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## **Isn't It Possible that Our Military Operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan Are Actually Destabilizing Pakistan?**

**Posted by Eric Martin**

There is widely accepted (though largely unexamined) conventional wisdom in US national security circles which holds that our military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan are serving to stabilize the Pakistani state. Or, as it is more commonly construed, that the withdrawal of a large portion of our armed forces, and recalibration of our strategic objectives, would destabilize Pakistan and, as a result, put that country's nuclear arsenal in jeopardy of being seized by militant groups.

What's odd is that this presumed dynamic runs counter to what are the most common effects of wars, generally speaking. To state a series of truisms, wars have a tendency to destabilize regions, breed conflict, radicalize populations, empower warlords and militants, create huge refugee flows, give impetus to small arms proliferation that can perpetuate conflict, disrupt society's day-to-day ongoings and give rise to myriad other maladies that sow turmoil, rather than stability.



So why would our war be having an opposite, beneficial impact on the stability of Pakistan? The short answer is, it isn't. One would be hard-pressed to argue that Pakistan is more stable now, than when we first invaded Afghanistan. The reasons are manifold.

Our continued military operations targeting a highly valued proxy of Pakistan's national security state (the Taliban), while shifting the balance of influence in Afghanistan away from Pakistan and toward a more India-friendly regime (Karzai's), is creating real divisions, anxiety and conflict within Pakistan. That is true in terms of its political/military elites, as well as with smaller indigenous factions and groups becoming more radicalized and militarized in response to crackdowns and a perceived loss of sovereignty in the face of US demands.

Along these lines, we have been continuously pressuring Pakistani political leaders to cooperate with our goals and policy objectives, which have included both allowing us to strike individuals/groups on Pakistani soil, as well as to encourage the Pakistani military to undertake campaigns to root out various home-grown and foreign militant groups. While these types of controversial, fraught policies would be a hard sell to a Pakistani public struggling with inequality and economic stagnation under even ideal circumstances, that these policies are seen as originating with the US government at a time when America is wildly unpopular, and our "interference" is viewed with the most nefarious assumptions, makes them political poison.

To sum it up, our military operations are roiling Pakistan's elites, giving rise to more anti-Americanism and radicalizing/mobilizing militant groups to act against the Pakistani state. Not to mention, greatly straining US/Pakistani relations. That's not exactly an stability cocktail.

Nevertheless, there is a commonly held assumption that should we withdraw our forces, Pakistan would be further destabilized (without acknowledging the potential ameliorative effects) - with a particular emphasis on the possibility that Pakistani militants would use Afghanistan as a redoubt from which to wage war on the Pakistani state and, according to those warning of dire consequences, possibly overrun state facilities and seize nuclear material.

Joshua Rovner and Austin Long do an excellent job of puncturing this and other "strategic myths" commonplace in arguments for continuing the war in Afghanistan as it currently comprised. Here is a sample:

If the Afghan Taliban succeeded in retaking part or all of Afghanistan, it would risk losing ISI support if it offered a substantial sanctuary to Pakistan's enemies. It is possible that some members of the Pakistani groups might find shelter there, but the Afghan militants would have a strong incentive to ensure that their numbers remained low enough to be plausibly deniable to the ISI. And even if the Afghan militants are foolish enough to grant safe haven to substantial numbers of Pakistani militants,

the protection they offer will be qualitatively different from the sanctuary currently enjoyed by Afghan militants in Pakistan. The sanctuary in Pakistan derives from the existence of a Pakistani state and, more importantly, a nuclear-armed Pakistani military. Attacking Afghan militants on Pakistani soil without permission would be an act of war. Moreover, the United States receives Pakistan's help with intelligence collection along the border region and elsewhere. This means U.S. officials have large incentives to negotiate with the government before conducting operations in Pakistan. Because of the significant risks involved, the United States usually reserves unilateral actions for extraordinary cases...Drone strikes are only allowed in certain areas and ground force operations are apparently not allowed (or are so covert as to be invisible).

Paradoxically, Afghan militants have a fairly robust sanctuary from U.S. forces only because of the mixed interests of America's ally. In contrast, who would stop the Pakistani military from acting in Afghanistan if its proxies harbored substantial numbers of Pakistani militants? If the United States withdrew from Afghanistan and the Kabul government collapsed, the answer is nobody. Pakistan could take covert or overt military action at will or could find new proxies. Indeed, the Taliban was created by ISI when its old proxies proved unable to secure Afghanistan. The fact that ISI created the Taliban provides yet another reason to believe that few if any of the Afghan proxies of the ISI would shelter large numbers of Pakistan's enemies. To do so would put them between the devil and the deep blue sea, with the Pakistani military playing the part of the sea and the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras of Afghanistan (the old Northern Alliance) in the role of the devil. These latter groups fought the Taliban before September 11, 2001, reportedly with aid from Russia, Iran, and India. They would certainly fight on after a U.S. withdrawal in much the same way. Only ISI support enabled the Afghan Taliban to succeed in the 1990s; if Pakistan was actually fighting against them, they would be in serious trouble.

Right, and we could and would likely aid Pakistan in its targeting of those militant groups even if we didn't have 100K troops undertaking a nation building exercise in Afghanistan. The Taliban tail is just not capable of wagging the dog, and the Pakistani government knows it. That is why that government continues to support those same Afghan Taliban factions that allegedly pose such a serious threat to Pakistan and that we are, ostensibly, protecting Pakistan from. Maybe they know something we don't?

Fear of destabilizing Pakistan by the withdrawal of our armed forces from the region should not be a basis for our continued military operations - at least not in their current incarnation in terms of size and strategic objectives. Speaking of which, Rovner and Long also have some very smart suggestions for how to scale back our mission to a more sustainable, efficient posture that serves our core interests, with less negative impact on the region.

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