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## Weak Link in Afghanistan Strategy: Pakistan, Still Not Serious About Terrorism

by Alyssa Ayres  
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Nearly sixteen long years on, the United States still struggles with how to devise a strategy for success in Afghanistan. The Donald J. Trump administration's ongoing strategic review, according to press accounts, remains in a cycle of developing new options. Those presented so far have not earned the president's approval. It's possible to deliberate for months over the right troop levels, clearly. It is also possible to deliberate over the appropriate mix of military strategy, diplomacy, and development, especially given the reduced weight the Trump administration appears to place on the latter two. But in all honesty, it's hard to see what combination of troops, aid, and statecraft will overcome the continued problem of terrorist safe havens in Pakistan.

Pakistan's strategic location has given it a vital role in the war in Afghanistan, despite the widespread recognition by U.S. officials that it remains insufficiently focused on addressing the many terrorist groups operating from its soil. During his visit to Islamabad in April of this year, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster said, "...we have hoped that Pakistani leaders will understand that it is in their interest to go after these groups less selectively than they have in the past and the best way to pursue their interests in Afghanistan and elsewhere is through diplomacy not through the use of proxies that engage in violence."

In July, Secretary of Defense James Mattis declined to certify that Pakistan had taken “sufficient action” against the Haqqani network operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Without the certification, Pakistan cannot receive additional coalition support funds from fiscal year 2016. Secretary Mattis’s action mirrors that of former Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter last year, who declined to certify Pakistan’s “sufficient action” against the Haqqani network, thereby limiting the coalition support funds Pakistan could receive.

In the White House, the top official on the National Security Council staff managing Afghanistan, Deputy Assistant to the President Lisa Curtis, has deep expertise on Pakistan and, prior to entering the Trump administration, published widely on the country’s terrorism problem. She coauthored a major report last year that argued for strengthening conditions on assistance to Pakistan to “more effectively contain, and eventually eliminate, the terrorist threats that continue to emanate from the country” that threaten vital U.S. interests, including stabilizing Afghanistan.

A national security advisor, a secretary of defense, and a deputy assistant to the president with a clear-eyed view of the threat terrorists in Pakistan pose to U.S. interests—you would think officials and generals in Pakistan might take greater, more credible action against terrorists given the high-level concern from senior Washington policymakers.

But earlier this week, news emerged from Pakistan that the organization headed by Hafiz Saeed, an individually-designated terrorist on UN sanctions lists, has registered as a political party with the name Milli Muslim League. This group, the Lashkar-e-Taiba, has been under UN terrorist designation since 2005. In 2012, the United States issued a \$10 million reward for information leading to the arrest of Saeed, the “suspected mastermind” of the Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2008, for which not one single accused has been brought to justice in Pakistan. (Trials have been continually delayed since 2009.) The group is active in Afghanistan—President Ashraf Ghani has named it among the terrorist groups fighting against his government. The fact that despite these designations, Saeed and compatriots continue to operate unfettered in Pakistan is well known. He is presently under house arrest, but that does not seem to have curtailed his group’s activities and ambition.

How can a designated terrorist group register itself as a political party and declare ambition to contest in Pakistan’s 2018 national election? The idea that a UN- and U.S.-designated terrorist group long under international sanctions could suddenly march over to the Election Commission of Pakistan and morph into a political party is ludicrous.

The Pakistani government cannot expect that anyone will believe claims that it is sufficiently countering terrorism in their country if terrorists under well-known, longstanding international sanctions not only escape justice but shift out of the shadows to the political arena.