

Pakistan on the Brink: Implications for U.S. Policies

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Brief Analysis

Both the establishment of sharia (Islamic law) in Pakistan's Swat valley and last month's advance by Taliban militants to within sixty miles of the capital, Islamabad, have raised concerns about increased terrorist threats to the United States as well as the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. It appears that Pakistan, whose president, Asif Ali Zardari, meets President Barack Obama in Washington on May 6, is becoming the first major foreign policy challenge for the new administration. Intense discussions have already taken place in the White House. Early thinking on the issue suggests that events in Pakistan also affect many aspects of U.S. Middle East policy.

Counterterrorism

The size of the safe havens available to terrorists along the Afghan-Pakistani border has evidently expanded beyond the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the region adjacent to Afghanistan where tribal rather than national law applies. Although Pakistan has launched air and artillery strikes to force the retreat of Taliban fighters, FATA and the surrounding region are likely to remain outside full government control. Announcing his new "AfPak" strategy on March 27, President Obama noted, "[Al-Qaeda has] used this mountainous terrain as a safe haven to hide, to train terrorists, to communicate with followers, to plot attacks, and to send fighters to support the insurgency in Afghanistan. For the American people, this border area has become the most dangerous place in the world." The president cautioned ominously that "multiple intelligence estimates have warned that al-Qaeda is actively planning attacks on the U.S. homeland from its safe haven in Pakistan." The area serves as a magnet for Islamic fighters from across the Middle East, Central Asia, and even Europe, but Islamabad's level of concern seems lower than that of Washington. On April 22, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton criticized the Pakistan government, saying it was "basically abdicating to the Taliban and to the extremists."

Nuclear Security and Proliferation

Although President Obama said last week that he was confident that Pakistan's nuclear weapons would not fall into the hands of Islamic militants, concerns surely remain. Pakistan's estimated 150 nuclear weapons are designed to be

carried by land-mobile missiles and fighter-bombers. Most warheads are probably stored close to Islamabad's twin city of Rawalpindi, which serves as the headquarters of the Pakistan army, or on air and army bases in the Punjab province, southeast of the capital. Also close to Islamabad are several centrifuge enrichment plants, including the main Kahuta facility, and nuclear bomb assembly sites. The Pakistani military sees India as the primary national adversary and therefore the main threat to the security of these weapons. (The domestic threat posed by the Taliban, a 1990s creation of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence to gain influence in Afghanistan, is still largely discounted.)

Given the country's history of nuclear trade with China, Iran, Libya, and North Korea, concerns about leaks of weapons and technology linger. Although past proliferation has been blamed on the activities of the now retired and still restricted Abdul Qadeer Khan, the country's military and political rulers were also undoubtedly complicit. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is often seen as being available to its ally, Saudi Arabia, as a counter to Iran and an alternative to U.S. security guarantees. The full implications of a truly radical regime in Pakistan have yet to be thought through but, if this happened, Riyadh would face a dilemma, but would likely seek an "Islamic" solution -- siding with Islamabad -- though it might be unsatisfactory and short-lived.

Afghanistan

The Khyber Pass in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, serves as the major logistical route for supplies sent to U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Truck convoys bringing materiel, which arrives by sea at the Pakistani port of Karachi, have recently faced attack and sabotage in the area. Last week, more than thirty people were killed in ethnic clashes in Karachi, prompting further anxiety. The answer to President Obama's recent question -- "What is our purpose in Afghanistan?" -- is to dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda and prevent its return. He described the way forward as strengthening the Afghan government and removing the role of illicit drugs in the economy. But without the political and logistical support of Pakistan, the likelihood of such success in Afghanistan will be diminished. (Afghan president Hamid Karzai will also be in Washington for talks this week.)

Enforced emphasis on the policy issues arising from Pakistan could lead the Obama administration to reduce its focus and alter its priorities on other aspects of Middle East policies. These could include:

Iraq. President Obama's worldview, expressed often on the campaign trail, was that the Bush administration should have focused on al-Qaeda and Afghanistan rather than on invading Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein. His view is likely reinforced by recent events in Pakistan. At his April 29 news conference, he said he was "gravely concerned" about the stability of the Pakistan government, while about Iraq, he said: "We have begun to end the war."

Iran. Concerns about Iranian nuclear intentions focus on the possibility that Tehran will be able to enrich enough uranium to produce its first atomic bomb by next year. But Iran was mentioned only in passing during President Obama's news conference. A deepening crisis with Pakistan will distract from the current, and urgent, nuclear focus of the agenda but offer new room for potential U.S.-Iranian dialogue: ethnic Baluchis live on both sides of the common border, with difficult histories, respectively, with Tehran and Islamabad.

Policy Options

Pakistan's diverse and dysfunctional leadership inhibits U.S. policymaking. The visit to Washington this week by the increasingly isolated President Zardari might only confirm the problem. The enigmatic military leader Gen. Ashfaq Kayani seems unwilling to work closely with Zardari. Kayani is not accompanying his president to the United States. The traditional template of Pakistan's military and bureaucratic elite providing stability regardless of the country's shifting political leadership appears no longer valid.

The United States is planning more aid for the Pakistan military, particularly for forces capable of operating against the Taliban rather than confronting India. Economic aid for social and educational spending is also planned, but at a projected \$1.5 billion a year, it is likely to have little impact in a country of 176 million people. Measures to secure

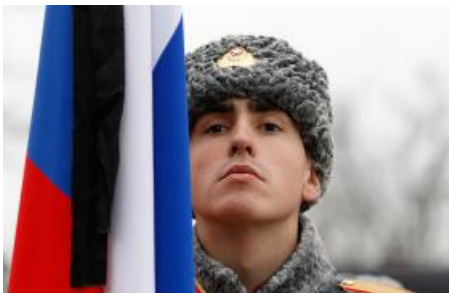
Pakistan's nuclear weapons and manufacturing facilities also need to be considered. The destruction or seizure of this arsenal by U.S. special forces is increasingly being perceived as a necessary part of Washington's planning rather than a fanciful option.

Taking a wider perspective, an implosion of political authority in Pakistan would likely be perceived as a failure of U.S. policy and diplomatic leadership, with implications both regional and worldwide. Officials are reported to have likened the situation to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, when the Shah failed to order his military to take action against demonstrators. The fall of the Shah was a setback for the United States that still resonates. Persian Gulf Arab allies of both Islamabad and Washington, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have played a limited and generally helpful role in influencing Pakistan, but that task seems to be becoming too large. India, so far mostly silent on the crisis, must also be greatly concerned. In 2002, India and Pakistan came close to a nuclear exchange. Although the present challenge is different, it is arguably even larger.

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