanwhile, PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif, undoubtedly the country's most popular national politician, was forced after months of silence to comment on the Taliban's spreading invasion. His bold prescription? "We've got to avoid that situation." His tactics? Engage in dialogue with militants.

Politically, the Obama administration has made great strides toward recognizing the magnitude of the challenges in Pakistan. Unfortunately, this has not yet translated to the policy realm. The core of Mr. Obama's new strategy is to attach strict conditionality to the substantial military and civilian aid the U.S. provides Pakistan each year. If the arrangement ensures that aid is actually directed toward antiterrorism programs and productive civilian projects (it has not in the past), President Obama can claim a victory.

In the grand picture, however, account-

ing for aid is a small battle in a large war. As we have seen, the military's problems are not primarily material; they are psychological. On the civilian side, aid destined for the FATA may, in time, incrementally alleviate the misery of the average Pakistani, but economic needs have never driven the spread of the Taliban and al Qaeda's ideology. The motivations and goals of these movements are religious, political and ideological, not economic. They wish to repel the crusaders, punish the apostates, and bring Pakistan and the world under the rule of God's law, the sharia.

Aid in this case is a hammer without a nail. Not that the Pakistani state doesn't require financial assistance; its economy is in dire straits and cannot be allowed to collapse. But as a tool to motivate the army or confront the jihadists, aid simply will not suffice. And in fact, rather than granting the Obama administration new leverage, the aid package is already generating a backlash within Pakistan. Officials in Islamabad have balked at the demand for accountability, insisting they will not accept aid with any restrictions. Prime Minister Yousef Gilani has said "aid with strings attached would fail to generate the desired goodwill and results in Pakistan."

Notably, one area where a focused and substantive aid package could provide utility is in education. The most worrying aspect of the rise of the Taliban is not Washington's flagging efforts to patch each new wound, but their inability to halt the poison spreading unseen from within. Within Pakistan today there are perhaps more radical preachers staffing more madrassas and poisoning more young minds than at any time or place in history.

### **Juicier Carrots, Sharper Sticks**

IF WASHINGTON IS TO reverse Pakistan's descent into chaos, it will have to change the military's strategic calculation and gener-

ate better performance out of Pakistan's political leadership. Diplomatic and monetary incentives have failed, so the Obama administration must be prepared to broaden its policy horizons. It can begin with juicier carrots.

Recognizing what Pakistan wants and fears from Afghanistan is the key to generating a change in its policy toward the Taliban. Thus, engaging Kabul and Islamabad in a constructive dialogue about long-neglected issues, such as the Durand Line and Pashtun nationalism, could go a way toward allaying the army's fears about a strong Afghanistan. For Pakistan to truly abandon the Taliban and its allies it must view Afghanistan as a partner rather than a threat. Guarantees from Kabul that it will not challenge Pakistan's territorial borders, legally or subversively, could reap substantial benefits. The U.S. should also press for a complimentary dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad to craft an arrangement where both sides agree to a level of transparency about their activities in Afghanistan. Both processes would require intensive engagement and involvement from the U.S., but at the moment Washington should have no higher priority. Several other incentives, if implemented carefully, could also help entice Pakistan: access to more advanced military equipment, the expansion of military-to-military and cultural exchanges, and easing restrictions on crosscountry travel.

Sharpening America's stick will prove more challenging; it's not a policy familiar to Washington, and it's unclear how Pakistan will respond. Drastic times, however, call for drastic measures. If the Pakistani military continues to demonstrate a lack of will in confronting the Taliban and hunting down al Qaeda, America should threaten to cut off aid. All of it. The army is concerned most with regime survival and the vulnerabilities exposed by the global economic crisis quickly become points of leverage for

a patron. There is a precedent: America imposed sharp sanctions on Pakistan in the 1990s for testing a nuclear weapon, a sin easily eclipsed today by its acquiescence in the rise of the Taliban.

America should be prepared to expand the use of the unmanned aerial drones within Pakistan. President Obama is, wisely, planning to do that anyway, but it should be clear to Pakistan that sovereignty is as much a responsibility as a right. If the army refuses to confront the enemies of America, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the U.S. will—wherever they are. Likewise, if Pakistan continues to hamper efforts to stabilize Afghanistan, the U.S. should make clear that it will seek assistance from those that are willing to help. And the only U.S. ally with the will and capability to contribute sufficient troops and equipment is India. Nothing would make Pakistan more uncomfortable. But Pakistan in part supports the Taliban because it fears Indian influence in Afghanistan. America should reverse that calculation: supporting the Taliban will invite Indian influence while the Taliban's fall would forestall the need for Indian assistance.

Finally, America should make clear it will pursue, legally or militarily, anyone aiding or abetting the Taliban or al Qaeda—regardless of affiliation. Washington's "look the other way" approach to the ISR's double dealing has lost its entertainment value. Instead, the U.S. needs to impress upon Pakistan that it is not, and will never be, America's adversary, but that anyone supporting extremism, whether draped in a turban or sporting shiny stars on his shoulder will be treated as an enemy.

For the past 60 years, one image has haunted U.S. policy makers above all others: the possibility of a nuclear weapon falling into the hands of fanatics with the intent to use them. For the first time, ever, that specter skirts perilously close to being a reality. ■