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Obama's Pakistan problem

BY SAMEER LALWANI

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During the 1980s covert campaign against the Soviets, Pakistan's General Zia ul-Haq told CIA Director William Casey that being an ally of the United States was like living on the banks of a major river — “The soil is wonderfully fertile, but every four or eight years the river changes course and you may find yourself alone in the desert.” Since then, Pakistan has remained cognizant of Zia's warning and insulated itself from fully allying with the United States.

Barack Obama's current approach to Afghanistan fundamentally depends on Pakistani cooperation to squeeze the Taliban insurgency from both sides and halt the cross-border raids that have frustrated NATO efforts. But despite surface appearances and tactical victories — like the recent elimination of a major Taliban commander, Baitullah Mehsud — it is increasingly evident that the U.S. president does not have the partner he needs or wants.

After repeated setbacks, advocates of the Afghanistan strategy partly base their optimism on the Pakistani military's recent turnabout, launching offensives on Taliban strongholds. Unfortunately, it does not appear that Pakistan's moves against the Taliban are anything more than tactical, or that the Pakistani leadership shares America's threat perceptions or strategic interests.

Nor does Mehsud's untimely demise change this picture. In the past, the Taliban have displayed surprising cohesion even after the death of senior militant commanders. In many cases, they've only been replaced by more zealous leadership.

Of the some 20 militant groups that broadly compose the “Pakistani Taliban,” the Pakistani military selectively confronts the ones that directly threaten their government. Insurgents who confine their activity to cross-border attacks on U.S. and NATO forces remain largely untouched. After Mehsud's death, it is unclear whether Pakistan will be less of a target for Taliban attacks. One thing, though, is certain: The various factions of the Pakistani Taliban will not only continue their cross-border raids on NATO troops but will likely step them up in response to the drone strikes.

Meanwhile, the Afghan Taliban that use Pakistan as a safe haven will continue to be given a pass. Pakistan considers them “strategic assets” to hedge against Indian encirclement, the Baluchi insurgency, or a rapid Western departure from the region that leaves Pakistan holding the bag.

This strategy is the product of what the Pakistanis see as limited options. Despite calls to model the success of U.S. counterinsurgency tactics, the Pakistani Army is not adopting such techniques because of the tremendous costs and tradeoffs involved. A serious counterinsurgency effort would require a force the size of the entire Pakistani Army. This poses an insurmountable obstacle since Pakistan still considers its eastern border with arch-rival India a far greater existential threat than the Taliban, and with good historical reason. While the latter can launch attacks and disrupt daily life, the former has defeated the Pakistani military in three wars and possesses the capability to capture territory and destroy the state.

Manpower requirements notwithstanding, counterinsurgency is one of the most difficult military strategies to execute. It is extremely time-, capital-, and labor-intensive — and bogs down even the most capable and sophisticated militaries in the world. It can also potentially weaken a military's conventional capabilities. Recent studies suggest that after decades of quelling insurgents in the Palestinian territories, Israeli Defense Forces were underprepared for the largely conventional fight against Hezbollah in the 2006 Lebanon war.

Public opinion also significantly influences Pakistan's strategic choices. Pakistan is a partial democracy with a vibrant independent media and an active citizenry. But the public remains distrustful of U.S. intentions and is loathe to unleash the Army on its brethren for what are seen as Western interests. Even if the public shares some threat perceptions of al Qaeda, overwhelming majorities strongly disapprove of U.S. leadership and its mission in Afghanistan, and believe the United States seeks to divide and weaken the Muslim world. Pakistani leaders also estimate NATO's presence in Afghanistan to be more destabilizing for their country.

Obama faces a strategic "Catch-22": If he increases troops in Afghanistan to demonstrate a commitment to the region, this will reinforce suspicions of a Western colonial occupation and galvanize support for the insurgency. If the Pakistani government confronts Taliban militants raiding Afghanistan, perceptions of colluding with this occupation could intensify resentment, militant recruitment, and attacks on the Pakistani state. And a destabilized Pakistan would be far more dangerous than a destabilized Afghanistan.

Strategists in Pakistan think the ruthlessness and ferocity of the Taliban, which once controlled 90 percent of Afghanistan, will outlast a hesitant NATO and a largely hapless Afghan National Army. Reports indicate they already control the south and east and are beginning to infiltrate the north. Even Americans are starting to balk at the price of a decade-long counterinsurgency effort that can cost roughly half a trillion dollars and as much as 50 casualties a month.

Pakistan's calculations won't be easy to change. In 2001, U.S. threats coerced Pakistani cooperation but today — with its dependence on Pakistan to transport up to 80 percent of its supplies for Afghanistan — the United States no longer possesses the same leverage.

Understanding that Pakistani strategic and political interests are not aligned with American ones should prompt a serious rethink of investments in the “Af-Pak” region. Obama has three options: Raise the stakes to induce real cooperation by making Pakistan a strategic and financial offer it cannot refuse, deploy another 100,000 troops or more to control the Afghan border region without Pakistani help, or forego Afghan nation-building for more limited objectives like containing al Qaeda, even if it means the Taliban retaking the country. These options are political nonstarters for now. But so long as the United States misunderstands its partnership with -Pak, its strategy in Af- will remain in jeopardy.

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