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How the US can push Pakistan to abandon its terror proxies

Washington must develop a coercive campaign that diminishes the advantages of Pakistan's use of militant proxies under its nuclear umbrella

Photo: Larry Downing/Reuters

Despite the fascination with Pakistan's feckless civilian leadership, it is the Pakistan Army that controls all levers of power that influence the country's foreign and security policies as well as key domestic policies that inform the same. Civilian opposition to the army's preferences is but a speed bump for the army drive to prosecute its preferred policies. The Pakistan Army has three enduring objectives. First, it aims to resist what it views as Indian hegemony in South Asia and beyond. Second, it aims to cultivate "strategic depth" in Afghanistan, both to vitiate any Afghan ill-will towards Pakistan and to deny India any space from which it can destabilize Pakistan from Afghan territory. Finally, it seeks to seize that portion of Kashmir currently administered by India. As I have argued elsewhere, these goals are driven mostly by Pakistan's ideology (the so-called two-nation theory) and less by strategic imperatives. To secure these goals, Pakistan has two tools. First, it has cultivated a menagerie of Islamist (as well as non-Islamist) militant groups acting as proxies on behalf of the state. Second, it has developed an ever-expanding nuclear arsenal which includes battlefield nuclear weapons.

Pakistan successfully employs terrorism under its nuclear umbrella with impunity because it works to achieve Pakistan's agenda of highlighting the "conflict" between Pakistan and India and inevitably provokes calls for dialogue to resolve "outstanding differences". At the same time, Pakistan has incurred few costs that it believes to be disproportionate to the benefits it derives from this course of action. Even the sustained blowback of erstwhile proxies since 2004 has not persuaded Pakistan to cease using jihadis as tools of foreign policy.

The only way to motivate change is by developing a coercive campaign that diminishes the advantages of Pakistan's use of militant proxies under its nuclear umbrella while also increasing the costs of doing so. Washington DC has resisted adopting punitive measures because it believes American assistance and presence in the country can position itself to stave off state collapse and/or prevent further nuclear proliferation. Unfortunately, Pakistan has used American assistance to further develop the very assets—nuclear weapons and terrorists—that disquiet Americans the most.

New Courses of Action

Washington must cease incentivizing Pakistan to continue producing "good jihadi assets" while fighting "bad terrorists who target the Pakistani state". As long as Pakistan has terrorists to kill, Washington will pay exorbitant amounts to Pakistan to do so. Instead of continuing to incentivize Pakistan's security establishment to groom more terrorists, the US should incentivize them to abandon Islamist terrorists as tools of foreign policy. How can Washington do this?

First, it must stop providing strategic weapons systems to Pakistan and deny future supply of spare parts and lifetime maintenance. The past provision of these assets was an egregious mistake. Restriction of spare parts and maintenance can, in some measure, rectify these past outrages. Washington should be willing to provide a narrow set of platforms which have proven utility in counter-terror and counter-insurgency operations, provided they offer no significant value in fighting India. Washington should also offer Pakistan military training in these areas, as well as other areas that fit squarely within the rubric of domestic security (i.e., natural disaster relief).

Second, the US must end security reimbursements to Pakistan. (The US used to do this under the problematic Coalition Support Funds programme. It will now provide reimbursements under a new programme). Pakistan should not be paid to do what sovereign states are expected or supposed to do. This programme distorts Pakistan's incentives while vitiating the importance of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1373 (adopted in 2001) which obliges all states to undertake actions to prevent and undermine the ability of terrorist groups to use their soil to organize, train, raise funds and recruit and engage in other activities required to carry out attacks.

This resolution is a Chapter VII resolution which considers major terrorist events as a threat to international security and carries the possibility of a forceful response by the UN and/or member-states. However, even after the November 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai and

the subsequent revelations that the attack had state sponsorship, the US—along with China—actively shielded Pakistan from any debate over sanctions—much less other more forceful responses—at the UN. This set of behaviours underscores the inconsistency of US policy towards Pakistan, which behaves more like an enemy than a problematic ally.

Third, the US should state clearly that it will declare Pakistan to be a state sponsor of terror if specific actions are not immediately undertaken. Such a declaration will impose sweeping and devastating sanctions against Pakistan's army because it will curtail security assistance. To pre-empt such an outcome, the US should provide a timeline of concrete steps that Pakistan must take against the various militant groups it now supports. The first such step is ceasing active support for these groups, constricting their space for operations and recruitment; ultimately, Washington should demand the elimination of the remnants. It is unlikely that Pakistan will be willing to undertake such efforts.

However, if it evidences some willingness to do so, the international community must acknowledge that this will be a long-term project and will require a disarmament, demobilization and re-integration programme to contend with the many proxies the state has raised over more than six decades. However, neither the US nor any other actor should provide economic support for these efforts as long as Pakistan continues to actively raise, nurture, support and deploy so-called jihadis for state goals.

Fourth, the US must work prodigiously to target specific individuals who provide material support to terrorist groups and individuals under UNSC Resolution 1267. This cannot be India's task alone. China has little compunction about blocking Indian-initiated efforts. It will find it harder to resist the will of the US.

Fifth, the US department of treasury should step up efforts to designate individuals and apply more pressure on its partners—such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar—to seize accounts of designated persons.

Sixth, the US must deny visas to any person in and out of government who has supported or is supporting terrorist activities. Instead, Washington tends to fete those men in uniform who lead these deadly policies. In some cases, the US should use Joint Special Operations Command or other means to eliminate high-value personnel, whether in the ranks of terrorist, military or intelligence agencies.

Seventh, the US must work to deprive Pakistan of the single biggest benefit it derives from deploying militant proxies in India, by refusing to lend credence to its claims on Kashmir. Administration statements in the recent past that reiterate support for India and Pakistan to achieve "peaceful resolution of outstanding issues, including Kashmir" rewards Pakistan for its malfeasance while treating India as an equal party to the crime. This language equates the victim (India) and the perpetrator (Pakistan) while gratuitously rewarding Pakistan for its use of terrorism. This policy position is historically ill-informed and dangerously misguided. Despite Pakistan's vocal assertions that it has legitimate claims to Kashmir, it simply does not.

Consistent with historical facts, Washington should assiduously avoid any mention of Kashmir in its various statements with and about Pakistan and demur from making statements encouraging India to engage with Pakistan on the subject. Instead, it should deploy strong language placing the onus of the conflict firmly on Pakistan. Pakistan is very attuned to such omissions and will understand the intent such an exclusion conveys. This signalling can promote American interests by disincentivizing Pakistani terrorism simply by denying Pakistan of this apprized outcome.

At the same time, when Pakistan-based terrorist organizations attack India, the US should abandon its usual practice of encouraging India publicly to observe restraint and offering the usual bromidic calls for the both sides to continue dialogue. Instead, the US should state clearly that it stands with India in its fight against Pakistani terror and make explicit, public and forceful calls for Pakistan to stop using terrorism as a tool of foreign policy.

Finally, the US inter-agency should reconsider its official position on the Kashmir "dispute" and officially adopt support for converting the Line of Control into the International Boundary. Such a conversion requires India to forego its claims to those portions of Kashmir illegally occupied by Pakistan as well as those areas illegally ceded by Pakistan to China. It should work with India (and potentially Russia) to make obsolete the various UNSC resolutions on Kashmir that have been obviated by Pakistan's behaviour, most notably refusal to demilitarize the portion of Kashmir it controls, as well as the 1972 Simla Accord forged by India and Pakistan to resolve outstanding disputes bilaterally.

These actions will require political will. There are many within the US government who offer various excuses to continue a policy of appeasement and placation. Those persons should be held to account for Pakistan's endless perfidy, including the deaths of thousands of Americans and tens of thousands of Afghan and international partners in Afghanistan, despite taking more than $33 billion from Washington ostensibly to "support" American efforts there. With allies like this, who needs enemies?

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