MAPPING PAKISTAN’S INTERNAL DYNAMICS
Implications for State Stability and Regional Security


Essay

Pakistan and the Threat of Global Jihadism: Implications for Regional Security

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Pakistan and the Threat of Global Jihadism: Implications for Regional Security

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay traces the creation of Pakistan’s Islamic identity and examines its influence on the country’s foreign and security policy, especially through the use of Islamist groups as key levers.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The first section of this essay analyzes how Pakistan is connected to global jihadism through its ideology. Pakistan’s national narrative and identity have been built around Islam. The country’s need to explain its foundational idea as “a laboratory of Islam” for South Asia’s Muslims has led it to incorporate religion into its foreign and domestic policies. The second section then considers implications for countries in the region, especially Afghanistan, India, China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Finally, the essay concludes by discussing the challenges facing Pakistan and offers policy prescriptions for both Pakistan and other countries.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

• Ideologically motivated policies are sometimes presented as pragmatically driven and based on national security considerations. But the consistency of Pakistan’s commitment to pan-Islamism and Islamic nationalism indicates that the country is unlikely to abandon jihadism without a fundamental reorientation of its core ideology.

• While many Pakistanis might be troubled by the violent ramifications of global jihad within the country, broad sympathy in Pakistani society for jihadis remains a reality. Most Pakistanis support sharia rule, an Islamic caliphate, and an Islamic state, even if they disagree on the definition of those concepts.

• The state is willing to crush jihadi groups that engage in violence against Pakistani citizens and security personnel but has no qualms about the mobilization of jihadis that target other countries, particularly India, Afghanistan, and even the United States. The problem with this policy has been that jihadi groups do not make the distinctions made by the government and often collaborate with each other on the ground.
The shadow of global jihad has spread from the mountains of Afghanistan to the far reaches of North Africa in recent years. Pakistan is perceived as the center of jihad, and the roots of this can be traced back to the very founding idea of the country. The idea of Pakistan and its reality have tugged at each other from the time of the nation’s inception. Historically speaking, the geographic boundaries that became Pakistan in 1947 belong to an ancient land that traces its history back to the Indian civilization. At the same time, however, these boundaries signify a fairly new country borne out of a unique set of ideas. Shaped by the idea that the Muslims of India were a separate nation and, therefore, had the right to a separate homeland, Pakistan crafted a national identity to maintain its cohesiveness.

This constructed identity emphasizes religion and ideology at the expense of ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian diversity. As a result, ideological rather than pragmatic considerations drive the country’s approach to national security. Although Pakistan’s military and civil bureaucracy both originated from institutions created under the British Empire, the “ideology of Pakistan” has progressively shaped these institutions more than the professionalism that is often projected to outsiders.

The ideology of Pakistan has led to a policy of using Islamist groups as levers of Pakistan’s foreign and security policy. Over time, this policy of selectively acting against or providing safe havens to different jihadi groups created a society where these militant groups can spread their tentacles. There has also been an erosion of the writ of the Pakistani state and a decline in the capacity of state institutions, especially the law-enforcement machinery.

This essay traces the creation of Pakistan’s Islamic identity and examines its influence on the country’s foreign and security policy, especially through the use of Islamist groups as key levers. The second section then considers implications for countries in the region, especially Afghanistan, India, China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Finally, the essay concludes by discussing the challenges facing Pakistan and offers policy prescriptions for both Pakistan and other countries.

Pakistan and the Rise of Jihadism

Pakistan’s Islamic Identity and Ideological Nationalism

The desire to strengthen Pakistan’s Islamic identity and to avoid a South Asian one—identified with India—led Pakistan to turn toward the Middle East, the hub of Islam. This rotation toward Mecca to differentiate, legitimize, and strengthen Pakistan’s identity was not new, as previous sultanates and kingdoms of the subcontinent had often gained legitimacy through Mecca’s sanction. However, this twentieth century turn toward the Muslim Middle East created a study in contradictions: Pakistan has become at the same time home to moderate and tolerant Sufi South Asian Islam, a growing Wahhabi populace, and jihadism.

This contradiction has its roots in the incompletely imagined ideology and identity of Pakistan, founded on a narrow and poorly defined set of Islamic principles that sowed the seeds for Islamic extremism and religious fundamentalism, leading over time to a schism in Pakistani society.⁴ A country with a rich history of Sufi Islam that initially promoted a tolerant form of Islam became hostage to a narrow and dogmatic religious interpretation that was alien to the country. Geopolitics,
foreign funding, and policy choices made by those in power enabled the growth of this brand of Islam, ultimately leading to the current crisis. Today, the roots of Islamic fundamentalism are woven deeply into the fabric of Pakistani society, making the country a global hub of jihad.

The synthetic imposition of an ideological nationalism and religious identity also sharpened preexisting ethno-linguistic cleavages within the various provinces of Pakistan. The fact that virtually every ethnic group within Pakistan overlaps with those in neighboring countries led to an intertwining of foreign and domestic politics. Fearful that its neighbors, India and Afghanistan, may attempt to manipulate these ethnic and linguistic overlaps to instigate instability, Islamabad followed a policy of suppressing any and all expressions of ethnic or linguistic nationalism.

This perceived threat to Pakistan’s existence has been the cornerstone of its foreign policy, the rationale for the state’s continuing suppression of Pashtun and Baluch irredentism, and fuel for Sindhi, Muhajir, and Seraiki sentiments that exacerbate ethnic and linguistic divisions. The creation of an independent state of Bangladesh from East Pakistan in 1971, with support from India, still looms large in the Pakistani imagination. In fact, the events of 1971 only strengthened fears of the intentions of neighboring countries and heightened desires to secure national integrity at any cost.

This existential threat has been the driving force for Pakistan’s military, which has dominated the country since independence in 1947. At the time of independence, the military emerged as the strongest institution when Pakistan inherited one-third of the British Indian Army with less than a quarter of the requisite revenues. Instead of adjusting institutions to the nation’s capabilities and resources, weak civilian parties and leaders facilitated the development of a military-intelligence establishment that was stronger than was required or sustainable. The military thus became the supreme institution. Since the first coup in 1958, the Pakistani military has dominated and directed the course of domestic politics, foreign policy, and security strategy. The dysfunctional system that thus evolved has only deepened and exacerbated national fissures and fault lines instead of allowing them to become irrelevant.

**Pakistan’s Use of Militant Groups**

The aforementioned fear of internal breakup instigated or backed by neighboring countries, combined with a lack of resources to stand up to these antagonistic neighbors, especially India, directed Pakistan toward a military-led foreign policy that favored asymmetrical warfare. This involved the use of nonstate actors who shared the ideological nationalism and strategic vision of Pakistan’s military establishment. In the 1980s, this policy received a shot in the arm with the United States’ decision to support the mujahideen in Afghanistan in order to combat the Soviet Union. As substantial amounts of money, weapons, and fighters flowed in, Pakistan’s security establishment began setting up camps to train militants for fighting not only in Afghanistan but in Indian-held Kashmir as well.²

Today, a wide array of militant organizations operate in Pakistan with safe havens in urban and rural areas. Some of these include sectarian organizations that target minorities (Sipah-e-Sahaba), anti-India outfits (Lashkar-e-Taiba), anti-Afghanistan groups (the Haqqani network), and anti-Pakistan militants (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP). The Pakistani state

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provided safe havens to groups considered vital assets in projecting power regionally. Over time, a nexus emerged between the various militant organizations, allowing them to share operational and technical knowledge. In a number of incidents, close coordination between these groups has been witnessed. For example, during the 2009 attack on the Pakistan Army’s general headquarters in Rawalpindi, there was coordination between the TTP and its Punjabi allies, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the Punjabi Taliban. Many of the Punjab-based groups send their recruits to train in the tribal areas or in Afghanistan before they return to participate in attacks around the country.

The policy of allowing militant groups to operate on Pakistani soil proved to be disastrous. Rising militancy, coupled with a significant decline in the capacity of the state, gave these groups the ability to wreak havoc not only in Pakistan but also in India, Afghanistan, Iran, and China. For example, Faisal Shahzad, arrested for the attempted bombing of Times Square in May 2010, trained at militant camps in Waziristan. This event showcased that militant groups in Pakistan were now keen on carrying out attacks on a global level. Today, these organizations have strong bases all across the country—Karachi, South Punjab, and Quetta—not just in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

The September 11 attacks and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan proved to be a turning point in the nature of militancy in Pakistan. General Pervez Musharraf quickly severed ties with the Taliban and supported U.S. operations in Afghanistan. To give the peace process with India some traction, he put a temporary halt on the flow of militants into Indian-held Kashmir. This stance differed from April 1999, when Musharraf told a group of retired military officers that the “Taliban are my strategic reserve and I can unleash them in tens of thousands against India when I want.” By 2002, he had moved against sectarian and other militant organizations, banning groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba. However, these bans proved to be only for show, as the banned organizations and their leadership were allowed to operate under new names. These groups were still seen as allies, not threats to the Pakistani state and its vision.

As Afghan and Arab fighters fleeing from Afghanistan found refuge in the tribal areas of Pakistan, disgruntled militants from Pakistan began moving to these areas as well. The tribal areas thus emerged as a hub for regional and global militancy, and in 2002 Pakistan sent troops into FATA for the first time since independence. Nonetheless, Pakistan continued to follow a policy of differentiating between groups. While foreign terrorists with links to al Qaeda were handed over to the United States, local militants (sectarian, anti-India, and anti-Afghanistan groups) were left alone.

Over time, some of these militants built their capacity to challenge the writ of the state and inflict huge casualties on security forces in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Other groups, such as the Haqqani network, were “managed” by Pakistan’s intelligence agencies in a bid to exert influence on events in Afghanistan. This policy proved disastrous: not only did the tribal areas become a seething cauldron of global terrorism, but there was blowback for Pakistan itself. According to the

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South Asia Terrorism Portal, in Pakistan from 2003 to 2014, 19,152 civilians and 5,839 security force personnel lost their lives in terrorism-related violence.7

The creation of an ideological nationalism based on Islam allowed these radical groups to propagate their message and raise large sums of money. Further, while the coercive apparatus of the military and intelligence agencies remained strong, the local police were not provided the political support, resources, and skills required to combat these radical outfits. Matched against a poorly trained and demoralized police force, these groups developed extortion and kidnapping rackets in urban centers. They also were able to raise money through narcotics trafficking and trading smuggled goods. Thus, these militant organizations possess a sophisticated system of raising funds to support their activities.

Ethnic and sectarian divisions within the population further provided opportunities for terrorists to develop bases across Pakistan. The Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N), the ruling party in Pakistan, adopted a soft stance against militant organizations in Punjab. In 2010, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s brother and Punjab chief minister Shahbaz Sharif went so far as to say that the Taliban and PML-N were fighting for the same cause and that the Taliban should spare Punjab.8 In Karachi, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, an ethnic political party, entered into a gang war with the Awami National Party, a secular party representing Pashtuns. The result was that the TTP and its affiliates were able to establish bases in large parts of Karachi, giving the group the ability to destabilize Pakistan’s financial capital. The TTP provided support to al Qaeda in the May 2011 attack on the Pakistani naval base Mehran—one month after the killing of Osama Bin Laden—as well as in the attack on Karachi airport in June 2014.

Pakistan’s use of ideology and Islamist groups in both its domestic and foreign policy has greatly influenced the security of its neighbors, Afghanistan and India, both of which have had strained relations with Pakistan. China and Iran, too, have been affected by the growth of jihadism in Pakistan.

Regional Implications

Afghanistan

Pakistan sought strategic depth in Afghanistan through militant groups with close links to the Pakistani security establishment.9 Today, these very same groups are obtaining strategic depth using Pakistani territory to train, recruit, and spread out into the region and beyond. The mistrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the inability of both countries to control militants on either side of the Durand Line have strained ties between the neighbors. While Afghanistan alleges that Pakistan has provided sanctuary to groups such as the Haqqani network in FATA, Pakistan argues that the chief of the TTP has been given space to operate from eastern Afghanistan.

In July 2014, Pakistan launched a military operation—Operation Zarb-e-Azb—in North Waziristan, asserting that this time Pakistan would not differentiate between good and bad groups but would target all militant groups in that area. In order for this operation to succeed,

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9 “Strategic depth” is a policy envisaged by the Pakistan military to use Afghanistan as a fallback in case of invasion by India. Pakistan could retreat into Afghanistan, regroup its forces, and use Afghan soil as a base to then counter Indian forces.
Pakistan needed cooperation from Afghanistan. The two countries formed a joint working group on security, signaling that they are beginning to work together to tackle militant organizations.\textsuperscript{10} However, cross-border raids leading to the death of Pakistani soldiers once again threaten to sour relations.\textsuperscript{11}

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan will increase the challenges faced by Pakistan. In a sign that the U.S. military drawdown will last beyond 2016, the White House announced in October 2015 that 9,800 troops will remain in Afghanistan in 2016 along with their NATO counterparts. In 2017, around 5,500 troops will still be in the country as a bare bones U.S. presence. As the U.S. military footprint in the region grows lighter, more operational space will be available for militants on either side of the Durand Line, allowing them to train, plan, and carry out attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The impact of a U.S. drawdown is already visible in Afghanistan, with a rise in the rate of civilian casualties in 2014.\textsuperscript{12}

If we bear in mind recent events in Iraq, both Pakistan and Afghanistan need to work closely together to eliminate militant sanctuaries on either side of the Durand Line. This 2,640-kilometer-long and exceedingly porous border has been a bone of contention between Pakistan and Afghanistan since independence. No Afghan government, not even the Taliban, has ever accepted the Durand Line as the official boundary between the two countries. Furthermore, Pakistan sees intermittent Afghan support for Pashtun and Baluchi irredentism as a threat to national integrity and as a nefarious plan involving India and Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{13}

The space that Pakistan ceded to militant groups in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan has over the years become a no man’s land. If this territory is not reclaimed, it has the potential to lead to a regional nexus of various jihadi groups—the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, the TTP, and others—into one grouping. The swiftness with which the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) gained control of large parts of Iraq provides a salient example. ISIS operated in border areas of Iraq and Syria, where the writ of both states was weak, and used this area as a base for launching overwhelming attacks against Iraqi forces.

The border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan represents an area where the rule of law is similarly weak—re-establishing the writ of the state on either side of the border will be critical in defeating militant organizations with bases in the region. Moreover, the decision by a Pakistani jihadi group, Tehreek-e-Khilafat, to claim allegiance to ISIS chief Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi’s caliphate has made the threat of regional cooperation between terrorist groups seeking to undermine Afghanistan very real and the need to counteract these associations more urgent.\textsuperscript{14}

The struggle for Pakistan’s soul, however, is internal, not external. Pakistan is increasingly threatened by homegrown militant elements as well as foreign terrorist groups to whom it has provided sanctuary and training. There is a real and clear danger that after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan may collapse into what analysts have often feared: a country of 190 million


people with an unstable polity, numerous jihadi groups, and a nuclear arsenal. As things stand, the Great Game which set the tone for the great rivalry of the nineteenth century between the British and the Russian empires has been replaced by the struggle between jihadism and democracy. This struggle is setting the tone for Afghanistan and increasingly Pakistan. Afghanistan once provided a buffer zone between the two great empires of the world, but now the region on either side of the Durand Line has become a buffer zone keeping the spillover of militancy from Pakistan into India at low levels.

**India**

Pakistan’s relations with India have been marred by four inconclusive wars and a history of government-sanctioned militant activity in Kashmir. As mentioned earlier, the war on terrorism supposedly induced Pakistan, under Musharraf, to temper anti-India militant groups in order to provide some traction to the stunted peace process with India. However, because the Pakistani government did not completely disavow the policy of supporting these groups, they were allowed to base their operations in Pakistan and sustain their anti-India activities. As a result, terrorist incidents have risen in India, including the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Yet despite this trend, India to some extent has been shielded from the volatility and insecurity that have engulfed Pakistan and Afghanistan. India’s involvement in Afghanistan is tied to the perspective that a stable Afghanistan is a prerequisite to India’s own stability and security.

Since the trade liberalization reforms of the early 1990s, India has progressed on a path of economic growth to become an emerging global power and the world’s third-largest economy, even as the country’s growth has slowed down in the last couple of years. In this crucial period, India needs a stable South Asia and especially a stable Pakistan. If Pakistan were to become a failed state, the implications for India’s growth would be ominous. Another incident like the 2008 Mumbai attacks could lead to a direct confrontation between the two nuclear-armed powers, making it imperative that Pakistan deal with anti-India militant groups. However, the Pakistan military and intelligence agencies have yet to launch a concerted operation against these groups despite the implications for relations with India and, on a larger scale, regional security and cooperation.

**Iran**

The rise of militant organizations in Pakistan also threatens ties between Pakistan and Iran. Pakistan’s Baluchistan Province shares a 909-kilometer border with Iranian Baluchistan. Over the years, Pakistan has allowed its territory to be used for a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This helped provide funding and ideological material for various militant groups, Islamist organizations, and madaris (Islamic schools). Many of these groups are based in Pakistan but operate in other countries. For example, Jundullah, a Sunni militant organization focused on fighting Iran, developed close ties with militant groups operating in Pakistan.

In recent years, relations between Iran and Pakistan have suffered because of the actions of these groups and Pakistan’s reluctance or inability to act against them. In February 2014 a Sunni militant group kidnapped five Iranian border guards and took them into Pakistani territory. Iran threatened to send forces into Pakistan to free the guards if Islamabad was unable to secure their release.15 On June 9, 2014, an attack by militants killed 23 people, many of them Shia.

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pilgrims returning from Iran.\(^6\) Given the existing instability on its borders with Iraq and Syria, Iran’s interests lie in maintaining a stable and secure border with Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, the instability in those countries and their inability to control militant groups will continue to force Iran to take tougher stances against Pakistan, which may result in a larger conflict in the future.

**Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia is one of Pakistan’s closest allies, continually providing economic aid to bolster its chronically ill economy. However, this closeness comes at a cost, as Saudi-based charities and groups have funded religious seminaries that espouse an extremely narrow version of Islam. During the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad, a large number of madaris were set up along the Afghan-Pakistan border, where a Wahhabi-Salafi version of Islam was taught. The number of madaris that take a harsh view of unbelievers and apostates later rose to 11,221 in 2005, up from the 2000 figure of 6,761. This means that in a period of five years that included the terrorist attack of September 11, the number of apostatizing seminaries doubled in Pakistan. Charities run by Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamaat-ud-Dawa were prominent in relief efforts after a massive earthquake in the north of the country in 2005 and floods in the south in 2010. The proliferation of such charitable organizations across Pakistan bolsters the ideological foundations of militant organizations and continues to churn out a steady line of recruits. Keen to maintain close ties with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has largely turned a blind eye to such groups.

In order to preserve its access to Saudi largesse, Pakistan, instead of eliminating its jihadi groups, may decide to use them to further Saudi goals vis-à-vis Iran as well as continue to support those jihadi groups that operate in India and Afghanistan. The Saudis support Sunni militants in an effort to ensure that nuclear-armed Pakistan remains close to the Arab monarchy in its competition with Iran for influence in the Middle East. The recent Saudi gift of $1.5 billion raised eyebrows in Pakistan and led to fears that the country was once again taking money in return for supporting a proxy conflict.\(^7\)

**China**

China is one of Pakistan’s oldest allies in the region. Partly owing to their contentious relations with India, the two countries have a close friendship that has produced cooperation in many arenas. China has provided aid and technical assistance for major infrastructure development within Pakistan, including the Gwadar port and Karakoram Highway projects. Apart from such investment in infrastructure, China has also provided military assistance, especially in the nuclear arena.

For China, Pakistan has been an important ally in the Muslim world. Beijing hoped that ties with Pakistan would ensure that China would not have any problems with its own Muslim populace. The Xinjiang region is home to a large Uighur Muslim population, and there has been continual violence in the last two decades, with militant groups taking up arms against the Chinese state. Ever since the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, Uighurs have trained and lived in Pakistan. In earlier decades, the Pakistani state ensured that these Uighurs did not return to Chinese territory.


In recent years, however, there has been a rise in Uighur militants trained in Pakistan’s tribal areas who have returned to Xinjiang. This reflects either Pakistan’s inability or unwillingness to control its own borders.

This ineffective border control has coincided with a steady rise in kidnappings and killings of Chinese workers in Pakistan, which threatens important infrastructural projects that are critical for Pakistan’s own development. While relations between the two countries are still friendly, Pakistan’s inability to control what happens within its own territory, especially with respect to groups targeting China, has resulted in a slow decline in Chinese support. In the economic arena, proposed regional cooperation projects, such as the maritime Silk Road, now seem to bypass Pakistan because of Chinese fears that continued instability in Pakistan could make the country unviable as an economic partner.18

For China, Pakistan is becoming a low-cost secondary deterrent vis-à-vis India, similar to North Korea vis-à-vis South Korea and Japan. While continuing to maintain close ties and offer economic and military aid, China rarely goes out of its way to help Pakistan in any conflict with India. Pakistan’s growing internal problems raise the question of whether China might at some point see benefits from allying with India on certain issues, while still keeping Pakistan as a secondary deterrent. Will Beijing apply more pressure on Islamabad to clamp down on the jihadi groups operating within Pakistan and Afghanistan? Will China use its close ties with Pakistan to steer the country toward adopting a more stringent policy against all militant groups and abandoning the perception of some groups as assets?

Conclusions

Pakistan’s national identity is built on Islam. Pakistani leaders may not share the views of jihadi hardliners about imposing sharia (Islamic law), but they cannot be seen as suppressing Islam in an Islamic country. This dilemma serves as an advantage for Islamists of all varieties, including the jihadis. To complicate matters further, the Pakistani deep state (comprising the country’s military and intelligence services) has used jihadism for leverage in both domestic and foreign policies. At home, the Islamists have served as a check on the influence of secularists who might draw the country closer to India, while in Afghanistan and Kashmir they have assisted Pakistan in exercising power through asymmetrical warfare.

Pakistan is currently engaged in an internal struggle for its soul. To rid the nation of jihadis, it must consider the plausibility of a national identity other than one based on Islam. An overwhelming majority of Pakistanis are Muslims, and they practice their faith in varying degrees of piety. But if the state continues to insist on describing its history solely in religious terms, denying the pre-Islamic culture of various ethnic groups and a shared history with neighboring states, Pakistan’s national ideology will continue to advance the goals of radical Islamists. Notwithstanding the government’s stated policies, Pakistan’s milieu would continue to be conducive as a haven for global jihadism.

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Challenges

Over the years, Pakistan has become jihad central. Training camps nestled in the ungoverned North Waziristan region increasingly prepare and equip militants to wage war in different regions of the world. Foreign fighters trained in Pakistan have reportedly fought in Syria, Iraq, China’s Xinjiang region, and other conflict-ridden areas. However, beyond training camps, these organizations are developing close relations and cooperation for strategic purposes, as evidenced by the June 2014 attack on the Karachi airport, which was orchestrated by the TTP in association with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Such collaborations have the potential to create instability across the entire region, extending from Central Asia, Xinjiang, and Kashmir all the way to Syria.

At the same time, there has been a rapid erosion of the Pakistani state’s authority within its territory and a decline in the capacity of government institutions. The inability of the state to enforce its laws, particularly those responsible for keeping the country secure, has only increased in recent years. New operations by the Pakistani military—for example, in North Waziristan—are steps in the right direction, but these actions will not be enough as the hydra-headed monster of jihadist groups becomes more pervasive and gains traction with smaller regional militant outfits. Further, these operations tend to target only those terrorist groups that attack the Pakistani state. As discussed earlier, this is because the military and intelligence community continue to view certain groups as strategically valuable to Pakistan.

This approach, however, can produce only limited results, and a very real possibility for Pakistan is increased violence and instability in tribal areas. The near absence of the state’s writ on either side of the Durand Line will only add to the political turmoil and humanitarian disasters engulfing the region as militant organizations with transnational jihadist goals could fill the resultant vacuum. The ongoing military operation in North Waziristan targets militants that have made the region a safe haven. This operation needs to be complemented by efforts to rebuild local governing institutions. Absent any government presence, the region will continue to remain host to a wide range of militant organizations with local, regional, and global agendas.

Furthermore, increased instability in Pakistan’s tribal areas will provide an incentive for anti-Pakistan terrorist groups such as Tehreek-e-Khilafat and the TTP to align with regional terror networks such as the IMU or ISIS. As the power-projection capabilities of these groups increase, the stability of the region will be more and more dependent on not just Pakistan and Afghanistan but also regional countries like China, Russia, India, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The emergence of ISIS and its challenge to the very existence of modern Iraq are evidence of the rising tide of transnational jihad. The success of ISIS will encourage like-minded militant organizations in Pakistan to try to expand the theater of jihad from Syria to Pakistan. Militants affiliated with the Afghan Taliban will be able to project power into Afghanistan, especially as that country recovers from a divisive election. Chinese Uighur militants in the area will be able to carry out deadly attacks in China’s Xinjiang region. Groups such as the IMU and Jundullah will increase their attacks in Central Asia and Iran, respectively. In short, a deteriorating situation in the tribal belt could spill over into the entire region.

Another challenge faced by Pakistan is increased militant activity within its heartland and most populous area: South Punjab. This region is the primary recruitment ground not only for the Pakistan Army but also for jihadi groups. As a result, a future scenario where militants and security personnel are from the same village or family cannot be precluded and will have
dangerous repercussions for Pakistan. Militants operating in South Punjab belong mainly to anti-India and sectarian organizations. As their capacity grows, these groups could elevate the level of violence in Indian-held Kashmir and potentially carry out deadly attacks in mainland India. The Mumbai attacks are proof that such a scenario can increase hostilities between the two nuclear powers. These militant groups thus could undermine any normalization of relations between India and Pakistan.

The Pakistani military has historically relied on such organizations to project power, and increased hostilities could once again lead to the military’s outright support of anti-India militant groups. If such a situation were to occur, Pakistan would be unable to effectively deal with the plethora of militant organizations within its territory. This failure would develop into a self-perpetuating cycle that strengthens militant organizations, further weakens the state, and causes increased levels of violence and turmoil in the region.

Events in the Swat Valley prior to the 2009 military operation are proof of how quickly militants can fill the vacuum left by the state. Once local Islamist movements were given space to establish a foothold, they implemented their own brand of sharia, shutting down schools, conducting public executions, and attracting thousands of radicals to the valley. In the end, the military was forced to step in, displace hundreds of thousands of people, and fight a bloody battle against these radicals. Events in the valley provide a small case study of the reinforcing cycle bred by lack of governance and increased militancy.

Political turmoil and instability on a national level will also damage Pakistan’s already beleaguered economy. International investors are reluctant to invest in a country that is in the news on account of terrorist attacks and violence. Domestic entrepreneurs, too, have chosen to take their capital out of Pakistan for several years. Moreover, industrial output is adversely affected by frequent closure of manufacturing units, limiting the country’s export potential as well as tax collection. Already, Pakistan’s foreign exchange reserves have been consistently low and its tax-GDP ratio is among the lowest in the world. In addition, such volatility will result in a weakening of the civilian government’s mandate, which will only skew the civil-military relationship further. The rise of terrorist organizations that now challenge the military means that any future military intervention will incite opposition not only from pro-democracy forces but from militant groups as well. A military intervention would thus lead to increased violence and instability, further emboldening militants and allowing them to propagate their own form of sharia rule. During the Musharraf era, a number of such peace deals were signed with militant organizations, with each deal leading to increased violence. To restore stability, the military could decide to once again co-opt certain militant organizations, thereby increasing their role in the country. This action would not only wipe out the small but not insignificant democratic gains made by Pakistan since 2008 but also wash away any gains made against the spread of militant organizations and their views in the country.

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19 There were three main peace deals signed. The first peace deal between the TTP and the government of Pakistan was signed in April 2004 and is referred to as the Shakai peace agreement. It was signed with then TTP commander Nek Muhammad and came after the government launched a military operation in March 2004 to pressure Muhammad to cease supporting foreign militants. As part of the deal, the government agreed to release Taliban prisoners and pay compensation for property damage. The deal, however, collapsed by June 2004. The next peace deal was signed in February 2005 and is known as the Sarrogha peace deal. The government again compensated the TTP for property damage and loss of lives and hoped to contain further Taliban expansion into Pakistani territory. The deal collapsed within a few months. The next deal was signed in May 2008 between the provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the TTP and listed a sixteen-point agreement. However, this third deal collapsed as soon as it was signed as the Taliban refused to surrender arms and renewed attacks against government installations and security forces.
The Need for a Regional Strategy

As the Pakistani military belatedly goes after terrorist organizations in North Waziristan, developing a regional strategy for collectively targeting these groups is essential. The porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan means that action must be taken on both sides of the border for efforts to eliminate militant organizations to succeed. Furthermore, the Pakistani military must realize that the use of proxies in any shape or form is a bad policy in the long run. A regional agreement recognizing that militant organizations pose a threat to the security and stability of all regional actors is vital to ensure the long-term success of operations against these groups. Increasing levels of violence and efforts by militant organizations to widen their operational terrain pose a significant threat to both Pakistan and the region.

To ensure that such a scenario does not play out, Pakistan’s security and political establishments must work together to blunt and permanently disable the capacity of militant organizations. It is also in the interest of regional and global states to support Pakistan as it tries to rein in militants. This support should include not only military aid but also training and the provision of equipment for Pakistan’s underfunded and demoralized police force.

Overall, a comprehensive strategy that takes into account the interests of all regional states and does not rely solely on the military option is needed. Pakistan has a key role to play in such a strategy, and regional and global powers must also assist in pushing the country toward tackling militancy. Pakistan’s security establishment and policymakers must recognize that militant organizations are not a suitable means to achieving national goals and furthering foreign policy. Over the decades, these groups have grown extremely strong and established deep roots within Pakistani society. To uproot them will be painful and require time, but with the region and the entire Muslim world in flux, it is imperative that Pakistan move in the right direction quickly.

In the years to come, the extent of radicalization within Pakistan’s armed forces will remain unknown. Although there have been numerous instances of military officers cooperating with jihadists or deserting their service to join jihadist ranks, the Pakistan military tends to hold back information on the matter, making it difficult to assess the extent of this problem. Incidents such as the attacks on the Mehran naval station in 2011 and the Kamra airbase in 2012 and the foiled attempt by al Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent to take over a navy frigate in Karachi harbor in 2014 point to the persistence of jihadi influence within the ranks of the armed forces.

As U.S. and NATO forces withdraw from Afghanistan, it is unlikely that Pakistan will give up its decades-long pursuit of paramountcy over that country. Faced with international pressure as well as growing threats from the TTP, Pakistan has cleared out the known jihadist sanctuaries in North Waziristan, which has deprived Afghan groups such as the Haqqani network of their base of operations. But Pakistan has neither acted against nor militarily confronted the Afghan Taliban leaders, and the Haqqani network is believed to have relocated to other parts of FATA. Pakistan’s policy in the immediate future will be to engage with the government of Afghanistan and the United States, with the stated objective of negotiating a settlement with the Afghan Taliban. At the same time, Pakistan will continue to try to militarily change the situation on the ground in Afghanistan in an effort to force the world to deal with de facto Taliban control of parts of the country as fait accompli. In Islamabad’s view, this tactic could enable Pakistan to determine the final terms of an Afghan settlement, resulting in India’s exclusion from Afghanistan and the country being acknowledged as Pakistan’s sphere of influence.