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Counterinsurgency in Pakistan

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Executive Summary

Beginning in 2001, Pakistan conducted a range of operations against militant groups in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and other parts of Pakistan. Because of Pakistan's nuclear status and the presence of international terrorist organizations, such as al Qaeda, Pakistan's counterinsurgency campaign significantly affects the security of countries across North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East—including the United States.

U.S. President Barack Obama argued that Pakistan's border region is "the most dangerous place in the world" for the United States. The head of U.S. Central Command, General David Petraeus, noted that "it is the headquarters of the al Qaeda senior leadership," which is planning attacks in the West.¹ U.S. intelligence agencies have linked several terrorist plots in the United States to networks in Pakistan, including Faisal Shahzad's May 2010 attempt to bomb Times Square in New York. Another notable threat was the al Qaeda plot to detonate a bomb in the New York City subway that involved Najibullah Zazi. According to U.S. government documents, Zazi's travels to Pakistan and his contacts with individuals there were pivotal in helping him build an improvised explosive device using triacetone triperoxide, the same explosive used effectively in the 2005 London subway bombings.² Similarly, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown warned that "three

¹ Yochi J. Dreazen, "Al Qaeda's Global Base Is Pakistan, Says Petraeus," *Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 2009.

² United States District Court, Eastern District of New York, United States of America Against Najibullah Zazi, 09 CR 663(S-1), February 22, 2010; United States District Court,

quarters of the most serious plots investigated by the British authorities have links to al Qa'ida in Pakistan.”³

This document examines counterinsurgency efforts in Pakistan and asks several questions: What are the roots of the militant challenge in Pakistan? What have Pakistan's primary operations against militants been? How effective have these operations been in achieving their goals? And what are the policy implications? To answer these questions, the document combines field research in Pakistan with a review of the literature on counterinsurgency and other relevant areas. While there have been numerous policy reports on Pakistan and its militant challenges, there has been little effort to systematically analyze the effectiveness of Pakistan's operations and to apply relevant theoretical lessons.

A Mixed Record

The study argues that despite some successes since 2001, militant groups continue to present a *significant threat* to Pakistan, the United States, and several other countries. As Figure S.1 illustrates, numerous militant networks—including al Qa'ida and other foreign fighters—exist in the FATA and North West Frontier Province. Other groups, including Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad, remain entrenched in other areas of Pakistan outside FATA. Some of these groups pose a grave threat to the Pakistani state, as the growing number of terrorist attacks in Pakistani cities demonstrates. Some also present a threat to the United States, which has at least two major interests in Pakistan. One is defeating al Qa'ida and other militant groups that threaten the U.S. homeland and its interests overseas. The second is preventing militant groups from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons.

Eastern District of New York, United States of America Against Najibullah Zazi, 09-CR-663, September 24, 2009.

³ Sam Coates and Jeremy Page, “Pakistan ‘Linked to 75% of All UK Terror Plots,’ Warns Gordon Brown,” *The Times* (London), December 15, 2008.

Figure S.1
Example of Militant Networks in FATA and the North West Frontier Province



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The militant threat persists for several reasons. One is Pakistan's challenge in developing an effective population-centric counterinsurgency strategy, which is necessary to counter militants and secure its population over the long run. Counterinsurgency is extraordinarily challenging; governments have won only 31 percent of counterinsurgencies since 1945. Insurgents have won 28 percent; 22 percent ended in a draw; and 18 percent are ongoing.⁴ This study concludes that Pakistan will not be able to deal with the militant threat over the long

⁴ David C. Gompert and John Gordon IV, *Building Complete and Balanced Capabilities for Counterinsurgency*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2008, p. 377.

run unless it does a more effective job of addressing the root causes of the crisis and makes security of the civilian population, rather than destroying the enemy, its top priority.

In addition, Pakistan's decision to support some militant groups has been counterproductive. Its use of militancy as a tool of foreign policy is not new and, in fact, dates back to the early weeks of statehood. Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear weapons appears to have emboldened its support of militant groups by dampening its concerns about Indian retaliation. The policy of supporting militants began to backfire after September 11, 2001, when such groups as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan conducted terrorist attacks in Pakistan from bases in FATA. By 2010, following the capture of senior Taliban leaders, such as inner shura member Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, some changes appeared to be taking place in Pakistan's policy. But Pakistan has not yet made a systematic break with militant groups.

Finally, Pakistan's army and Frontier Corps have demonstrated an uneven ability to clear and hold territory. Their performance during Operation Al Mizan—especially in South Waziristan in 2004—suggested serious deficiencies in conducting cordon-and-search operations and holding territory. Pakistani operations had improved somewhat by Operation Sher Dil in 2008 (Bajaur), Operation Rah-e-Rast in 2009 (Swat), and Operation Rah-e-Nijat in 2009 and 2010 (South Waziristan). Frontier Corps and army forces were better able to clear territory and integrate operations with local tribes. U.S. mentoring and training assistance, including that of U.S. Special Operations Forces, was helpful in building the capacity of some Pakistani forces, such as the Frontier Corps and Special Services Group. But the Pakistan Army has been reluctant to establish such a close relationship.

Pakistan's lack of an official counterinsurgency doctrine remains a lingering challenge. The government's focus on a war with India has ill-equipped it to contend with a growing domestic threat, although Pakistan's capabilities have improved. The Pakistan Army has long contended that it is the sole institution that can protect the country, yet Pakistan's police institutions have languished. The extensive literature on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism suggests that police-led—not army-led—approaches are usually more effective over the long run.

Pakistan's federal and provincial bureaucracies have also failed to provide systematic development and other aid to conflict-afflicted areas, offer adequate assistance to internally displaced persons, or engage in other efforts to secure the support of locals. The government's inability to provide immediate relief has exacerbated the army's reliance on scorched-earth policies in such places as South Waziristan, Bajaur, and Swat, which have alienated some locals.

A Population-Centric Strategy

Pakistan has demonstrated varying will and capacity to counter the militant groups operating on its territory. Four components are critical to adopting a more effective strategy.

First, Pakistan needs to establish a population-centric approach that aligns better with effective counterinsurgency efforts. As the counterinsurgency practitioner John Nagl argued, "Population security is the first requirement of success in counterinsurgency."⁵ U.S. Special Operations Forces can be especially helpful, since they have both a history of involvement in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, and good relations with Pakistan's security institutions. Of particular importance are the Pakistani police, which need to serve as a key "hold" force over the long run. Pakistan's police forces are poorly paid and poorly equipped, and there are too few of them. There is an urgent need to increase the number and capabilities of police forces. In addition, Pakistan's domestic intelligence agencies, including the police Special Branch, are underdeveloped and overshadowed by Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).⁶ The United States is partly responsible for Pakistan's overreliance on military, rather than civilian, power because it has provided so much assistance to the Ministry of Defense.

⁵ John Nagl, "Foreword to the University of Chicago Press Edition," in *U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps, Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. xix.

⁶ C. Christine Fair and Peter Chalk, *Fortifying Pakistan: The Role of U.S. Internal Security Assistance*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2006.

FATA's outdated and idiosyncratic legal structure is also a challenge. Under the Frontier Crimes Regulation, there are no regular police in FATA; justice is draconian; and corruption appears to be rampant. The Frontier Crimes Regulation is also a barrier to the free movement of people between FATA and the rest of Pakistan. The High Court in Peshawar declared the Frontier Crimes Regulation unconstitutional. Despite the importance of this region, the Pakistani government has not developed a consensus on how it should move forward with the legal and constitutional issues surrounding FATA. Current plans contend with only development and defer important issues of legal status and governance.

Second, Pakistan needs to abandon militancy as a tool of its foreign and domestic policy. A key objective of U.S. policy must be to alter Pakistan's strategic calculus and end its support to militant groups. The United States should continue to make this position clear, as it began to do in 2010. Other states and international organizations, such as China and NATO, should issue similar statements. Indeed, the United States should enlist as many partners in this effort as possible. Pakistan's key allies, such as China, have become increasingly concerned about militant groups, including Uighur groups, that have used Pakistani soil for training and sanctuary. Anti-Americanism in Pakistan would likely make a coordinated message more effective in persuading Pakistan to alter its policy.

Third, the United States needs to reduce its reliance on Pakistan where feasible. In some areas, the United States will remain dependent on Pakistani cooperation, such as in targeting al Qaeda and other militants based in Pakistan that threaten the U.S. homeland and its interests overseas. The ISI's Counter Terrorism Wing has been a particularly cooperative partner with U.S. government agencies in targeting terrorist groups. In other areas, however, the United States can seek alternatives if necessary. For instance, Pakistan provides an important and affordable land bridge to move lethal and nonlethal supplies to NATO troops in Afghanistan. The U.S. reliance on Pakistan indicates a notable vulnerability. The United States should continue seeking alternative routes for resupply, including through Iran and Central Asia.

Fourth, the United States should reexamine “carrots” and “sticks” in a comprehensive strategy. The United States should continue U.S. Special Operations Forces training programs and ensure that goods and services given to Pakistan are appropriate for counterinsurgency purposes. But it should withhold some aid until Pakistan makes discernible progress. Washington has had mixed success in persuading Pakistan to change course, partly because U.S. strategy has focused too much on carrots and too little on sticks.

The carrots offered include money and conventional weapons, which do not offer the strategic carrots Pakistan most values. Successful persuasion requires a mixture of carrots and sticks. The United States secured President Musharraf’s cooperation in 2001 precisely because its strategy included carrots and sticks, which President Musharraf took seriously. In 2010, U.S.-Pakistani cooperation began to improve following a renewed diplomatic push that included both carrots *and* sticks. In a letter to Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, for instance, U.S. President Barack Obama bluntly warned that Pakistan’s use of militant groups to pursue its policy goals would no longer be tolerated. President Obama also offered additional military and economic assistance, as well as help in easing tensions with India.

To accomplish these objectives, the United States needs to respect Pakistan’s sovereignty and recognize that there is still considerable anti-Americanism among some Pakistanis. However, there is a tremendous amount at stake for the United States and Pakistan to deal more effectively with militant groups that threaten both countries’ security. Some observers have focused on the periods of friction between the United States and Pakistan, including during the 1990s. But there is a rich history of cooperation. In a May 1950 meeting with U.S. President Harry Truman, Pakistani Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan remarked that

the American people are not strangers to us. We have known them as educators and as men and women engaged on missions of peace. We have known them as soldiers who fought on our plains,

our hills, and our jungles. And again since the birth of Pakistan we have known them as messengers of your goodwill.⁷

Cooperation today is just as important—if not more important—than it was during the Cold War. The United States and Pakistan need to come together to develop a more-systematic strategy to deal with the challenges that threaten both countries.

⁷ Quoted in Shuja Nawaz, *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, Its Army, and the Wars Within*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 95.