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Pakistan: In the Cauldron

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Pakistan is beset by an increasingly violent homegrown insurgency and a weak and unpopular civilian government with difficult relations with the powerful military, just as the United States is launching a new strategy in Afghanistan designed to regain military momentum and lay the groundwork for a political settlement. This strategy cannot work unless Pakistan is part of it, and so far it is not clear whether Pakistan is working in tandem with the United States or is playing along for tactical reasons. In the end, what happens with the Pakistani insurgency will have an enormous impact on U.S. interests in the region.

Dealing with insurgency: During the past year, the Pakistani military increased its action against some of the insurgents that have been brazenly challenging the authority of the state for the past three years. In May 2009, the army deployed its troops against insurgent groups that had largely taken over the Swat Valley. This was a significant move, and in strictly military terms seems to have been reasonably successful. The army's next move was against related militant groups in South Waziristan, starting in October. Here too, the army believes that it has been fairly successful. But in both cases, the civilian stabilization and rehabilitation effort that needed to follow the initial military action has been much slower. On the military front, moreover, the army has faced recurrent guerrilla attacks after it thought it had achieved control. The other manifestation of the insurgency, the increasingly prominent presence of militant groups in other parts of the country, has not drawn a military response, and it is not clear whether the government regards these as threats to the state in the same way.

Growing and spreading violence: This military action by the Pakistani Army is one reason that extremist violence in Pakistan reached record levels in 2009 for the third year in a row. Strikes have increased against both military and civilian targets. Militants often describe these attacks as retaliation against the army's actions. According to the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) annual security report, 2,586 terrorist insurgent and sectarian-related acts were recorded in 2009, resulting in at least 3,000 civilian and military deaths. These casualty levels are almost 50 percent higher than the total civilian deaths in the three-year period from 2003 until 2006, and are up almost 50 percent from 2008 levels alone. When deaths from operational clashes are included, the 2009 casualty figures jump drastically to 10,000-12,000.

The year 2008 saw the beginning of a wave of attacks on military and law enforcement targets. In 2009, the headline-grabbing attacks increasingly targeted civilians. The attacks at the Islamic University in Islamabad, the Meena Bazaar in Peshawar, and the stadium and the Moon Market in Lahore are all examples of a tactical shift among the militants. In 2009 there were 87 suicide attacks in Pakistan, a 32 percent rise from the previous year and a huge increase from the 2 attacks reported in 2002. The shift to a strategy aiming at maximizing casualties has had a huge psychological impact on the population.

Geographically, most of the attacks are concentrated in the conflict zones where the army is already engaged in active operations. In 2009 there were 1,137 attacks in the North-West Frontier Province, 792 in Balochistan, and 559 in FATA, according to the PIPS security report. Security concerns for Pakistan are not limited to the traditional areas of conflict. In 2009, 46 attacks occurred in Punjab, 30 in Sindh, 12 in Islamabad, and 5 in Pakistani-administered Kashmir.

Insurgents working together: Militant groups that had previously been operating autonomously, and at times even in opposition to one another, are apparently now cooperating. These include not only the largely Pashtun groups based in the tribal areas and the North-West Frontier Province, but also groups with a substantial presence in southern Punjab, which had traditionally focused on Kashmir. According to a report published by the Council on Foreign Relations, al Qaeda is spearheading a movement to unite various militant groups and promote cooperation between them. In addition to coordination assistance in the operations, al Qaeda has reportedly been providing Pakistani militant groups with technical training and capabilities for the attacks.

A particularly disturbing instance of reported collaboration of disparate insurgent groups was the involvement of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (or the Pakistani Taliban) in the December 30 bombing of the CIA base in Khost. Cooperation between al Qaeda and the Taliban, along with other major players including the Lashkar-e-Taiba, could have potentially grave consequences for Pakistan and the region.

Unrest in Karachi: Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and troubled for much of the past 20 years, is also participating in the current violence. According to newspaper reports, Karachi saw 256 political assassinations in the last six months of 2009 and 67 politically motivated killings in January 2010 alone. Karachi's frequent political conflicts are typically a result of the tension between the Awami National Party (ANP), representing Pashtun nationalists, and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which represents Muslims who migrated from India. Sectarian violence has afflicted the city, most recently in the bombing of a Shi'a religious procession in December 2009. The recent arrests in Karachi of Mullah Baradar, the Afghan Taliban's military chief, and several al Qaeda-linked militants are reminders that the Taliban and al Qaeda too are present in the city. Violence in Karachi has severe economic consequences. Karachi is home to the central bank, the main stock exchange, two major ports, and much of the country's industry and foreign investment.

Political maneuvering: A series of political crises have left the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government still in place, but with President Asif Ali Zardari's position weakened. The Supreme Court decided in December 2009 to overturn the 2007 National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO), which had provided immunity for Zardari and a number of other politicians from corruption charges. This could lead to the reopening of thousands of corruption cases and the prosecution of many PPP politicians. Zardari himself has immunity from prosecution as long as he remains president. However, some are attempting to challenge the legality of his presidency and reopen a Swiss investigation of corruption charges against him. On February 13, Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry challenged Zardari's appointment to a vacant seat on the Supreme Court on the grounds that he had not been vetted by the chief justice as the Constitution requires. Zardari withdrew his nomination to avoid a crisis, but both incidents highlight the continuing and deepening rift between the president and the Supreme Court.

Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani has gained prominence as Zardari has been embroiled in crises. Gilani was a relatively minor PPP politician from Punjab, and Zardari chose him to be prime minister in part because he was unlikely to prove much of a challenge to the Bhutto family's leadership of party or nation. He has been the public face of the resolution of recent political crises, prompting speculation that the next turn of the political wheel might see him replace Zardari as the effective head of government.

The major opposition figure is former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, standard-bearer of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and epic rival of Benazir Bhutto in the 1990s. Sharif has become hugely popular in Pakistan's largest province, Punjab, where his brother is chief minister, and is waiting for the moment when he could force—and win—an election. He has pressed Zardari to fulfill his undertaking to abolish the president's power to remove the prime minister and the parliament, meanwhile enshrined in Musharraf's 17th Amendment to the Pakistani Constitution. Zardari has avoided action, a position that is quite unpopular.

The army: The military remains a formidable political actor in Pakistan. Army chief General Kiyani has worked with the civilian government and does not seem inclined to bring the army back into an overt ruling position at this time. However, Zardari's relationship with the army is strained. The military has been involved in the resolution of several political crises; it seems also to have lent its weight to trimming Zardari's powers. In late November, 2009, for example, Zardari stepped down as the chairman of the

National Command Authority and passed control of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal to Prime Minister Gilani, whose relationship with the military is easier. Nawaz Sharif's relationship with the army is also difficult. For the time being, the most likely scenario is that the army will remain just offstage but ready to guide events in directions they find acceptable.

Strategic complications with the United States: The United States ships some 80 percent of its supplies and equipment for Afghanistan through Pakistan, creating an uncomfortable dependency that has been only slightly reduced by the development of alternative transit routes. President Obama's new strategy for Afghanistan, announced December 1, has raised the stakes for the United States in working with Pakistan, without whose collaboration the strategy is likely to fail. But U.S. and Pakistani objectives in Afghanistan are only partly aligned. The United States seeks a viable, non-Taliban-controlled Afghanistan; it also seeks to help Pakistan counter its own insurgent threats and strengthen its civilian political institutions. For Pakistan, and especially for the Pakistan Army, the principal security threat is India, and the priority in Afghanistan is minimizing any Indian influence. At a time when the United States is unpopular in Pakistan, the government and the army want to avoid appearing too close to Washington's efforts in Afghanistan.

The Obama administration's acknowledgment that the endgame in Afghanistan will be fundamentally political has raised the possibility of some Taliban figures becoming involved in negotiations over the future government of Afghanistan. Given Pakistan's intense interest in Afghanistan and its concerns about Indian influence there, Pakistan would want to keep itself at the center of any such negotiations. The United States hailed the arrest in Pakistan of three major Afghan Taliban figures in February 2010, and described it as a major turning point in Pakistan's willingness to confront its former clients. Those arrests, however, could also turn out to be a Pakistani signal to the Taliban not to attempt any contacts with the Karzai government in Afghanistan or with the Americans without going through Islamabad.

The economic picture: Pakistan's economy is badly stressed. Due to the increasing financial needs of the country, the IMF increased its support for Pakistan, originally marked in 2008 for \$7.6 billion, to \$11.3 billion dispersed over the next two years. The United States will be providing \$1.5 billion per year in economic assistance under the Kerry-Lugar aid bill. A portion of this will permit the United States to get back into the business of funding badly needed infrastructure, including in agriculture, energy, healthcare, education, and water management programs. The controversy over the conditions the U.S. Congress attached to this increased aid has eased, but Pakistan's leaders will be wary of anything that makes them appear too subservient to Washington.

Down the road: Politics, security, Afghanistan, and the economy are all likely to go through a rough patch in the months ahead. The priority of the United States is to develop a greater degree of strategic convergence between U.S. and Pakistani objectives and operations in Afghanistan. That will probably put the military at the center of the U.S.-Pakistan dialogue, even as the United States tries to lend its support to the continuation and strengthening of civilian government.

But the most pressing questions for Pakistan have to do with its own domestic insurgency and with the reestablishment of the authority of the state. Addressing this problem requires above all that Pakistan's civilian and military leaders work together as a team. Pakistan's badly frayed political relationships—both among the civilians and between them and the military—make this a tall order.

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