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Actually, Pakistan Is Winning Its War on Terror

With cozy ties between extremists and Islamabad on the decline, militants now face a more resolved and committed effort to eliminate them.

BY **SAMEER LALWANI**

DECEMBER 10, 2015



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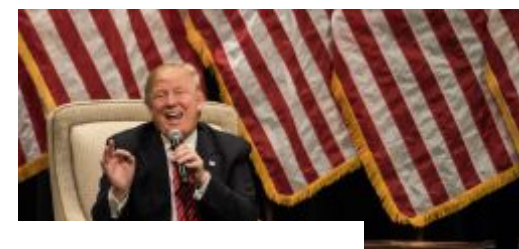
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During the separate visits of Pakistan's prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, and its chief of army staff, Gen. Raheel Sharif, to Washington in recent months, observers **dismissed** the prospect of meaningful changes in the country's security policies or in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. On the surface they may not be wrong, but in seeking major breakthroughs or transformations, incremental yet consequential choices are often overlooked.

The recent revelations that the San Bernardino shooters had **extremist ties** to Pakistan might appear to confirm the narrative that Pakistan is consumed by a downward spiral of extremist violence. But over the past year, it has quietly made some important, costly, and under-appreciated strides in its counter-militancy efforts. Individually, none are groundbreaking, but together they point in a more promising direction for Pakistani society, regional stability, and the U.S.-Pakistan relationship.

Military targeting in tribal regions

First, the Pakistani army has been targeting militant groups in tribal areas more than in the past. This is a significant shift in policy, as the army has previously been more focused on the Haqqani Network as a threat. The army has also been targeting a wider array of militant groups in the tribal areas.

Hafiz Gul Bahadur, the leader of the TTP and a longtime government tactical ally based in North Waziristan, may have only been **displaced** to Afghanistan during the early phases of the military's operation, but the Pakistani army has made his life difficult. It reportedly **targeted** him, **sidelined** him operationally from his organization, and then **eliminated** some of his remaining commanders in airstrikes last fall. Once a potential prospect for reconciliation, Khan "Sajna" Syed, a former leader of the TTP in South Waziristan, was **targeted** by an army intent on accepting only **unconditional surrenders**. Sajna was consequently **killed** in a U.S. drone strike in late November. The state has also **cracked down** on potential TTP splinter groups like **Jamaat-ul-Ahrar** and the **Shehryar Mehsud group**, both of which have recently carried out attacks against a provincial government official and a Christian church.

Quietly expanded target sets may have resulted from lessons learned, deliberate strategy, mission creep, or failed efforts to flip breakaway factions. But the result is that Pakistan is more directly targeting the Taliban.

Kinetic operations against former assets

Second, Pakistani security forces have expanded their counter-militancy operations, not only rogue, but also again adopted a strategy of

formidable Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), a sectarian militant group with strong links to the Sunni extremist political group, Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat. Over the past year, LeJ leadership — once described as “untouchable” and “invincible” — has been systematically wiped out in a series of extrajudicial killings, possibly because it was drifting toward the Islamic State.

In February, the death of Usman Saifullah Kurd — the mastermind behind attacks on hundreds of Hazaras and Shiites over the past decade — “[broke] the back” of LeJ in Balochistan. Several months later, a major police raid killed its leader, Malik Ishaq, his two sons, and 11 other militants. Other LeJ militants were captured during targeted raids based on specific intelligence in October. And a third leader, Haroon Bhatti, was arrested in late October and then killed in a staged encounter with Lahore police (effectively an extrajudicial killing) two weeks ago. As a retributive response to Ishaq’s killing, Punjab Home Minister Shuja Khanzada, a retired army colonel, was assassinated in a suicide bombing along with 16 others. Despite this, the state proved willing to stomach the consequences of the fight and showed that it is willing to take on powerful and influential groups — like LeJ — once afforded de facto protection by the Pakistani government.

A substantial amount of recent research suggests that leadership targeting can be effective and can yield security improvements under certain conditions. Security officials anticipate the elimination of first, a campaign already seen violence. Since 2012

violence. Since 2012, annual sectarian incidents and casualties are down by about

50 percent or more **nationwide** and by approximately 75 percent in **Balochistan**, where LeJ's violence has wreaked considerable havoc.

The counter-sectarian campaign could expand beyond LeJ. The Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) estimates that the state has conducted 20 major search operations that have netted nearly 100 key leaders from the militant-linked Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat. Chipping away at sectarian groups is important, because they **feed** other militant organizations like al Qaeda, TTP, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).

Denial of social space

Third, Islamabad has augmented the military's kinetic actions by denying extremist and militant groups the social space they have utilized and operated in for decades. It has begun to seriously **enforce** regulations on **hate speech**, on the misuse of **mosque loudspeakers** or **amplifiers** to prevent public incitement, and on **weapons sales**. Tempering sectarian mobilization with these tools was **not new**, but its enforcement is.

Even **independent assessments** identify progress, albeit slow, on the government's National Action Plan, which was formulated in January to crack down on terrorism. **Thousand** sectarian hatred and **successfully prosecu**

speech inciting violence. The glorification of terrorism has been **banned**. This may be producing a deterrent effect. Some observers point out that Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat has not been able to hold a conference in an urban area for the past eight months.

Religious seminaries, their **curriculum**, and **ties** to foreign organizations and funders are increasingly **scrutinized**. Dozens of unregistered or suspect seminaries have been **raided** or **forced to close**. Meetings of civilian, military, and madrassa educational board leaders also offer a path for structural reform. The Federal Investigation Agency has **exposed** millions of dollars in domestic financing of terrorism, **interdicted** some foreign financing, and enlisted help from international partners to **choke** the flow of funds to extremist organizations. The Supreme Court's **decision** to uphold the conviction of Mumtaz Qadri for the January assassination of former Punjab governor Salman Taseer sent an important signal and affirmed the right to criticize misuses of the blasphemy law (though not the law itself).

Finally, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority **prohibited** media coverage of banned organizations, specifically LeT and Jamaat-ud-Dawa, though there appears to be confusion and **bureaucratic infighting** over this judgment. Even critics of government shortcomings **acknowledge** "the space for pro-extremist mindset has gradual

Hard foreign-poli

Finally, Pakistan has also assumed tough foreign-policy stances that support its internal security national agenda. In April, the government made a decision to avoid getting roped into the conflict in Yemen. Such involvement in an almost explicitly sectarian conflict would have triggered internal divisions with Pakistan's large Shiite population and exacerbated its sectarian problem.

The decision was challenging for Pakistan to make. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states openly pressured the Sharif government to intervene — a difficult request to fend off, given their historical financial support of Pakistan through oil discounts, soft loans (like a recent one worth **\$1.5 billion**), and remittances from migrant laborers. One United Arab Emirates minister warned that Pakistan would pay a **“heavy price”** for this choice.

Pakistan's military proved critical in the decision to stay out of Yemen, despite **intense lobbying** by religious parties like Jamaat-ud-Dawa. Part of Pakistan's refusal may have been that Riyadh reportedly requested deployments of only Sunni soldiers from a military that is **estimated** to be up to 30 percent Shiite. More assertive Pakistani leaders have begun to both **privately** and **openly criticize Saudi**, Iranian, and UAE funding of religious seminaries and sectarian groups.

Shortcomings and the future

Pakistan's decision to
too valuable or too d

against former assets

against former assets like LeJ to **showball** into actions against groups like the

Haqqani Network and LeT should not hold their breath. State counter-militancy efforts are still constrained by fears of loss of control, violent retribution since LeT's military strength is **orders of magnitude** greater than **LeJ's**, potential electoral costs in the PML-N's **electoral heartland** in central Punjab, and loss of these groups' utility in achieving foreign-policy objectives in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

Even if Pakistan narrowly focuses on its sectarian militant problem, it has a long way to go. Worrisome patterns of extremism remain part of the national fabric, most recently evinced by reports that Tashfeen Malik, one of the shooters in the San Bernardino terrorist massacre, may have had **links** to radical groups in Pakistan. Sectarian **mob violence** continues, the Islamic State is feared to be **making inroads**, and many of the thousands of unregistered **madrassas** retain nontransparent financing, regressive curricula, and continue to function as terrorist recruitment centers. Additionally, the limits of the state's capabilities — or willpower — may be **exposed** in an emerging showdown at Islamabad's Lal Masjid. Maulana Abdul Aziz Ghazi — a **known** security threat who retains links to the Taliban and expresses **support** for the Islamic State — resumed delivering Friday sermons, and appears poised to **resurrect** a movement for sharia law.

The feeders for many
legitimate political p
will require **counter-**

political, and economic reforms. As noted analyst Huma Yusuf **argues**, “Pakistan’s war against violent extremism will not be won in the battlefields, but in classrooms, madressahs, mosques, the offices of bureaucrats, and at police stations.”

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