

Pakistan, the Taliban and Australia

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Introduction

Christopher Snedden of Deakin University writes that on the basis of his record, Pakistan's new president, Asif Zardari, has neither the skills nor the aspiration to effectively address Pakistan's deep-rooted and threatening problems. With more than a thousand Australian troops in neighbouring Afghanistan, Snedden argues that "there also appears to be little that Australia can do to encourage or help Pakistan to confront the Taliban with greater effectiveness." "One serious option, therefore," he concludes, "is for foreign governments and their forces to engage the Afghan Taliban in dialogue in order to try to understand its point of view, to attempt to influence and moderate it, and to engage it in a political process. While this may be unpalatable, it is practical and not harmful to non-combatants. It could also assist Pakistan, and it would be playing to one of the West's strengths."

Essay: Pakistan, the Taliban and Australia

Pakistan faces a wide range of serious and urgent economic, social and diplomatic problems. These include:

- high food prices coupled with current shortages of grains, high fuel prices, rampant inflation, a collapsing stock market and balance of payments issues exacerbated by a declining rupee;
- shortages of electricity, with a daily national shortfall of some 2-2,500 megawatts;
- insurgencies by Islamist Taliban elements in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and associated terrorist attacks, with military intervention to deal with severe problems in Swat District and in the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA);
- sectarian issues between Sunnis and Shias, including in FATA's Kurram Agency where up to six Sunni tribes are trying to obliterate the Shia Turi tribe;

- shortages of water for drinking, irrigation and electricity generation;
- a poor relationship with Afghanistan, strong pressure from the United States to do more in the Global War on Terror, and a difficult relationship with India, with Pakistani accusations of Indian involvement with Baluchi separatists;
- high levels of poverty and illiteracy, coupled with about eight per cent unemployment or substantial under-employment; and,
- honour killings of women by tribal elements.

Yet Pakistan's leaders have been distracted from dealing with these problems by some major political issues. While these issues have little direct impact on Australia, Canberra needs a strong Pakistan in order to create a strong Afghanistan, where 1,000 Australian Army and Air Force personnel are trying to suppress the Taliban and help nation-building. There is little that Australia can do to aid Pakistan directly. It may be time, therefore, for coalition forces in Afghanistan to consider dialogue with the Taliban. This would be a more effective and less arrogant way to deal with this powerful phenomenon within Afghanistan and Pakistan that has proven difficult to deter.

Politics in Pakistan: Distractions and Rivalry

Pakistani politicians have been heavily distracted by a number of political issues since the February elections that saw civilians effectively regain power from the military. No party won a majority of the 342 seats contested at this election. Consequently, Asif Zardari's Pakistan People's Party (PPP; 124 seats) and Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) faction (PML (N); 91 seats) formed a coalition government. The PML (N) later withdrew its ministers due to Sharif's frustration with Zardari's stalling on the first issue that has been distracting Pakistan's politicians—and continues to distract them: the restoration of the Supreme Court judges sacked by General Musharraf last November (discussed below). The second distraction was removing Musharraf from the presidency. Zardari and Sharif displayed a single-minded desire to do this, with Sharif appearing to be strongly motivated by revenge. On 18 August, Musharraf obliged by meekly resigning, possibly to avoid losing his pension benefits should impeachment or any later legal action be successful. After dispatching General (Rtd.) Musharraf, the PPP-PML (N)'s anti-Musharraf alliance not surprisingly quickly disintegrated. Increasingly, both parties and their leaders have become—and will continue to become—the ideological and political rivals that they always have been. Pakistani politicians then confronted their third distraction: the need to elect a new president. On 6 September, Asif Zardari won a conclusive victory in the presidential election. Benazir Bhutto's widower received 481 of 678 votes cast, or 71 per cent; he won in all provinces except Punjab, where Sharif is powerful; his victory margin exceeded expectations, as the PPP had hoped to get 450 votes.

With Zardari's election as president, this issue is now seemingly resolved. I say 'seemingly' as it is unlikely that the PML (N) will 'bury the hatchet' of political rivalry and unequivocally accept Zardari's presidency—unless Zardari chooses to act as a ceremonial president (as his PML (N) presidential rival and former chief justice, Saeeduzzaman Siddiqui, had intended to). This is unlikely. Zardari is ambitious and the presidency enables him to control appointments and agendas, including those seeking to investigate him or his opponents (including Sharif) for alleged corruption. As the PML (N) has already discovered over the issue of the judges' restoration, Zardari is a charming, clever but duplicitous manipulator. But now he is triply powerful. First, he heads the largest party in the National Assembly. It is in power federally; it is very strong in all provinces, except Punjab (although it has a significant presence there as well). Second, Zardari heads the nation, is titular commander of the armed forces replete with nuclear weapons, and he appoints provincial governors. Third, 'his' prime minister, Raza Yousaf Gilani, on whose advice Zardari is

supposed to act as president, is beholden to Zardari as the PPP's effective leader. Hence, the PML (N) and other parties will be wary of him, particularly as Zardari has a discretionary constitutional power under Section 58: 2 (b) to dissolve the National Assembly. Any dismissal must be verified by the Supreme Court, but, as president, Zardari also appoints the chief justice. This constitutional power—which many past presidents have abused—allows Zardari to call an election at a time of his choosing.

Despite their mutual suspicion and mistrust, we are likely to see Asif Zardari and Nawaz Sharif continue both to cooperate and be rivals—depending on the issue. These two are Pakistan's most ambitious and high profile politicians. No third figure has their national standing, reputation or political backing. Their rivalry will play out federally, where Zardari will use his presidency to protect himself, to support the PPP Government, and to advance his party's interests. Sharif will use the PML (N)'s numbers to support the federal PPP government—or to cause it problems. Punjab will be a second front—but in reverse. It is Pakistan's most populous province in which Nawaz Sharif's brother, Shahbaz, leads a PML (N) government of 170 seats. However, it requires the PPP's support of 107 seats to maintain control of the 371-seat assembly. Nevertheless, some disenchanted PML (N) members want the PPP to withdraw from this coalition, as the PML (N) withdrew from the federal coalition. At this stage, however, in order to continue governing in the constituencies where they are respectively the most popular party, both the PPP and the PML (N)—and their respective leaders—need each other.

Meanwhile the third major party in Pakistan, the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid) faction (PML (Q)), will become increasingly important both to placate the big two and as receivers of their largesse in exchange for its support. Once known as the 'king's party' because it was a creation and strong supporter of Musharraf, the PML (Q) has significant blocs of seats in the National Assembly (84) and the Punjab Assembly (54). Political expediency could see the PPP form a coalition with it at the centre and/or the PML (N) form a coalition with it in Punjab.

Reinstatement of Supreme Court Judges and the Military

As mentioned above, the ongoing issue that has greatly distracted Pakistan's politicians—and frustrated the PML (N)—is the reinstatement of the Supreme Court judges sacked by General Musharraf in November 2007 during his Emergency. The PML (N) believed that its so-called Murree Declaration with the PPP would restore the judges 'within 30 days of the formation of the federal government through a parliamentary resolution'. Zardari has stalled on this issue. He feared that the former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Chaudhry, would reinstate charges of corruption against Zardari if Chaudhry regained his judicial position. These charges had been dropped in an alleged agreement with Musharraf that allowed Zardari and Benazir Bhutto to return to Pakistan late last year. Sharif is still pushing for all judges to be reinstated. It is an important issue on which he seemingly has a principled and popular stance. It also is an issue from which he can extract further political advantage: he can seek to embarrass Zardari and show him to be self-seeking and against the rule of law, thereby questioning his rival's democratic credentials and pushing him into a political corner. Conversely, Zardari will probably try to continue Musharraf's method of autocratic, top-down rulership, by which he controls the political agenda, the cabinet and the politicians, and drives the nation. This style sits nicely with many in Pakistan's male-dominated tribal, feudal and military structures that pervade the nation.

Seemingly unassailable, the only way Zardari can lose power in the short term would appear to be via a popular (but usually messy) people's movement in support of the judges' restoration or via assassination by the violent, dangerous and anti-establishment Taliban (see below), whose members allegedly assassinated Benazir Bhutto. A third option is a military coup. While many in the military

apparently don't like Zardari, military rule in Pakistan is unlikely in the short term. The military no longer wants to be Pakistan's saviour and administrator. These diminish its primary role of being a fighting force able to protect Pakistan. Equally, this once highly-regarded organisation has become discredited, unpopular and disinclined to intervene after General Musharraf's 'command democracy' in which nominally elected officials invariably obeyed military orders. The current head of the Pakistan Army (and therefore the de facto head of the Pakistan military), the supposedly apolitical General Ashfaq Kiyani, also has good political links, including with the PPP, which he served as deputy military secretary to Benazir Bhutto. Kiyani could use these skills and connections to influence Zardari. Finally—and most importantly, the Pakistan Army is heavily distracted dealing with the violent and dangerous Taliban in NWFP.

Despite the military's reluctance, in the event of Zardari exceeding his powers, or widespread national protest and unrest, or gross corruption, it may feel compelled to again assert itself as the protector of the nation—including against rapacious politicians—and administer Pakistan. The military is, after all, Pakistan's only truly powerful national organisation. It has had long experience running Pakistan. A coup also would continue Pakistan's perennial civilian-military government oscillations. The military also has—in its opinion—the superior ethics and scruples to run the country for the benefit of all—even though this body itself is not above corruption. When in power, the military has advanced its own causes and wellbeing through generously allocating itself resources, spending these how it sees fit without any accountability, or using these to develop enterprises that now apparently directly or indirectly control about 20 per cent of the Pakistan economy.

Overall, then, in the next six to twelve months, we are likely to see a lot of political activity in Pakistan as the various personalities and organisations deal with the realities of power, especially President Zardari's ascendancy. Another election is possible if the federal political situation becomes untenable. On the other hand, Asif Zardari and Nawaz Sharif may simply agree to divide the spoils. The PPP could then rule federally and in Sind unhindered, while Sharif and his brother do likewise in populous Punjab. Their mutual rival, the PML (Q), would rule nowhere; the military would remain happily ensconced in its barracks—except in areas where it needs to fight the Taliban or the Baluchis, or defend against India; and, Zardari-appointed Supreme Court judges could decide legal matters. Hopefully, at some stage, Pakistan's leaders also will try to address the array of problems confronting the average Pakistani. However, given their records, neither Zardari nor Sharif appears to have the skills or aspirations to do this very well. 'Their' respective governments in Islamabad and Lahore will be narrow, implicated by allegations of corruption, and probably will advance the lifestyles and wellbeing of the elite over the masses.

The Taliban in Pakistan

One major problem that will continue to confront Pakistan is the coterie of hardline, anti-social, Muslim men who comprise the Taliban. The Pakistani Taliban results partly from the trend in Pakistan in which Islam has increasingly played a role in society and governance. Hardline Islam received a boost when General Zia ul-Haq unleashed aspects of Islamic Sharia Law on Pakistan during his overbearing military dictatorship from 1977 to 1988. Since then, Islamic elements have become more militant in Pakistan (although, moderate, secular forces did very well in the February elections, including in NWFP). Some Pakistanis also fear that radical Islamist elements in the Pakistan military are moving into more senior positions. Some also fear that Pakistan's nuclear weapons could fall into the hands of radical Islamists, despite the Pakistan military's assurances that it is in full command and control of these weapons.

Apart from Taliban-inspired terrorist incidents, including against Prime Minister Gilani on 3

September, many Pakistanis were shocked in July 2007 when the Pakistan Army had to capture and clear Islamabad's Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) of hardline Islamic elements. This operation killed 173 people. It also was a major turning point for Pakistan. For one of the few times ever in India-Pakistan relations, Islamabad could not in any way blame the 'foreign hand' (i.e. India) for fomenting this problem. It was totally a domestic affair. This made Pakistan reconsider how it manipulates and uses radical Islamist elements. Up until then, Islamabad, through the military's semi-rogue Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) organisation, had been happy to use hardline Muslims to cause India problems in Kashmir, or for its own ends in Afghanistan. The Red Mosque incident confirmed that radical Muslims in Islamabad and the Taliban had links and sympathies—and that Pakistan had a major problem. The Pakistan military already had been fighting Taliban elements in NWFP, particularly in FATA and Swat District, who strongly disliked General Musharraf's links with the United States and Pakistan's part in the US-led Global War on Terror. This fighting escalated after, and because of, the Red Mosque incident. The Pakistan Army has lost many soldiers trying to suppress and defeat the Taliban in these areas. But the Taliban is proving to be difficult, motivated, mobile, intransigent and capable—and this problem is getting worse.

Governments in Islamabad and Peshawar have used three methods to try and deal with the Taliban: the 'carrot', the 'stick' and what I call the 'cup of tea'. The 'carrot' has involved providing resources, development and incentives in these remote, backward and isolated tribal parts of the NWFP in which the religiously-inclined, often illiterate, often unemployed or under-employed ethnic Pushtoon/Pukhtoon men have been attracted to fight for the Taliban. The 'stick' has involved using force against the Taliban. The paramilitary Frontier Force was first deployed, but its soldiers proved unwilling to fight men with a similar ethnic and tribal background. The more dispassionate Pakistan Army then took over, although its soldiers, the majority of whom comprise Punjabis, lack local language skills and cultural awareness. The secular forces refreshingly elected in February and who took over in Islamabad and Peshawar have used the 'cup of tea' method to talk with the Taliban to try to bring it into the political process. None of these methods has worked. The use of force is now on hold due to the implementation of a fourth method: a break during the Ramazan fasting period—after which the Pakistan Army will need to move quickly before the snows begin against a regrouped and refreshed Taliban. The 'carrot' also faces a major dilemma: development can only occur after force has defeated the enemy and restored peace, stability and normalcy to enable aid agencies and their employees to operate safely. The 'cup of tea' has allowed people to talk, but it has not deterred the taciturn Taliban from fighting. Furthermore, members of the Taliban have been talking with each other, with many groups now apparently represented in the umbrella 'Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan' organisation (Pakistan Taliban Movement) formed last December. The Pakistan Government has banned this body.

At this stage, the Pakistan Taliban does not threaten Pakistan's viability as a nation. It is largely confined to NWFP, although Taliban-inspired terrorist incidents regularly take place in Pakistani cities and towns outside this province. A further problem is that the Taliban has killed moderating influences such as tribal elders in FATA, who have been replaced by younger, more aggressive, less communicative Taliban commanders. The Pakistan Taliban also appears to have links with the Afghanistan Taliban, if only because members of both 'organisations' live in the remote, rugged and backward tribal areas that straddle the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Nevertheless, both 'organisations' appear to operate fairly separately. The Pakistan government is contemplating what to do next in order to try and defeat this potent, resilient and increasingly problematic force. It needs to control the Taliban both for national wellbeing and to appease Afghanistan and the United States, both of which nations believe that Pakistan could do much more to help overcome the Taliban problem. A variety of approaches is needed. So too is a long term perspective, as it will take time and a sustained effort to defeat the recidivist Taliban that continues to 'morph' into new ways to organise and operate.

Australia and the Taliban

Australia needs a strong and stable Pakistan that will help marginalise the Taliban who live in, or take safe haven in, remote areas that straddle the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and whose brethren confront Australian forces deployed in Afghanistan's Oruzgan Province. There is little that Australia directly can do to influence the political situation in Pakistan, except to promote democracy, moderation, good governance, the rule of law—and the tightest security possible for Pakistan's nuclear weapons. Foreign Minister, Stephen Smith, has already encouraged Pakistan's new president to focus on the serious problems that confront his nation. The issue now is to see whether President Zardari can disengage from politics (the playing of which he appears to love), build some national consensus, and seriously start to deal with Pakistan's problems. This remains to be seen.

There also appears to be little that Australia can do to encourage or help Pakistan to confront the Taliban with greater effectiveness. Pakistan is confounded by this phenomenon—as are Western forces in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, there are three things that Australia itself can do in relation to fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. First, it can obtain a better understanding of its opponent. The old maxim 'Know thy enemy' appears to be secondary to the Western forces' strong desire to use ever increasing—but seemingly decreasingly effective—firepower against the Taliban, including air strikes, even though these may arbitrarily kill innocent non-combatants. Instead, Western forces should acquire a greater understanding of local languages, cultures and interpretations of Islam so that they can mount more culturally-informed and effective 'hearts and minds' campaigns in Taliban-infested areas of Afghanistan. Second, Western forces need more meaningful and prolonged human contact on the ground in the tribal Pushtoon/Pukhtoon areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan where the Taliban live or retreat to. Rather than offering troops to help train Pakistani soldiers mount counter-insurgency operations, the Australian Defence Minister, Joel Fitzgibbon, could ask the Pakistanis to provide Pushtoon/Pukhtoon speakers to train Australian soldiers in Pakistan in these people's language, culture and religious customs. Such contact and understanding vicariously could help Western forces to obtain more accurate and timely human intelligence about the secretive Taliban.

The third point is the most controversial and difficult to accept: there is a need to engage in a dialogue with the Taliban. These hardline Afghans are keen to defeat yet another foreign invader, regardless of how long this may take. They have a more compelling reason to fight: they want to regain their territory and homelands. They also are better able to be sustained during this fight by local supporters. One serious option, therefore, is for foreign governments and their forces to engage the Afghan Taliban in dialogue in order to try to understand its point of view, to attempt to influence and moderate it, and to engage it in a political process. While this may be unpalatable, it is practical and not harmful to non-combatants. It also could also assist Pakistan, and it would be playing to one of the West's strengths. Dialogue also may prove to be a better way to deal with the powerful phenomenon of the Taliban, both within Afghanistan and Pakistan. It confounds many foreigners and many Pakistanis. Equally, it has a large degree of local support—popular or coerced. Given the uncertainty of Pakistan's future and the time it will take for it to become a sufficiently strong and robust enough nation to effectively deal with the Taliban, Australia could do well to promote this option.

About the author

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