

## Engaging Pakistan— Getting the Balance Right

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## SUMMARY

Pakistan will remain a daunting challenge for the next American administration. The near-term challenge of defeating terrorism requires Washington to strengthen ties with the Pakistani military—the source of its national problems—whereas the long-term goal of nursing Pakistan to health requires a robust partnership with civilian leaders, which could undermine the military's counterterrorism cooperation. Unfortunately, the United States cannot choose between these approaches. U.S. strategy in these circumstances ought to consist of:

- Strengthening the civilian government in Pakistan.
- Investing in Pakistan's human capital and supporting its civil society.
- Assisting Pakistan with counterterrorism while emphasizing the long-term U.S. commitment to Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Encouraging Indo-Pakistani reconciliation without American mediation.
- Encouraging Indo-Pakistani economic integration.

Because Pakistan's problems are deep-rooted, the United States should be satisfied in the interim with positive trends in governance, macroeconomic management, foreign policy, and temperate ideological orientation.

Of all the foreign policy challenges facing a new American administration, transforming Pakistan is likely to prove among the most daunting. Pakistan is a nuclear-armed state riddled by economic crises and internal cataclysms playing out against a weak governing regime, a demoralized but self-centered military, a powerful intelligence agency that supports terrorism, and an unstable set of political institutions. From the sanctuary of its tribal regions, a resurgent Taliban and its indigenous allies continue to undermine the fragile nation-building effort currently underway in Afghanistan, while threatening Pakistan's settled areas as well.

These dangers obviously pose a threat not only to Pakistan itself but also to the United States

and to U.S.–Pakistani relations. For the last eight years, Washington has relied on Islamabad for political and operational support in prosecuting the war against al-Qaeda along the Afghan–Pakistani border. In gratitude and as inducement, the Bush administration provided Pakistan with over \$10 billion in financial assistance, transferred major weapons systems previously denied, forgave significant portions of its outstanding debt, offered it new schemes to access the U.S. market, and, in the latest example of American largesse, proposes to upgrade its principal combat aircraft, the F-16, by diverting some \$230 million from U.S. counterterrorism funding.

Despite this generosity, U.S.–Pakistani relations remain precarious: anti-American senti-



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ments in Pakistan are among the highest in the world; most Pakistanis oppose U.S. military operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban; and Pakistani civilians remain disenchanted by the Bush administration's embrace of their military (including former president Pervez Musharraf), even as the military itself harbors deep suspicions of Washington's intentions toward Pakistan, its friendship with India, and its capacity to stay engaged in southern Asia over the long term.

These realities imply that engaging Pakistan successfully will be a difficult challenge for the incoming administration. In contrast to Iraq and Afghanistan, where the problems concerned at least evoke discernible solutions, however difficult to carry out, the troubles engulfing Pakistan are not only intractable and viciously self-reinforcing, they also seem impervious to anything other than extreme remedies, which carry the inherent risk of making things worse.

### Troubles, They Come in Battalions—Or, How Did We Get Here?

Sixty-one years after independence, Pakistan remains a garrison state dominated by a rent-seeking army that profits from a militarized economy. The army's repeated interventions in politics, though invariably justified as efforts to ward off internal disorder, have provided the military with opportunities to control the nation's internal and external security policies, snatch a prized share of the national budget, develop extensive networks of political and economic patronage, nurture vast commercial organizations for profit, and manipulate the weakened civilian polity for its own purposes—all in the name of preparing to meet the threat posed by India.

As New Delhi's strength grew, however, and Islamabad's traditional strategy for conventional war became less and less viable, the Pakistani army gradually shifted toward terrorism to achieve its goals. Based on its experience with the anti-Soviet jihad, Pakistan sponsored radical groups in Kashmir and the Taliban in Afghanistan: The former were intended to help Islamabad wrest control of the disputed territory from India while the latter became the means of maintaining a friendly state on Pakistan's west-

ern frontiers. Faced with U.S. pressure after the September 11 attacks, Islamabad reluctantly abjured support for these groups, but deliberately chose not to eliminate them. As a result, the Taliban, which lay low for several years, has now reemerged as a potent threat against the Afghan state. In the process, it has spawned various Pakistani affiliates, which have declared war on the Pakistani army itself because of Islamabad's support for the larger American campaign against terrorism.

Despite this blowback, the military and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate remain unwilling to sever their links with terrorism entirely, preferring instead to differentiate among various elements, depending on their utility. For example, while the army prosecutes al-Qaeda in the settled areas and Pakistani radicals such as Baitullah Mehsud along the frontier, it simultaneously ignores the senior Afghan Taliban leadership in Quetta and other key insurgent commanders, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani, operating near Peshawar because of their perceived value in securing an accommodating Afghanistan. Similarly, while the military currently has restrained its Kashmiri clients—as it waits for the peace process to prove its worth—it nonetheless maintains these terrorist cadres as a “force-in-being” ready to be deployed once again if relations with India falter irretrievably.

The persistence of this strategy, despite the military's own recognition that extremism represents the most dangerous security threat facing Pakistan today, confirms just how conflicted the army is about the utility of radical groups for advancing certain critical interests. That the election of a new civilian government in Islamabad has not produced any fundamental change of course further attests to the fact that the Pakistani military continues to remain preeminent in national security decision making. Consequently, policy changes in this arena will materialize only when these are seen to advance Pakistani interests as interpreted by the army—to include its own institutional well being. Because the national security state advances the military's welfare, but not necessarily Pakistan's, the civilian regime is struggling to wrest control of criti-

cal policy making from the army. The power and secrecy that protects military actions, however, make the outcome of this effort uncertain.

Thus, the current situation in Pakistan remains unsettled. The army and certainly ISI continue to abet radical groups warring against the Afghan government and the international coalition defending it (which includes U.S. forces), while remaining formal partners of the United States in the war on terror and major recipients of its assistance. They also aid terrorist groups involved in India. Meanwhile, the Pakistan army appears to have sullenly retreated from combating Islamist militancy within its own country. Having been conspicuously targeted by these jihadists since 2007, the military—in part because of its material and operational inadequacies—now appears reluctant to interdict them comprehensively; instead, it seems content to offer up the inadequately equipped and poorly motivated Frontier Corps for this purpose, while mounting episodic offensives even as it pursues peace deals with the extremists to buy immunity from attack. The civilian government's recent agreements with the tribal clans—while potentially sensible strategically—have provided political cover for the military's own accords with the insurgents. The net result is that the Afghan–Pakistani frontier has become a formidable sanctuary shielding various terrorist groups that wage war against Afghanistan, India, the United States, Western Europe, and Pakistan itself—groups often either tolerated or patronized by the army and/or ISI because they serve the narrow objectives of buttressing praetorian power within Pakistan, embarrassing and thereby limiting the autonomy of the civilian government, and keeping key neighbors, such as Afghanistan and India, off balance.

The United States thus finds itself in a quandary. Washington remains a critical partner of Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan, yet it is trapped in the subterranean war waged by the Pakistani security forces against the others, with increasing risks to American lives and interests in all three states. Unfortunately, the United States cannot rely on the civilian government in Islamabad to solve this problem. The latter may wish to restrain its military and intelligence

services, but cannot do so because of historical and institutional weaknesses. Its own strategy of splitting the terrorists from their tribal bases of support has not yet succeeded, as necessary as these efforts are, and it cannot simply command the Pakistan army to resume counter-terrorism operations and ISI to cease supporting extremist activities because these entities would disregard such directives with impunity.

The Bush administration had hoped that generous assistance and a closer relationship with the Pakistani army and ISI would wean them away from their old entanglements with terrorism. But this approach has not proven very successful so far. The military's resentment to-

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wards India, its suspicions about Washington's friendship with New Delhi, its fears about Indian aims in Afghanistan, its anxieties about U.S. objectives in regard to Pakistan's territorial integrity and its nuclear weapons, and its conviction that the United States will leave Kabul sooner rather than later, prompts it to protect its internal and foreign interests through destabilizing measures. Thanks to this calculus, it will desist from eliminating all the terrorist groups that currently threaten Afghan, Indian, American and even Pakistani security—and will also virulently oppose any American efforts to do so through combat operations inside Pakistan.

Washington is thus left with only painful choices. Either acquiesce to the current realities, in which case the threats to Afghan government and U.S. forces will get worse (and the risks of Indo–Pakistani crises increase), or respond with unilateral military actions that, whatever their effectiveness, could enrage Pakistanis and thus make the struggle against terrorism harder. Even worse, both options retard the U.S. ability to pursue the one solution necessary to fortify Pakistan's stability over the long term: strengthening democracy. A strong civilian government could restrain the

military's temptation to wage clandestine wars, contain the threat posed by the army and ISI to democratic institutions, and reorient national priorities towards development over warfighting. To get there, however, Pakistan's civilian rulers would have to exhibit sturdy leadership *and* Washington would have to make extraordinary efforts to support them in the process.

Even if a competent civilian government emerged, the risks inherent in this approach are apparent. If the United States casts with strong civilian rule, the military probably would covertly resist cooperating with its own government and with Washington in relinquishing its links with terrorism. This struggle could end disastrously in an open conflict within Islamabad and between the United States and Pakistan. If

the Pakistani military to abandon all extremist groups and take the lead once again in counterterrorism operations in the tribal areas, despite its current overextension and its inadequacies—while also pursuing the long-term measures necessary to nurse Pakistan to political health. These goals admittedly contain an inherent tension: meeting the near-term challenge requires Washington to strengthen ties with the military (which could weaken civilian authority), whereas the long-term goal requires developing a robust partnership with civilian leaders, even though it would undermine military primacy—and possibly the army's counterterrorism cooperation. Unfortunately, the United States cannot choose between these approaches: so long as civil-military antagonisms persist in Islamabad and so long as Washington is condemned to pursue both short- and long-term goals in Pakistan simultaneously, it must strengthen civilian control while continuing to work with the army, however contradictory in principle and difficult in practice it may be.

The only approach that remains viable is continued engagement with Pakistan, one that quietly, but consistently, confronts Islamabad about its shortcomings, even while seeking to institutionalize a broad and lasting relationship that propels both civilian and military leaders to act with integrity because of their expectation that deepening trust between the United States and Pakistan would pay for itself over time. To give this strategy a chance to succeed, Washington should continue its current approach of assisting Pakistan without conditions—at least until both the new civilian government and the post-Musharraf military leadership have had a chance to negotiate their terms of coexistence and focus on delivering political and economic stability, rescinding support for terrorism, and prosecuting counterterrorism operations effectively. The alternatives to this approach are all very costly. Hence, both patience and the willingness to juggle opposing short- and long-term goals will be necessary. Patience is essential, because Pakistan's problems are so ingrained that they will outlast the next administration and its successor as well. Supporting democratic consolidation in Pakistan while simultaneously remaining engaged with its

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Washington, by contrast, persists—explicitly or subtly—in treating the military as a preeminent center of power or as the civilian government's equal, it will have buttressed the national security state in Pakistan, thereby deepening the country's malaise and increasing the perils posed over the longer term. Such an approach might produce improved anti-terrorism cooperation immediately, or it may be yet another will-o'-the-wisp, as the record of the past eight years suggests. The alternatives facing the incoming administration are not enviable.

**Giving Hope a Chance—Or, What Should the United States Do Next?**

There is no easy way out of this conundrum. Although the administration's decision not to force Islamabad to conclusively cut all its ties with terrorism after September 11 has partly contributed to this dilemma, the real cause remains the deeply entrenched nature of Pakistan's problems. Consequently, the next president will have to deal with the pressing near-term challenge of defeating terrorism—which requires

military will be as difficult in Washington as it is likely to be in Islamabad, yet U.S. policy will fail dangerously if it cannot get the balance right.

The next administration would do well to hold on to three core principles as it goes about this task:

- Enabling Pakistan to become a success is as important for its own sake as it is for the attainment of U.S. objectives.
- A successful U.S. policy toward Pakistan cannot be based on a narrow partnership with some key elites to the neglect of the larger body politic.
- The chances for Pakistani success cannot be increased by limiting cooperation with India.

Keeping these principles in mind, the next administration ought to implement the following five policies concurrently:

**Strengthen the civilian government in Pakistan.**

Because the core of Pakistan's political, economic, and social problems derive from the enervating power of the national security state, strengthening civilian rule so as to consolidate democracy will be essential to Pakistan's viability and the long-term success of its struggle against extremism. Although the chaos of democratic politics in Islamabad—manifested by the current competition between Asif Zardari and Nawaz Sharif—is frustrating to U.S. policy makers, Washington should ignore the temptation to acquiesce to authoritarian solutions, no matter how immediately efficient or appealing they appear. Engaging the military in a way that undermines the civilian government would damage Pakistan's democratic evolution without winning the “long war,” as would all attempts at manipulating the country's internal politics, even if they were to produce coalitions useful to immediate U.S. interests. Such efforts have not only boomeranged in the past, but they also have contributed to deepening anti-American sentiment inside Pakistan.

Working consistently with the civilian government as the primary authority, while reaching out to all legitimate opposition parties, will strengthen democracy against its challengers and

convey the important message that Washington will not usurp the prerogatives of the Pakistani people. Consequently, the United States should resist the temptation of inserting itself into party politics and encouraging constitutional solutions that undermine civilian supremacy; it should focus instead on the elected government, supporting it against any military interference, while investing in strengthening other political institutions, such as the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and the assemblies, which have been battered

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during the last few decades. Two other initiatives are critical here: The United States should help the Pakistani government to set up a National Security Council that reconciles competing substantive concerns and parochial interests without subverting the principle of civilian rule, and it should press both civilian and army leaders to begin reforming ISI for their own benefit.

**Invest in improving Pakistan's human capital and supporting its civil society.**

While strengthening Pakistani democracy inevitably demands rebuilding institutions, both political and economic development require empowering its people. Increased U.S. assistance, accordingly, ought to be focused on education, particularly public education, which remains the best weapon against Pakistan's atavistic feudal structures and its religious radicalism. Investments in public health, improved delivery of social services, and greater access to state institutions would also aid economic development and increase the legitimacy of the moderate political order. In this context, Pakistan's civil society—the media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and various voluntary associations working in women's health, primary education, legal aid, and the environment—is a natural ally and ought to be assisted by the United States. The Biden–Lugar bill, which aims to expand civilian over military aid, is a worthwhile initiative that deserves the sup-

port of the incoming administration, but it will require enlarged U.S. monitoring capacity to succeed. Subject to considerations of accountability and absorption capacity, increasing assistance to Pakistan with the intent of improving its human capital through indigenous delivery vehicles ought to be a major innovation championed by the new administration. The pressing challenge of aiding Islamabad to meet its serious food and energy shortages, which threaten internal upheavals and the fledgling civilian regime, will also have to be confronted. But all assistance here should be targeted and conveyed through means

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other than blanket budgetary support, which historically has had the perverse effect of absolving Pakistani leaders from responsibility for carrying out sound economic policies and making hard decisions.

**Help Pakistan to win the war on terror and the struggle against radicalism.** While building the foundations for democracy and development remain important components of a long-term strategy, winning the battle against violent radicalism remains imperative in the near term because of its importance to both Pakistan and the United States. Addressing Islamabad's deficiencies in capacity and motivation is critical. As far as incapacity, focused security assistance that improves Islamabad's counterterrorism and counter-insurgency capabilities ought to receive clear priority. This implies equipment that provides better intelligence, connectivity, and tactical mobility, as well as training for both the military and the Frontier Corps. A critical yet often overlooked component is strengthening the local police and their associated intelligence and rapid-reaction capabilities. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) development program begun in the second Bush term must be sustained and should be complemented by

larger political reforms.

None of these components will succeed, however, if the Pakistani Army opts out of sustained counterterrorism operations along its western border—an absence that will become even more injurious as Afghan and Pakistani Taliban attacks increase in response to intensified U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. In any case, it will be years before Frontier Corps modernization yields fruit, and even then this force is likely be dogged by significant weaknesses of will because of its members' consanguineal ties with the insurgents. Also, the development initiatives currently underway in the tribal regions will mature only over time and, consequently, cannot be relied upon as substitutes for effective military action embedded in a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy that knits together economic, political, and coercive instruments at both the provincial and central levels.

Intractable as they are, the Pakistani army's motivational weaknesses have to be addressed concurrently. At least three components ought to be emphasized by the incoming administration: First, U.S. determination to maintain a long-term presence in Afghanistan and a long-term partnership with Pakistan should be reaffirmed at the highest levels; second, the importance of the Pakistani Army and its intelligence services making a clean break with all terrorist groups needs to be underscored privately but clearly; and third, U.S. willingness to support the Pakistani military's legitimate need for major equipment, once it accepts the primacy of civilian authority and commits itself to advancing regional peace, ought to be enunciated. If the army evolves in this direction—as it must if Pakistan itself is to remain viable—Washington should offer increased defense cooperation across the board, although military-to-military ties require deepening in the interim in any case. The war on terrorism in Pakistan simply cannot be won without responsible conduct by the army and ISI and the development of an appropriate civil-military relationship. Aiding both civilians and the military in these twin tasks, while transforming the former into the focal point for national security decision making, will be a tricky but critical undertaking for many administrations to come.

**Encourage reconciliation between India and Pakistan.** Neither Pakistan's transformation nor the war on terror can be satisfactorily accomplished if Islamabad and New Delhi remain at loggerheads. This rivalry not only subverts regional stability but also distorts Pakistan's domestic politics, empowers the Pakistani military beyond its natural competence, and undermines economic development. Among the Bush administration's key regional achievements has been the successful management of U.S. relations with India and Pakistan. The incoming president should build on this legacy and encourage both states to complete the reconciliation process begun after the 2001–2002 “twin peaks” crisis. Washington's role here, emphatically, should not be to insert itself into the dialogue. Doing so would only distort the incentives for both sides to arrive at the necessary accommodation. The United States, instead, should quietly encourage Islamabad and New Delhi to begin implementing the framework already agreed to in “back channel” negotiations—an objective the Indian government is already committed to for its own reasons so long as the new Pakistani regime and the army can accept what would, in fact, be Musharraf's most positive legacy. Washington should use its influence in Pakistan to persuade both of them to move forward on this.

**Foster South Asian economic integration.** The fastest way to assist the resolution of political disputes in South Asia is to knit the regional states together economically. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has already declared its intention to create a free trade zone that spans the entire subcontinent. The United States, among others, now enjoys observer status at SAARC. The next administration should use this opportunity to press especially India and Pakistan to institutionalize a more liberalized economic relationship for both commercial and strategic purposes. Pakistan's fears have been the biggest stumbling block here: its concerns about being overwhelmed by India's more dynamic economy partly underlies its reticence to move forward. More disconcerting, however, Islamabad seems to view trade

liberalization as a reward to be offered India only when New Delhi makes political concessions on other issues. This approach is self-defeating. India's superior economic and political strength permits it to flourish without access to the Pakistani market. Consequently, Islamabad's strategy only hurts itself, while failing to push New Delhi toward a different course.

The next administration, therefore, ought to utilize its good relations with both capitals to encourage greater bilateral economic links. These would also have the effect of integrating Afghanistan into the dynamic Indian economy via Pakistan, thus aiding economic growth in that war-torn nation, as well as connecting all of South Asia more closely to its natural hinterlands in Central and Southeast Asia.

Given how deep and convoluted Pakistan's problems are, the burdens associated with these tasks should not be underestimated. The complications imposed by the need for a dexterous U.S. strategy that requires securing cooperation from the army, even as it seeks to strengthen the civilian regime in Pakistan, will only make things more difficult. Implementing such a subtle approach in a noisy and forgetful American democracy is difficult in the best of times and will require other components that lie beyond the ambit of this brief, namely, enhanced engagement with India and Afghanistan. The likely consequence of failure in dealing with Islamabad, however, is that Pakistan would continue to present various threats to the United States and the international community at large. Unmitigated, these dangers would only increase the pressure on Washington to adopt alternative strategies centered on coercion in various forms—an outcome in the interests of neither Pakistan nor the United States.

Even if Islamabad were to overcome the immediate problems related to terrorism, however, the permanent transformation of Pakistan would be decades away. Consequently, the United States should be patient and satisfied in the interim merely if the trend lines in Pakistan pertaining to good governance, stable macroeconomic management, focused investments in human capital, responsible foreign and strategic policy, and temperate ideological orientation are all at least relatively positive. ■

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## RESOURCES

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**The Merits of Dehyphenation: Explaining U.S. Success in Engaging India and Pakistan**, Ashley J. Tellis (*Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2008, vol. 31, no. 4).

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