

Picking Battles

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Aug 13, 2007

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Leverage is crucial for the effective conduct of statecraft. But it is not always easy to exercise it. Consider the case of Pakistan. One would think the Bush administration would hold some sway over President Pervez Musharraf, given the \$10 billion in aid it has provided his government since 9/11 for its assistance in the war on terrorism. And yet, as the recently published National Intelligence Estimate concluded, Musharraf has permitted radical Islamists to strengthen their positions in the areas along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan.

In taking note of the threat that a reconstituted Al Qaeda poses, Senator Barack Obama has suggested that if Musharraf isn't prepared to crack down on extremists in Waziristan province, the United States may have to act militarily to do so. No American president would deny this country the ability to strike preemptively against an enemy before it could harm the United States. But several candidates in both parties have criticized Obama's position, arguing that military intervention in Pakistan could destabilize Musharraf's regime, thus exacerbating the Al Qaeda threat rather than ameliorating it. So should preemptive attacks by the United States against Al Qaeda bases or operating areas in Pakistan be off limits?

The nightmare scenario in Pakistan is not just instability in a nuclear-armed state, but the possibility that either the rigid controls over nuclear weapons could break down or radical Islamists could actually come to power. A recent poll revealed that Musharraf's domestic approval rating has dropped from 60 percent to 34 percent. Obviously, we have an interest in avoiding actions that might further shake stability in Pakistan.

Musharraf has portrayed himself as a bulwark against the Islamists but also one who must respect the political realities of his country. He has publicly declared his opposition to radical Islamist teachings and terrorism, and he has cooperated with the United States and others in arresting leading Al Qaeda operatives like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. But he has also implied that he must avoid actions against Islamists that might tear his country apart, given the weight of the Islamic political parties and tribal loyalties in the provinces where military actions might be most necessary. And he must also be mindful, he says, of the growing antipathy toward the United States and not appear simply to be doing America's bidding, a charge that is already leveled against him.

But while it would be foolhardy to dismiss Musharraf's concerns, it is his own actions -- not those of the United States -- that seem to be creating a coalition of secular and religious opposition. Interestingly, the source of his troubles is

less his belated action against the "Red Mosque" and more his attempted dismissal of the chief justice of the supreme court, the killing of a leading tribal elder in Baluchistan; the on again-off again agreement with the tribes in Waziristan about controlling Taliban movement across the border with Pakistan, his determination to be both president and head of the military, his reluctance to allow the leaders of the political opposition parties to return to the country, and signs that the standing of the military in the country is being questioned for the first time.

Musharraf's readiness to contemplate two completely different options -- a power-sharing arrangement with a former prime minister and one of his leading political opponents, Benazir Bhutto, and alternatively the declaration of a state of emergency -- indicates his own awareness of the pressures building on him. But even the hints that he was considering imposing a state of emergency produced a torrent of domestic criticism, suggesting that, rather than resolving his current difficulties, he might be triggering far greater danger to his rule and to stability in the country.

Furthermore, truth be told, while the United States today is unpopular in Pakistan -- at least in part because it seems to prop up Musharraf with assistance that goes largely to the military, with only relatively small amounts devoted to social and economic development -- Taliban and Al Qaeda terrorist attacks on the military and government officials are also generating increasing sentiment against them.

This should be heartening to U.S. officials, for it suggests that the threat of the United States destabilizing Pakistan is not as great as many fear. But the threat of an Al Qaeda attack originating from within Pakistan is certainly great, and it cannot be ignored or tolerated. Musharraf, the Pakistani military, and the public need to know this. We have no interest in pushing Musharraf over the edge, but we do have an interest in conditioning the Pakistani public to a reality that if Pakistan does not act against such a threat we may have no choice but to do so.

Before going public in such a manner, however, the administration would be wise to try to hold quiet military-to-military discussions about how both the United States and Pakistan can act to combat the threat posed by the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Such talks might sensitize both sides to the actual nature of the threat and the steps we might take that would make it easier for the Pakistani military to act. But if private diplomacy and communication continue to prove ineffective, more public statements are also part of statecraft. It is appropriate for us to call attention to the growth of Al Qaeda and the Taliban as forces that are threatening to the well-being of Pakistan, its neighbors, and to us -- and ultimately to the fact that someone is going to have to deal with this threat.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270)

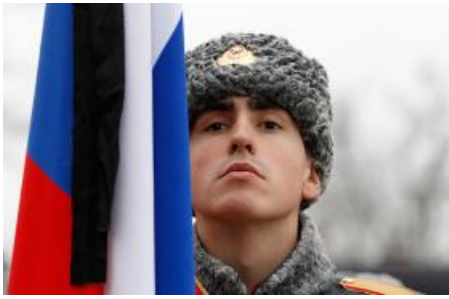
<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270>.

Read this op-ed at [New Republic Online](http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w070813&s=ross081307). (<http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w070813&s=ross081307>)

[Subscribe \(https://ssl.tnr.com/sumo/0405suboffer\)](https://ssl.tnr.com/sumo/0405suboffer) to the New Republic. ❖

New Republic Online

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022



Jay Solomon

[\(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)