In Pakistan, domestic threats begin to overshadow India

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The following is a guest post by Yelena Biberman *of Skidmore College.*

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The Peshawar school massacre has sparked unprecedented societal and political mobilization against terrorism in Pakistan. From televised debates to private conversations, there is now an unmistakable demand for policy reorientation toward domestic sources of insecurity. However, three big questions remain: Is India still the main enemy? Is Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the perpetrator of the deadliest terrorist attack in Pakistan's history, the only domestic militant group threatening Pakistani security? What will replace TTP in the unstable tribal region bordering Afghanistan?

For more than three generations, Pakistan's security policy and the dominant national narrative have positioned India as the primary and existential threat to Pakistan. The two countries fought four wars (in 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999), with the last in the shadow of nuclear missiles. Pakistan's army built up its capacity in response to India's military power at the expense of the country's economic development. The very idea of Pakistan is tied to the perception that India is a dangerous place for Muslims.

The Peshawar massacre offers India and Pakistan an opportunity to recast their relationship. Following the attack, Indian schools across the country and the parliament observed silence for the victims, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi reached out in a 12-minute phone conversation to his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif. Nevertheless, many Pakistanis remain skeptical about the recently elected Hindu nationalist leader. They cite periodic confrontations along the Line of Control, which separates Pakistan- and India-controlled parts of Kashmir. Modi's cancelation of August talks between the two countries' foreign secretaries, in response to a meeting between Pakistan's envoy in New Delhi and Kashmiri separatist leaders, also made a strong impression. Reimagining Islamist militants, and not Hindu nationalist-controlled India, as the chief threat to Pakistan after nearly 70 years of animosity between the two states is a tough sell.

Pakistan also has had a special connection to the Taliban. The latter has ostensibly allowed the former to maintain "strategic depth" in Afghanistan against India during the 1990s, after the United States withdrew from the region. The strategic depth doctrine hinges on the calculation that, in case of an enemy offensive, Pakistani military commanders would have space to withdraw, regroup and respond. After the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001, Pakistan's intelligence agency (ISI) secretly sheltered and provided logistical support to the (Afghan) Taliban. Some of the local Pakistani Pashtun tribesmen, who spent years in the company and service of the Taliban or al-Qaeda, became radicalized. In 2007, following the Pakistani forces' bold Lal Masjid confrontation with the Islamists, the latter joined forces under the TTP banner. The TTP's stated goal is to oppose the NATO forces in Afghanistan and wage a defensive jihad against the Pakistani forces. However, the TTP's active involvement in organized crime (e.g. bank robberies, kidnapping for ransom and smuggling) makes it more a criminal than an insurgent outfit. Destroying the TTP will require not only a military, but also a law enforcement solution. In addition to its involvement in organized crime, the TTP has made large investments in Karachi-based businesses.

The TTP represents the blowback effect from Pakistan's "proxy-fication" of the Taliban. However, it is unlikely that the lesson from the Taliban will be applied to the no less powerful Kashmir-oriented militant outfits. Organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed are still largely viewed as the "good" jihadis. This is because, as one insider explained, they have not yet done anything against the Pakistani state. They are oriented against India. Lashkar-e-Taiba is responsible for the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, which were no less traumatic for India as was the Peshawar massacre for Pakistan. Lashkar's sprawling compound is near Lahore, Pakistan's cultural capital. Pakistanis often cite the United States' extensive use of proxies. However, unlike the United States, Pakistan has employed proxies either inside or dangerously close to the country's borders. Playing with fire so close to one's home is far more hazardous than in someone else's neighborhood. Or, as Hillary Clinton put it, "you can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbors." Significant gains over domestic terrorist organizations will require a more comprehensive and sober approach, one that applies to proxies the same realpolitik foresight usually reserved for other countries.

Finally, there is the question of what will replace the TTP in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have been by and large neglected since the British colonial period. The current military crackdown on the TTP needs to be complemented with long-overdue "state-building" measures. If Pakistan does not significantly

invest in the governance and economic development of the region, grievances will continue to deepen and multiply. The region will then serve as an even more fertile ground for terrorist organizations.

6 Comments