

59. Relations with South and Central Asia

Policymakers should

- acknowledge that although the United States should seek to prevent Pakistan from descending into chaos in the short term, the Musharraf regime is unlikely to evolve into a long-term ally in the war on terrorism;
- vigorously pursue Al Qaeda and Taliban elements inside Pakistan's territory, preferably in cooperation with the Musharraf government;
- mobilize international support to contain Pakistan's nuclear proliferation and hold that country accountable for allowing the export of nuclear military technology;
- focus on India as a potential long-term military and economic partner of the United States in the region;
- recognize that relations with the governments of Central Asia present both opportunities and dangers in the context of the war on terrorism;
- steer clear of any direct involvement in regional conflicts involving separatist or local terrorist movements in Central Asian states; and
- acknowledge that the region is well within both Russian and Chinese spheres of influence and openly communicate to both of those governments the nature of U.S. intentions in the region.

Hard Choices in Pakistan

The 9/11 Commission report stressed that both Islamabad and Washington need to make "hard choices" if they are to make progress in the fight against radical Islamic terrorism. More specifically, the commission

recommended that the United States commit itself to a period of sustained aid, including military assistance, to Pakistan, but only on condition that Pakistan's military ruler, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, proves that he stands for "enlightened moderation" by confronting Islamic extremism, curbing nuclear proliferation, and paving the way for the return to democracy.

The commission's recommendations reveal the fundamental conundrum that the United States has faced in its dealings with Pakistan both before and after 9/11. American policymakers have come to recognize that Pakistan's pre-9/11 alliance with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and its strong ties to radical Islamic terrorist groups helped to create the environment that gave birth to Al Qaeda. But the commission report portrays Pakistan as dramatically different than it was before 9/11. The report implies that the decision by Musharraf to sever his country's links to the Taliban and provide logistical support for the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan marked a dramatic reversal in Pakistan's approach to radical Islamic terrorism. Accordingly, the 9/11 report implies that Pakistan has been evolving into a reliable ally of the United States in the war on terrorism.

That conclusion is flawed. Pakistan is not a dependably effective strategic partner. The decision by Musharraf to abandon the Taliban after 9/11 reflected not a strategic choice but a tactical one. It was based on the clear recognition that anything less than full cooperation with the United States would result in punishing American military retaliation, including the invasion of parts of Pakistan, and possibly the overthrow of the Musharraf government. At a minimum, the refusal by Pakistan to back the American invasion of Afghanistan would have led to the total diplomatic and economic isolation of the regime, which could have played into the hands of rival India in its bid for regional hegemony.

Support for Radical Islamist Causes

The assumption that Pakistan has severed its ties with those who advocate a radical Islamic agenda is based more on the rhetoric emanating from Islamabad than on the policy steps taken there since 9/11. For example, the 9/11 Commission points to "an extraordinary public essay" by Musharraf, in which he called on Muslims to adopt a policy of "enlightened moderation," to shun militancy and extremism, to seek to resolve disputes with "justice," and to help "better the Muslim world."

Contrast that with the reality in Pakistan as described by the members of the commission: "Within Pakistan's borders are 150 million Muslims, scores of al Qaeda terrorists, many Taliban fighters and—perhaps—Usama

Bin Ladin. Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons and has come frighteningly close to war with nuclear-armed India over the disputed territory of Kashmir.’’ In addition, when the commission asked American and foreign government officials, ‘‘If you were a terrorist leader today, where would you locate your base?’’ Pakistan was at the top of the list.

Policymakers should focus on what attracts terrorists to Pakistan. In many respects, it is a ‘‘failed state’’: corruption is widespread, the government is ineffective, and there is immense support among the general public and the elites for radical Islamic causes. Motivated by ideology and cheap tuition, millions of Pakistani families send their children to religious schools, or madrassas, which have become incubators for anti-Western propaganda that contributes to the terrorist problem.

Moreover, radical Islamism is backed not only by leaders of large political parties and by the tribes on the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders. Many reports by Western intelligence and media have found that the Pakistani Army and intelligence services, in particular, are at best ambivalent about confronting Islamic extremists. Meanwhile, Islamic terrorists have found refuge in Pakistan’s unpoliced regions, which now provide both a base of operations against U.S. forces in Afghanistan and a safe haven for planning attacks against Americans inside the United States.

Widespread support for extremist Islam in Pakistan may explain why many of the Pakistani government’s early efforts to pursue Al Qaeda members hiding along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border failed. That sentiment may also explain why Musharraf’s government refused to vigorously pursue former Taliban and Islamic militants gathered in tribal, semiautonomous regions of Pakistan. According to the 9/11 Commission report, during the two years following the 9/11 attacks, ‘‘the Pakistani government tried to walk the fence, helping against al Qaeda while seeking to avoid a larger confrontation with Taliban remnants and other Islamic extremists.’’ By most indications, Pakistan either could not or would not pursue Al Qaeda members effectively, even on its own territory.

The disappointing results of Pakistan’s early military offensives raise doubts about Musharraf’s ability to challenge the power of the local tribal leaders in Waziristan and the semiautonomous regions of northwest Pakistan. Despite the military pressure and the financial rewards offered by the United States, many Pakistanis continue to shelter the militants, including foreigners who operate there. At the same time, two assassination attempts on Musharraf in December 2003 seem to have mobilized the Pakistani president to take action. The capture of several Al Qaeda opera-

tives during the summer of 2004 may indicate a growing willingness on Musharraf's part to pursue Al Qaeda terrorists. Musharraf must understand that this is his fight as well, and U.S. policymakers must understand that Musharraf is in a precarious political position.

Nuclear Proliferation

In addition to Pakistan's uneven record in pursuing Al Qaeda and the Taliban, there were troubling revelations that a leading Pakistani scientist and the father of Pakistan's atomic bomb, Abdul Qadeer Khan, provided nuclear military technology to several countries, including Iran, North Korea, and Libya. Musharraf and other Pakistani officials insisted that the business network led by Khan—which transferred nuclear know-how, including designs, components, and advice to anti-American regimes interested in developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—operated without the authorization and knowledge of the government. The officials explained that Khan was a “rogue scientist” motivated by greed and that he was acting alone. But sources in Pakistan dispute that account and suggest that at least some individuals in the government approved of what Khan was doing and saw his proliferation efforts as part of a strategy to help other Islamic countries such as Libya and Iran to develop nuclear military capabilities as a deterrent against the United States and Israel.

The Khan network may also have been a way for the military and intelligence services to gain access to funds for covert operations in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and elsewhere. Musharraf's decision to pardon Khan immediately following the revelations about his activities raises serious questions about Pakistan's commitment to nonproliferation. It also calls into question the security of Pakistan's own nuclear military program and underlines concerns that Pakistan's nuclear secrets could fall into the hands of Al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorists.

The Bush administration accepted Musharraf's pardon of Khan and refrained from challenging the Pakistani leader when he said that he and all senior officials in Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment had been completely unaware of Khan's proliferation activities. Throughout 2003 and 2004, the Bush administration agreed (under pressure from Islamabad) not to dispatch American and British forces to the tribal areas inside Pakistan where senior Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders were believed to be hiding.

Also troubling was the Bush administration's decision to designate Pakistan a “major non-NATO ally,” a title that has been granted to Japan,

Israel, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Argentina, Egypt, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Jordan. That new status not only provided Pakistan with added diplomatic prestige; it also afforded Islamabad greater access to American military technology and surplus defense equipment and training. That announcement angered the members of the political establishment in India who regard Pakistan as a sponsor of anti-Indian terrorism.

U.S. officials defend their support for Pakistan by stressing that U.S. policy is driven by the short-term goals of the war on terrorism and also that Musharraf's government may present the only realistic chance to reach an agreement over Kashmir. New Delhi and Islamabad did announce in early 2004—only two years after nearly going to war—that they would restart peace talks. Some American analysts have suggested that, by agreeing publicly to prevent Pakistani territory from being used as a staging ground to support the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir, Musharraf has made a “strategic choice” to end the Pakistani-supported proxy war against India in Kashmir.

Musharraf Is Opportunistic; U.S. Policymakers Should Be As Well

Policymakers should consider an alternate interpretation of Pakistan's behavior. Since 9/11, Musharraf has been opportunistic. He responded to political and military pressure from the United States by ending his country's alliance with the Taliban and other radical Islamic groups, taking steps to liberalize his country's political and economic system, and opening the road to an accord with India over Kashmir. But there are no signs that Musharraf and his political and military allies have made a strategic choice to ally themselves with U.S. long-term goals in the war on terrorism by destroying the political and military infrastructure of the radical and violent anti-American Islamic groups in Pakistan. It is highly probable that Musharraf is not strong enough to do so. From that perspective, the partnership with the United States and Musharraf's willingness to negotiate with India over Kashmir are nothing more than short-term moves aimed at winning U.S. assistance and preventing India from emerging as Washington's main ally in the region.

If this alternate interpretation is correct, the current American relationship with Pakistan is, at best, a short-term alliance of necessity. Over the medium and long term, U.S. policymakers should distance themselves from Musharraf's regime, seek out ways to cultivate liberal secular reforms in Pakistan, and engage in more constructive relations with India.

Such a policy shift would reflect present-day reality: Westernized and secular India is a stable democracy and a rising regional power, not a de facto client of the Soviet Union, as it was widely presumed to be during the Cold War. With the Cold War order long since dismantled, the United States has a clear interest in establishing strong ties with India, whose political, economic, and military clout places the country in a position to counterbalance even an increasingly assertive China. As the world's largest democracy and an important bilateral trading partner with the United States, India, not Pakistan, should be the focus of long-term U.S. policy in the region.

U.S. Policy in Central Asia

Given the uncertainties in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Middle East, Central Asia will present both historic opportunities and serious challenges for the United States in the 21st century. The presence of oil and natural gas, coupled with the region's geographic location, makes Central Asia strategically important to the United States. Instability in the greater Middle East and the war on terrorism are demanding a new strategic posture.

The United States has indicated that it would like to become more involved in the region, particularly in establishing military basing rights in states such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Though such relationships are strategically important, they present serious problems that policymakers must take into account.

Strategic Value and Dangers of Cooperation

In the wake of U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, support in the Middle East for the United States and its policies has dropped precipitously. During the preparations for invading Iraq, even Turkey refused to allow its territory to be used as a staging ground, and the United States was forced to alter its plans accordingly. As American military planners were forced to look elsewhere for basing rights in the region, access to bases in places like Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan became increasingly desirable, particularly in the event of a flare-up in Afghanistan or the potential destabilization of Pakistan.

The Pentagon has cast its new thinking in terms of a Central Asian "lily pad" strategy; that is, the opportunity to "hop" from one base to another in Central Asia rather than maintain large, permanent bases from which U.S. forces could fight directly. Although this proposal has some

appeal (reducing the U.S. presence in a given country and maintaining fewer forces on active duty there), it carries serious risks as well.

Even before the regimes in Central Asia started cooperating with the United States, Islamist terrorists had targeted them for destruction. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and several Turkic groups have been branded as terrorists by regional governments. Hizb ut-Tahrir (the Islamic Liberation Party), while generally considered nonviolent, seeks to unite the entire Islamic world under the rule of a new caliphate and is active primarily in Uzbekistan. Sucking those groups into the amalgam of anti-American terror groups that operate worldwide would add fuel to an already hot fire. A U.S. military presence perceived as intrusive and humiliating could serve to push those groups into the arms of Al Qaeda. Although many of the region's leaders are unsavory and unpredictable, their overthrow and the chaos that would ensue in Central Asia would present serious problems for an already overstretched U.S. military.

Entering the Russian and Chinese Spheres of Influence

In addition to the concern of terrorism, the introduction of great power politics into Central Asia could create unnecessary problems for the United States. History, geography, and national interest place the region within both the Russian and the Chinese spheres of influence. A large or long-term American presence in the region would likely rankle both countries, creating needless tension in an already unstable region.

A variety of treaty organizations (such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization for China and the Collective Security Treaty Organization for Russia) have been used to tie both regional great powers to Central Asia. Thus, there is already competition for strategic space in Central Asia. Expanding the American military presence could aggravate the conflict and alarm both China and Russia.

Russia is already bolstering its military presence in the region; the budding U.S. base in Kyrgyzstan is in close proximity to the expanding Russian base at Kant. Though it is unclear whether Russian president Vladimir Putin himself disapproves of such an American presence in the region, he faces pressure from hardliners who vehemently oppose what they see as an attempt to undermine Russian dominance.

Meanwhile, China's energy needs and its campaign against the Muslim Uighur separatist groups in Xinjiang province have forced the Chinese to look westward. A larger U.S. military presence in the region could draw the United States into the conflict. Taking sides on that issue will anger

either China or the Muslim populations of surrounding states, possibly including terrorist groups.

Further, an American presence to China's west, coupled with the existing tensions over the Taiwan issue, could press China into seeing the United States as a genuine threat to its strategic position.

Conclusion: Walk Lightly in Central Asia

Although the potential downsides of involvement in Central Asia present serious dangers, cooperative relationships with governments there can offer important benefits at a manageable cost, if American activities in the region conform to certain characteristics.

First, the American military "footprint" in Central Asia must be small. If the United States were to set up a large-scale, highly visible presence in the region, Osama bin Laden and his adherents would have one more rallying cry. A visible U.S. troop presence and open alliances with corrupt regimes that oppress Muslim populations would likely inflame Muslim resentment and put both U.S. forces and the allies' governments at risk.

Accordingly, the United States should seek to establish agreements that regional bases *could* be used in the event of an emergency that threatened vital U.S. interests. Economic enticements such as trade agreements could be used to encourage Central Asian governments to cooperate. A small-scale American presence may be necessary temporarily to ensure that the bases meet U.S. needs, but there should be no permanent or quasi-permanent garrisons of U.S. troops.

Second, the United States must openly and clearly communicate its objectives in the region to Russia and China and act in accordance with its promises. Although both states would face internal pressure opposing a U.S. presence, neither state's influence would be threatened by a small-scale U.S. plan of basing rights. The United States should not oppose Russian and Chinese military agreements with Central Asian governments and should allow those states to maintain a preponderance of the military capability in the region. The notion that the United States must compete is foolhardy and threatens to upset the already unstable situation.

Third, U.S. policymakers must keep in mind their primary objective—keeping the world's most dangerous weapons out of the hands of the world's most dangerous terrorists. Although the Defense Threat Reduction Agency and the Proliferation Security Initiative are positive steps, Central Asia presents unique challenges for counterproliferation efforts. Radiological and nuclear materials remain in the region, and destabilization would

not only create a security and political vacuum—it could also jeopardize U.S. efforts to secure former Soviet nuclear facilities.

In sum, U.S. interests in Central Asia are best served by developing agreements to use bases in the Central Asian states in the event of an emergency. Conversely, U.S. interests could be harmed by a large-scale military presence in the region. By cultivating the regional governments with trade and other mutually beneficial economic agreements, the United States can improve its strategic position in the region. Maintaining a small footprint will prevent the new U.S. strategy from inflaming terrorist groups and their sympathizers. If U.S. intentions are focused on protecting vital U.S. national security interests, a corresponding U.S. policy will not present a significant problem for either Russo-U.S. or Sino-U.S. relations. Accordingly, the United States can enhance its ability to pursue its interests in both Central and South Asia.

Suggested Readings

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