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Pakistan's terror problem and the demise of hope

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Unfortunately, it would most likely take a major terrorist attack in the US with links to Pakistan to force a change in current US policy—and even that is not a given

Narendra Modi's hopeful journey towards normalcy with Pakistan has now collapsed tragically into blood and recrimination. Like that of his predecessors, Modi's outreach too was rewarded by state-supported violence that stymied his rapprochement agenda.

The recent Indian reprisals against terrorist launch pads were deliberately modest in their aims and execution, intended primarily to signal to domestic, Pakistani, and international audiences that New Delhi's traditional restraint could not be taken for granted forever.

The prospect of stronger Indian responses to future Pakistani terrorism, however, naturally exacerbates international fears of war—even nuclear war—in the subcontinent. But the prophylactic to further conflict has always been clear, even if seemingly beyond reach: The Pakistan army must stop supporting terrorist groups as part of its confrontation with India.

It is sometimes argued in the West—as George Perkovich and Toby Dalton have recently done—that “India cannot reasonably expect that Pakistani authorities will be willing and able to destroy groups such as (Lashkar-e-Taiba), and simultaneously eradicate the numerous militant groups that now threaten the internal security of Pakistan more directly”.

Rawalpindi has long offered such rationalizations in response to foreign démarches (especially those by Washington), but these cannot disguise the fact that its current problems with firefighting emerge from its own continued flirtation with arson. Letting go of the terrorist groups it has spawned over the years is presently less a function of inability than it is a deliberate choice.

If the Pakistan army's reluctance to move against outfits such as the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Hizbul Mujahideen were rooted in operational overextension, these groups would not continue to enjoy the financial subsidies, targeting assistance, and operational backing—under the generally directive, but also occasionally detailed, control—of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

In fact, when the Pakistani military wanted to, it moved against internal enemies with remarkable alacrity: Recall how former President Pervez Musharraf targeted numerous sectarian groups despite the army's substantial commitments along the western border following 9/11. In other instances, Rawalpindi has used lethal covert methods to neutralize sub-state challengers with minimal consequences to public order—as long as it perceived clear benefits to its parochial interests.

If various terrorist groups and their insurgent affiliates, such as the Afghan Taliban, are protected as a matter of state policy today, it is not because the Pakistan army fears internal chaos or organizational overstretch. Rather, the “deep state” sees them as prized instruments in its irregular wars against Pakistan's neighbours and, hence, is even willing to risk the internal blowback that episodically ensues from such a strategy. This conduct, Zalmay Khalilzad recently concluded, arguably justifies Pakistan's “inclusion on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism”.

Furthermore, whatever its originating resentments may have been, Pakistani terrorism today aims to secure larger strategic objectives rather than remedy specific grievances. The Pakistani support for the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqanis, for example, is no longer about protecting Pashtun enfranchisement in Afghanistan, but ensuring the permanent geopolitical subordination of Afghanistan to Pakistan.

Similarly, the latest proxy war against India, now close to 40 years old, has only an incidental connection with the Kashmir dispute. Pakistani terrorism today is directed against the entire Indian land mass and, far from protecting people in one contested state or recovering territory

that has proven to be beyond reach even in conventional war, is intended entirely to undermine India's emergence as a great power.

Pakistan's terrorism against India, accordingly, cannot be eliminated by negotiations with either Islamabad or Rawalpindi. The former is feckless, as infructuous overtures by Indian prime ministers since I.K. Gujral have demonstrated; the latter is capable of making peace with New Delhi, but lacks the incentives to do so. It took a maverick such as Musharraf to initiate a serious effort at détente, but his successor as army chief Ashfaq Kayani's eventual repudiation of this initiative confirmed that the Pakistan army prefers a continuing low-intensity war under the protective shadow of its nuclear weapons to a permanent peace with India.

Indian policy makers have long been cognizant of this deplorable equilibrium. They have sought to maintain a semblance of normal relations with Islamabad, but this has proven difficult with repeated terrorist attacks launched from Pakistani soil. When such assaults have occurred, the ensuing diplomatic interruptions have sometimes been accompanied by threats of reprisal. But in the past, these warnings never advanced into significant retaliation simply because Indian leaders viewed further escalation as undermining their larger strategic objectives.

Sooner or later, however, a military riposte was inevitable, even from an otherwise soft state such as India. And such a reprisal would occur not because it promised a permanent solution to the problem of Pakistani terrorism—even the US war against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan has not eliminated the threat of Islamist terrorism writ large—but because doing nothing proved worse than doing something, however incomplete or unsatisfactory.

In these circumstances, only actualizing Pakistan's long-advertised "strategic shift" against terrorism can conclusively eliminate the risk of major regional war. Bilateral diplomacy seems ineffective because the most serious disputes simply lack solutions that would simultaneously satisfy the Pakistan army and the Indian state. Nor can India immunize itself by improving homeland security alone: its physical proximity, economic constraints, and institutional weaknesses combine to prevent hermetic security.

Supporting insurgencies within Pakistan, engaging in economic warfare, pursuing focused retaliation to punish Rawalpindi, or threatening major military action to induce external pressure on Pakistan then remain the only means left for neutralizing Pakistani terrorism.

New Delhi has thus far refrained from supporting violence in turbulent Pakistani locales such as Balochistan and the tribal areas as well as economic retaliation. While both these approaches may indeed offer India relatively inexpensive substitutes for force, their pain, being slow and long-drawn, is unlikely to force any significant course correction by the Pakistani military and could only incite it to double down on terrorism.

Focused retaliation is entirely plausible: The real dangers here, however, are less operational or escalatory, but political. India has the capacity to punish the Pakistani military severely and to do so through means well below the nuclear threshold, but it risks reinforcing the traditional "hyphenation" with Pakistan at a time when the strategic trajectories of the two states are completely divergent. At any rate, as Michael Krepon notes, "Modi has (now) laid down a

marker that he will not stand idly by as the usual suspects carry out attacks resulting in rising casualty counts.”

The unsettling conclusion, therefore, is that the threat of major military action—one that suffices to punish the Pakistani military but also poses risks of significant escalation—remains the most effective means available to India for inviting the kind of international censure that could force the Pakistani military to reconsider its links with jihadi terrorism.

The seriousness and permanence of this introspection will depend largely on the intensity of the demands levied by the US, along with other major powers, on Pakistan. Whenever Islamabad has been threatened by serious penalties, as was the case during both the George H.W. Bush administration and the early years of the George W. Bush era, Pakistan controlled its terrorist proxies attentively.

Slackening American compellence has, however, over time strengthened Pakistani recidivism. The onset of any crisis often results in increased American pressure on Rawalpindi—as was the case in late-September as well—only to be succeeded by a return to bribery that aggravates the problem further. It is indeed frustrating that even after suffering Pakistani duplicity on terrorism for over a decade now, successive US administrations have been unable to threaten Pakistan with anything more persuasive than the suspension of petty carrots.

Anxieties about the Pakistani state’s collapse, fears of loose Pakistani nukes, bureaucratic fissures within the US government, the continued reliance on Pakistan for counterterrorism cooperation, and the perpetual, but untenable, hope among some US policymakers that Rawalpindi may yet reform itself have all contributed to making Washington an unwilling accessory to (as well as a victim of) the Pakistani military’s persistent support of terrorism.

Unfortunately, it would most likely take a major terrorist attack in the US with links to Pakistan to force a change in current US policy—and even that is not a given. Until that moment comes however, the extant failure of US policy towards Pakistan will continue to cost the lives of American and allied soldiers as well as undermine the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

These already high costs further magnify the growing dangers emerging from Pakistan’s continued terrorism against India and its other neighbours, not to mention the larger risks to its own nascent democracy, especially at a time when its civilian leaders seem to be tiring of their military’s adventurism. That the US, the world’s greatest power and Islamabad’s biggest benefactor, seems unable to do much about these perils darkens the prospects for hope in South Asia—not Narendra Modi’s token slap against Pakistani terrorism.