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Why Pakistan must change its priorities

US officials must emphasise that military support for extremists is harmful to Pakistan itself, not just to US interests in the region



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A report this week from the London School of Economics suggests that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) not only funds [Taliban](#) fighters in [Afghanistan](#), but is officially represented on the militant movement's leadership council. Many within the Pakistani military remain convinced that supporting Islamist groups helps to expand and secure the country's regional interests. The extremist groups Pakistan once nurtured for its security, however, may ultimately prove to be the instruments of its demise.

The LSE report, based on interviews with Taliban commanders, former senior Taliban ministers, and western and Afghan security officials, confirms what has long been an open secret. After the 11 September terror attacks, then president Pervez Musharraf and his military corps commanders decided to ally openly with the Bush administration in the "war on terror" and preserve their proxy assets as a hedge against Indian influence.

That policy was vividly illustrated last February, when the ISI seized [Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar](#), one of the Afghan Taliban's top field commanders and the second in command behind the group's founder, Mullah Muhammad Omar. The ISI also captured two of the Taliban's shadow governors who operated parallel governments in two Afghan provinces. In a limited tactical sense, the abductions were a success – US leaders pointed to a clear sign of progress in the nearly decade-long campaign and commanders in the field will gain valuable human intelligence to capture more insurgents.

The arrests, however, dealt neither a major blow to the Afghan Taliban network, nor represented a "new level of co-operation" between American and Pakistani forces in rooting out extremism. Furthermore, Pakistan refused to extradite the apprehended Taliban to Washington. And according to former UN envoy Kai Eide, at the time of his arrest, Mullah Baradar was in communication with the Afghan government, a sign that Pakistan may have sought to [thwart substantive peace talks](#).

The Baradar episode reflects the piecemeal co-operation Islamabad has provided in the post-9/11 era to the US. A substantive commitment to US goals will require Pakistan to undertake a significant shift in its strategic priorities – which will be difficult.

Since the country's inception in 1947, the Pakistani military (not the Pakistani people) has apparently believed that its country's very existence depends on supporting violent, extremist groups, not strictly for ideological reasons, but as a means to expand and secure its regional interests. Aside from [sponsoring Kashmiri insurrection groups since 1989](#), the Pakistani military infiltrated Pashtun guerrillas into Indian-held Kashmir in 1947, triggering the first Indo-Pakistan war. The Pakistani military once again attempted to annex Indian-held Kashmir in 1965, setting off the second Indo-Pakistan war. And the military infiltrated regular troops into Kargil in 1999, generating an

international crisis in a now nuclear-armed subcontinent.

Since 9/11, the Pakistani government has claimed that its military is too ill-equipped and poorly-trained to effectively combat its internal guerrilla insurgency. That may be true, but it's also clear that the militancy plaguing the region is a byproduct of the Pakistani military's self-defeating strategic ambitions. Getting Pakistan to modify its policies will be difficult, since many of the extremists it currently assists have been nurtured by the military for more than 30 years.

Today, Pakistan's frontier region along the Afghan border stands fully Talibanised. In strategically located areas of the north, the military continually cedes the state's sovereignty to militants imposing their apocryphal interpretation of sharia law. These events must be understood as the latest in a long list of damaging strategic blunders sponsored by the Pakistani military.

In recent months, highly co-ordinated suicide bombings and explosions have rocked the city of Lahore, in the heart of Punjab province. Such bold attacks, some against the homes of Pakistani air force captains and police officials, represent the extent to which militants have turned against the state. The costs of such calamitous policies are self-evident, as the insurgency Pakistan spawned has morphed into a monster that it is unable to control.

In this respect, US officials and commentators have focused too heavily on how the clash of competing strategic interests between Islamabad and Washington impacts US interests in Afghanistan. But in order to convince Pakistan to end its long-standing assistance to militants, US leaders must underscore to their Pakistani counterparts that unless they radically alter their policies, their country will continue to be slammed by a heavy dose of cosmic blowback as the militants they support turn against the state.

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