The U.S. Af-Pak Strategy: Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan

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Abstract: In this article, the author reviews the salient features of the Obama administration’s strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan and Pakistan’s corresponding counterterrorism response. He critically assesses how far Pakistan is able to tackle the challenges posed by the Af-Pak strategy and benefit from the opportunities it offers. The challenges pertain to Pakistan’s alleged reliance on irregular warfare in South Asia as an instrument of national security policy, especially the continuing external perception regarding its security establishment’s dual approach of practicing toughness toward home-grown domestic terrorists and leniency toward home-based regional terrorists. The opportunities include the possibility of a long-term strategic relationship with the United States and the creation of a regional security environment addressing Pakistan’s pervasive sense of national insecurity, especially vis-à-vis Afghanistan and India. The author argues that the U.S. and Pakistani counterterrorism policies have converged in some areas, coincidentally or otherwise, although noticeable incompatibilities remain in others, as Pakistan is yet to undertake the required shift in its regional counterterrorism approach. However, U.S. pressure on Pakistan to bring about this shift is likely to recede amid current uncertainty in the Afghan war, including the possibility of a political compromise in which Pakistan’s role may be crucial. The author concludes by arguing for the creation of a common security bond between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India, backed by the United States and the rest of the international community, one that goes beyond realizing the Af-Pak strategy’s core strategic objective of defeating al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies in the region.

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The Obama administration’s strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan offers peculiar challenges and potential opportunities for Pakistan. The challenges pertain to Pakistan’s alleged reliance on irregular warfare in South Asia as an instrument of national security policy, especially the continuing external perception regarding its security establishment’s dual approach of practicing toughness toward home-grown domestic terrorists and leniency toward home-based regional terrorists. The opportunities include the possibility of a long-term strategic relationship with the United States and the creation of a regional security environment addressing Pakistan’s pervasive sense of national insecurity, especially vis-à-vis Afghanistan and India. In this article, I first review the Af-Pak strategy’s Pakistan-relevant features and then narrate Pakistan’s corresponding counterterrorism performance. I attempt to answer questions such as how much Pakistan has been able to tackle the challenges posed by the Af-Pak strategy since it was unveiled in March 2009 and consequently benefit from the opportunities it offers and what pragmatic options the Obama administration has thus far exercised to co-opt Pakistan in realizing the objectives laid down in the revised U.S. counter-terrorism strategy for the region.

On the basis of this discussion, I argue that during the time the Af-Pak strategy has been in operation, the counterterrorism policies of the United States and Pakistan have converged in some areas, while noticeable incompatibilities remain in others. This convergence may be largely coincidental, as the enormity of domestic terrorist threat facing Pakistan and the country’s military response to it have occurred simultaneously with the evolution of the Af-Pak strategy. However, it may also be an outcome of a visible expansion in security and civilian cooperation between the United States and Pakistan, which has taken strategic orientation in recent months. As for the remaining areas of divergence between the two countries’ counterterrorism policies, the Obama administration has kept up the pressure on Pakistan to undertake strategic shift in its regional counterterrorism policy and target even those terrorist groups that use its territory to commit terrorism in Afghanistan and India. The simultaneous offer of U.S. incentives and disincentives to Pakistan are meant to encourage or force its security establishment to undertake the required strategic shift in its regional counterterrorism policy.

An additional argument pertains to the uncertainties involved in the evolving U.S.-led counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan—including the possibility of a U.S.-sanctioned compromise of political resolution in the Afghan conflict to facilitate the withdrawal of international troops from the country. Pakistan
is likely to play a pivotal role in realizing such settlement. In that case, U.S. pressure on Pakistan to bring about said shift in its regional counterterrorism approach is likely to recede over time. However, for such an eventuality not to have destabilizing consequences for the region, Pakistan’s relations with both Afghanistan and India may have to simultaneously experience sustained progress. I conclude by arguing for the creation of a common security bond among Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India, backed by the United States and the rest of the international community—one that goes beyond realizing the Af-Pak strategy’s core strategic objective of defeating al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies in the region.

**Salient Features of Af-Pak Strategy**

The Bush administration’s failure to reverse the tide of insurgency in Afghanistan and tackle the insurgency’s terrorist sources in Pakistan’s tribal regions forced President Barack Obama to announce the new U.S. strategy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan in a major speech on March 27, 2009. A white paper of the report of an interagency policy group, which was tasked to prepare the basic elements of this strategy, was also issued the same day. The Obama administration’s subsequent policy initiatives toward Afghanistan and Pakistan constitute major manifestations of the Af-Pak strategy. For instance, in November 2009, President Obama signed the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act, under which Pakistan would receive $7.5 billion in U.S. civilian assistance on a five-year basis. Then, in March 2010, at the first-ever ministerial-level strategic dialogue in Washington, the United States and Pakistan agreed to a long-term partnership in ten areas of cooperation, including energy and water, defense and security, and science and technology. As for Afghanistan, in December 2009, President Obama announced a major revision in the Afghan war strategy. Then, at the International Conference on Afghanistan in London on January 28, 2010, the United States unveiled a plan to reintegrate low-level and mid-level Taliban.

The discussion in this article about salient features of this strategy, especially those concerning Pakistan, seems to confirm its qualitative difference from the Bush administration’s counterterrorism approach toward the region in terms of the U.S. strategic goal, threat perception, counterinsurgency options, resource allocation, and level of commitment. The Af-Pak strategy is presumed to evolve in accordance with the changing political and security realities in the two countries, although the review and policies formulated on its basis have thus far largely conformed to the strategic principles initially articulated. Given its evolutionary nature and the fact that it aims to defeat al-Qaeda and its terrorist allies simultaneously in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the new U.S. strategy has greater scope for adapting to new political and security realities of the two countries, besides
reinforcing and reshaping their respective counterinsurgency campaigns through a variety of cooperative mechanisms.

The first salient feature of the Af-Pak strategy is that it treats Afghanistan and Pakistan as two countries but one challenge. The reason Pakistan is bracketed with Afghanistan is because its tribal areas alongside the Afghan border are perceived by the Obama administration to be a safe haven for al-Qaeda and its terrorist allies, fueling Afghan insurgency and threatening to increase international terrorism. The Af-Pak strategy, therefore, focuses more intensively on Pakistan than in the past, calling for more significant increases in the United States and in international support, both economic and military—which are obviously linked to Pakistan’s performance in counterterrorism in the region. Additionally, it aims to engage Afghanistan and Pakistan in a new trilateral framework at the highest levels and to foster their bilateral relationship in areas of political, economic, and security cooperation.

Second, the Af-Pak strategy is based on a “clear and focused” U.S. strategic goal for Afghanistan and Pakistan: “To disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future.”4 Such limitation in the overall strategic objective of the U.S.-led international forces in Afghanistan implies that the United States does not intend to transform Afghanistan into a Westernized democracy, as the neoconservative discourse during the Bush administration seemed to suggest. Categorically stating the core U.S. goal in the region is important for clarifying widely held regional misperception that the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have a long-term strategic ambition to use their presence in Afghanistan for exploiting Central Asia’s vast oil and natural gas resources. The clear identification of the terrorist enemy implies that the United States and NATO forces will leave the region as soon as the terrorist threat is eliminated.

Third, the Af-Pak strategy supports reconciliation with those local Taliban and other insurgents who are ready to surrender arms and dissociate from al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies. In Obama’s words, “There is an uncompromising core of the Taliban. They must be met with force, and they must be defeated. But there are also those who’ve taken up arms because of coercion, or simply for a price. These Afghans must have the option to choose a different course.”5 While implementing this component of the Af-Pak strategy, Obama signed the U.S. Defense Bill on October 28, 2009. The bill contained a new provision under which the United States was to pay Taliban fighters who renounced the insurgency for “mainly protection of their towns and villages.”6 Then, on the eve of the International Donors’ Conference on Afghanistan in London in January 2010, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, announced U.S. support for an Afghan government plan to reintegrate the low-level and mid-level Taliban fighters who were not driven by al-Qaeda’s terrorist ideology.7 As of fall 2010, the United States had not officially announced to be part of any dialogue to
reconcile the Afghan insurgent leadership. However, at the same time, it did not object to the Afghan government’s efforts for the purpose.

Fourth, the Af-Pak strategy includes a long-term U.S. commitment to Afghanistan and Pakistan through significantly enhanced resource allocation for civilian development projects in the two countries. In the case of Pakistan, building the country’s capacity to fight extremists is identified as an important objective, for which the U.S. Department of Defense has already allocated roughly $400 million to train and equip the Frontier Corps and recently proposed a Pakistani counterinsurgency capability fund, under which an amount of $3 billion is to be allocated over the next five years to train and equip Pakistan’s army and paramilitary forces for counterinsurgency missions. However, the thrust of the Af-Pak strategy is on providing substantial U.S. civilian assistance to Pakistan for “long-term capacity building, agricultural sector job creation, education and training, and on infrastructure requirements,” as well as to support its efforts to “hold and build” in insurgency-ridden areas as soon as they are cleared of terrorist insurgents.

The Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act, under which the United States will provide $1.5 billion each year during the next five years, is the most obvious example of the U.S. resolve to help build Pakistan’s civilian sector.

Fifth, the Af-Pak strategy has brought about a major shift in the tactics and goals of U.S.-led counterinsurgency warfare in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Even though the strategy seeks to employ “all elements of international power—diplomatic, informational, military and economic”—exercising military force is considered absolutely essential to achieve the core strategic objective of defeating al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies in Afghanistan. Consequently, the Obama administration has undertaken two surges of U.S. troops in Afghanistan—the first surge announced in March 2009, consisting of 21,000 troops (including 17,000 combat troops); and the second major surge of 30,000 more troops announced in December 2009. The simultaneous intensification of U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan’s tribal areas since late 2009 is also meant to realize the same objective. The second troop surge was part of the revised U.S. battle plan for Afghanistan based on the recommendation of General Stanley McChrystal, the former commander of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The plan, which Obama announced in a major speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in New York on December 1, 2009, envisions a speedier transfer of security responsibility to the Afghan government, which, he said, “will allow us to begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan in July of 2011.”

Significant increase in the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, accompanied by more troop contributions from NATO allies, as well as intensification in drone attacks on Pakistan’s tribal areas, are meant to intensify military actions against terrorist insurgent forces in the two countries. However, the new counterinsurgency options being exercised in Afghanistan ensure that decisive military actions are confined only to major population centers in hitherto insurgent-held areas in
southern and eastern Afghanistan, and the task of security and governance of the areas is transferred to the Afghan regime as soon as they are liberated from the insurgents. The U.S.-led military offensive in Marja of Helmand Province in early 2010 marked the first major instance of the change in U.S. tactics in fighting Afghan insurgency, paving the way for more difficult counterinsurgency operations in areas under the Taliban control in Kandahar province. McChrystal’s sacking by Obama in June 2010 may have underscored the difficulties involved in the U.S.-led counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan. However, because the revised battle plan for Afghanistan was grounded in the relative success the United States had achieved in its counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq, his departure and succession by General David Petraeus, the former chief of U.S. Central Command and the architect of the successful Iraq strategy, meant the Af-Pak strategy was to continuously evolve without fundamental change in its overall strategic goal of defeating al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan

Coincidentally, Pakistan’s counterinsurgency campaign against domestic terrorist groups in Swat, South Waziristan, and a few other agencies of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas has occurred simultaneously with the adoption and subsequent implementation of the Af-Pak strategy since early 2009. In late March 2009, Obama announced the Af-Pak strategy, treating al-Qaeda-inspired Taliban-ridden areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan as one and expecting Pakistan to intensify security operations in its tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. In late April 2009, Pakistani security forces launched an air and ground assault against Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariyat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) in the Swat Valley. Within a couple of months, TNSM insurgents were defeated. The humanitarian crisis generated by the Swat offensive was also managed effectively in subsequent months with due international help. In October 2009, Pakistani security forces started another major operation against Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in South Waziristan, which has caused major disruption in the terrorist campaign across the country orchestrated by TTP since the July 2007 Red Mosque operation in Islamabad.

Since early 2010, the security operation has been extended to other agencies of the tribal areas. Pakistani security agencies, with assistance from their U.S. counterparts, have also arrested some important leaders of the Afghan Taliban movement, including its chief military commander, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. U.S. drone attacks in south and north Waziristan and other agencies of the tribal belt have also intensified since late 2009. They have claimed the death of several al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, including Baitullah Mehsud, whom Pakistan had officially designated as its public enemy number one. The success of drone attacks
depends significantly on the availability of ground intelligence, which may be provided covertly by Pakistani security agencies.

However, despite such obvious instances of growing congruity in U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorism interests, the challenges the Af-Pak strategy poses to Pakistan are far from over, and Islamabad has not fully taken advantage of the opportunities this strategy offers to Pakistan. As of fall 2010, there remained a couple of areas in which the counterterrorism approaches of the United States and Pakistan seriously diverged or where incompatibilities were obvious. First, the Obama administration had consistently urged Pakistan to extend its counterinsurgency operations to north Waziristan, which is the main sanctuary for the Afghan Taliban–linked Haqqani network, the remnants of al-Qaeda and Punjabi Taliban groups. The Pakistan Army was unwilling to launch this operation on the pretext that it was already “overstretched after carrying out offensives in other tribal regions.”16 The United States also expected Pakistani security establishment to target Punjab-based terrorist organizations such as Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, along with its so-called philanthropic body known as Jamaat-u-Daawa, both of which were accused of orchestrating the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai. This U.S. expectation was likewise not met by Pakistan.

Before dwelling on the remaining divergence between the United States and Pakistani counterterrorism policies and its reasons and implications, it makes sense to discuss how each of the salient features of the Af-Pak strategy narrated before have impacted Pakistan. First, insofar as the question of hyphenating Afghanistan and Pakistan is concerned, Pakistan’s security establishment did express its reservation about it, while arguing “that there was a large difference between the situation in Afghanistan and that in Pakistan, and if the US tried to implement the same policy in Pakistan than it would not only yield negative results but it will also affect Pak-US relations.”17 However, over time, the benefits of linking Pakistan with Afghanistan seem to outweigh the Pakistani establishment’s concerns about this linkage, which has facilitated cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan for combating terrorism. Instead of trading accusations of crossborder terrorism against each other, as was the norm before, the leaders of the two countries have regularly interacted with each other to address the common threat from terrorism together as well as at trilateral and multilateral forums. For instance, Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s March 2010 visit to Islamabad saw Afghan-Pakistani ties move toward a more meaningful course, including mutual pledges to pursue tangible long-term cooperation in security, trade, and educational fields. The Afghan president assured Pakistan of a role in his government’s plan for “reconciliation and reintegration” of the Taliban to end fighting in Afghanistan.18

Since early 2010, the frequency of interaction between the top security officials of Afghanistan and Pakistan has also increased, including rare visits to Kabul by the Pakistan Army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, and General Shuja Pasha, the head of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate.19 The figures hostile
to such engagement in the Afghan government have recently been sidelined. Since the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s security establishment has been concerned about the growing Indian influence in Afghanistan. The evolving positive spirit in Pakistani-Afghan ties may help address this concern, consequently paving the way for due progress in the Indo-Pakistani peace process. In this context, the conclusion of the Afghan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement in July 2010 is extremely important. The agreement allows Afghan trucks to carry export goods to Wagah border for destinations in India and, in return, permits Pakistan to use Afghan territory for its experts to Central Asian Republics.

During the period that the Afghan-Pakistani ties became unusually cooperative and accommodative of each other’s pragmatic regional interests, uncertainty continued to prevail vis-à-vis the peace process between India and Pakistan. The euphoria about normalizing relations between the two countries during early 2010 seemed to evaporate by the middle of the year.

On April 29, 2010, Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh and his Pakistani counterpart, Yousaf Raza Gillani, met on the sidelines of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in Bhutan and decided to revive the peace process, which had stalled since the Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008. Then, on the occasion of the SAARC Interior Ministers Conference in Islamabad in June 2010, Indian home minister P. Chidambaram and his Pakistani counterpart Rehman Malik agreed to institutionalize counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries. This was followed by a visit to Islamabad of Indian external affairs minister S. M. Krishna in July 2010. Nothing concrete was achieved during that visit, insofar as the expected progress in the Indo-Pakistani peace process was concerned. However, Krishna and his Pakistani counterpart did agree to continue bilateral parleys regarding the modalities of reviving the Indo-Pakistani peace process. Despite India’s core focus on countering crossborder terrorism and Pakistan’s principal concern on resolving the Kashmir dispute, the fact that the political leaders of the two countries have renewed commitment to normalizing mutual relationship is important.

Any cooperative trend in Pakistan’s ties with its western and eastern neighbors may contribute enormously to eroding the remaining divergences between U.S.-Pakistani counterterrorism policies, as they lessen the Pakistani security establishment’s pervasive sense of insecurity in the region and thus motivate it to shed its contradictory approach of being hard on domestic terrorists and soft on terrorist organizations allegedly using its soil to conduct terrorism in Afghanistan and India.

Second, as for the Obama administration’s core goal of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is the same goal that Pakistan’s civilian government and security establishment also wish to realize—even though in a qualified manner. Recent years have seen al-Qaeda-linked domestic insurgent terrorist organizations, especially TTP, wreak
havoc on the lives of Pakistani civilians and security personnel. Pakistan already has the distinction of arresting the largest number of al-Qaeda leaders and activists following the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in late 2001. The stated objective behind its military offensive in south Waziristan has also been to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda-linked TTP and other hardcore allies of the terror network, including terrorists belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Since the start of 2009, Pakistan’s security establishment seems to have realized the enormity of the threat posed to state apparatus and societal fabric by home-grown terrorist groups linked to al-Qaeda. Its priority to target home-grown terrorist organizations like TTP and TNSM involved in domestic terrorism is understandable. However, it is this very approach that causes major discrepancy in the country’s counterterrorism policy insofar as the Af-Pak strategy’s core goal of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al-Qaeda and its allies is concerned. After all, the Haqqani network and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba are as much linked to al-Qaeda as TTP or TNSM are. There are even instances of Pakistani security agencies seeking the help of local insurgent groups, such as that of Mullah Nazir in south Waziristan, to target al-Qaeda-linked Uzbek terrorists in 2007.25

Third, reconciling with moderate insurgents—those who renounce violence, dissociate from al-Qaeda, and are willing to participate in the political process—is another important component of the Af-Pak strategy that is largely compatible with Pakistan’s counterterrorism interests in the region. Pakistan shares with Afghanistan what no other neighbor of Afghanistan does: the longest border, Pashtun ethnicity, and history of warfare in Afghanistan, including the 1980s jihad against the Soviets, during which Pakistan’s tribal areas acted as a sanctuary for Afghan and foreign Mujahideen. The U.S. plan to integrate low-level and mid-level insurgents and the Afghan bid to reconcile with their leaders are meant to dissuade Taliban and other insurgent groups from violence. The forces of insurgency in Afghanistan are primarily of Pashtun ethnicity. Since Pakistan’s tribal areas bordering Afghanistan are also lived in by Pashtuns, it is only natural for its civilian government and security establishment to support any Afghan or international plan to reintegrate insurgents or reconcile their leaders if they are willing to renounce violence and reenter the political process in Afghanistan.

Because of its unique geographical, ethnic, and historical link with Afghanistan, Pakistan can play a crucial role in the political resolution of the Afghan conflict. By arresting senior Afghan Taliban leaders recently, Pakistani security establishment may have attempted to enhance its potential role as a peace broker in any Afghan or international bid to reach a political compromise with the current forces of insurgency in Afghanistan. However, the Obama administration does not seem to share the allegation made by Kai Eide, the former United Nations (UN) envoy in Afghanistan, that these arrests have sabotaged the UN-sanctioned secret talks by the Karzai regime with the Taliban and other insurgent groups.26 For instance, on the eve of the U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue in Washington in March 2010,
Holbrooke said the United States was “extremely gratified” that Pakistan had arrested key Taliban leaders. It is also worth reiterating that Mullah Baradar, the Taliban military commander and head of the so-called Quetta Shura, was reportedly arrested in a joint U.S.-Pakistan operation from Karachi. In fact, if and when the process to reconcile insurgent leaders in Afghanistan makes headway, with the United States also on board, this may help Pakistan seek a negotiated outcome of its own counterinsurgency campaign in the tribal areas without facing U.S. pressure. The spillover impact of the continuing war in Afghanistan on Pakistan has been enormous. Therefore, a political resolution of the Afghan conflict will also help lessen its security and economic cost for Pakistan.

Fourth, Af-Pak strategy’s focus on aiding Pakistan’s ability to combat terrorism not only through provision of counterinsurgency-specific security assistance but also by offering long-term assistance for its civilian sector development is another factor that addresses long-standing Pakistani grievances regarding short-term orientation of U.S. ties with the country in the past. The Af-Pak strategy recognizes this “trust deficit” while stating that the U.S. government “must engage the Pakistani people based on our long-term commitment to helping them build a stable economy, a stronger democracy, and a vibrant civil society.” The Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act, which formalizes this strategic partnership, is a tangible manifestation of the broad support for Pakistan in the United States. The $7.5 billion in civilian aid Pakistan will receive under this act in the next five years is meant for improving the country’s education and health sectors, reforming its police service, expanding infrastructure, strengthening judiciary and democracy, and developing other civilian sectors. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, during her October 2009 visit to Pakistan, announced an additional amount of over $243 million in civilian aid to help improve Pakistan’s energy generation and efficiency, raise the level of its higher education, and meet some other urgent socioeconomic needs.

The passage of the Kerry-Lugar Bill in late September 2009 did generate bitter controversy in Pakistan on its conditionalities regarding “security-related assistance” to the country, with the Pakistan Army openly expressing its reservation on the issue. The United States was accused of micromanaging Pakistan’s internal affairs. Of particular concern in this context was a conditionality that required the U.S. Secretary of State to certify before appropriate Congressional committees that “the Government of Pakistan is continuing to cooperate with the United States in efforts to dismantle supplier networks relating to the acquisition of nuclear weapons-related materials, such as providing relevant information from or direct access to Pakistani nationals associated with such networks.” This was despite the fact that regarding this issue and other conditionalities pertaining to Pakistan’s commitment to combat terrorist organization—including “al Qaeda, the Taliban and associated terrorist groups”—Pakistan’s officially pronounced stand was no different. The controversy over the Kerry-Lugar Bill can be explained within the
context of Pakistan’s traditionally precarious civil-military relationship. The bill was meant for providing U.S. assistance for Pakistan’s civilian sector alone, but it imposed restrictions only on the U.S. security assistance to the country. Despite the restoration of democracy in Pakistan, its army continues to influence politics and media, and it used both channels to pressure the civilian government to seek a review of the Kerry-Lugar bill. Consequently, the Obama administration secured a joint explanatory Congressional statement, which clarified that the said legislation “does not seek in any way to compromise Pakistan’s sovereignty, impinge on Pakistan’s national security interests, or micromanage any aspect of Pakistani military or civilian operations.”

On October 15, 2009, President Obama signed the bill making it a law.

The period since then has seen greater interaction between the top military leaders of the United States and Pakistan, including periodic visits to Pakistan by Petraeus, Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General George Casey, U.S. Army chief of staff, as well as McChrystal. In fact, the day the U.S.-led operation began in Marja on February 12, 2010, McChrystal was coordinating U.S. counterinsurgency effort with Kayani at the Army Headquarters in Rawalpindi. Then, within days of McChrystal’s removal as ISAF commander, Mullen was in Pakistan to reassure its military leadership that the incident would not impact the U.S.-led counterterrorism campaign in the region. That the Af-Pak strategy is originally coined to adapt to intricate circumstantial realities in Afghanistan and Pakistan as they evolve is apparent from the manner in which the Obama administration has started to recently reach out to Pakistan’s powerful military leadership and co-opt it in U.S. counterterrorism mission in the region.

Kayani and Pasha were among the top civilian and military leaders who accompanied Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi to participate in the first-ever ministerial level U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue in Washington in March 2010. The concerns that Pakistan’s security establishment had vis-à-vis the Kerry-Lugar bill have also evaporated over time.

The first round of the strategic dialogue between the two countries concluded with Secretary of State Clinton and Foreign Minister Qureshi agreeing to establish a policy steering group to intensify and expand strategic cooperation between the two countries in ten priority areas, including economy and trade; energy; defense; security, strategic stability, and nonproliferation; law enforcement and counterterrorism; science and technology; education; agriculture; water; health; and communications and public diplomacy. For more than one month, starting early June 2010, top U.S. and Pakistani officials concerned with each of the ten core areas of strategic cooperation held in-depth discussions in Islamabad to finalize the specific projects. Their implementation was to begin after joint declaration by Clinton and Qureshi in Islamabad on July 21 regarding the completion of the strategic dialogue process. Simultaneously, the Obama administration has increased military supplies to Pakistan. In March 2010, the United States delivered
fourteen AH-1 Cobra gunship helicopters to the country. Washington has offered to supply Pakistan with an additional fourteen F-16 C/D Block 52 fighter jets in addition to the eighteen previous Block 52 F-16 aircraft whose delivery was to be completed by December 2010. In June 2010, the Pakistani air force (PAF) received three F-16s. The shipment of F-16s resolves a long-standing issue in U.S.- Pakistani military ties. The United States has also offered to provide Pakistan with shadow drones for surveillance. When severe floods caused by monsoon rains struck Pakistan in July and August 2010, the United States announced a $35 million emergency aid package for the country, besides sending four Chinook and two Blackhawk helicopters for rescue and relief efforts.

As for the final salient feature of the Af-Pak strategy, that of the surge of U.S. troops and revised goals of the U.S.-led NATO’s counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, these are also not at cross purposes with Pakistan’s counterterrorism priorities in the region. Because Pakistan provides the principal logistics for U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, the troops surge has actually increased U.S. dependence on Pakistan, thereby strengthening Pakistan’s bargaining position vis-à-vis the United States. Even otherwise, the troops’ surge is only a short-term military means to facilitate a qualitatively different counterinsurgency campaign that places greater emphasis on expanding Afghan security capacity, reinforcing civilian development campaign, and reconciling with moderate insurgent forces in Afghanistan. It is a military escalation that is essentially meant to prepare the ground for the eventual withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan and a political resolution of the Afghan conflict. Pakistan also wishes the same. Heightened security campaigns across the Durand Line by Pakistan and U.S.-NATO forces, respectively, have a shared objective: to weaken the resolve of the terrorist insurgent forces and, consequently, create moderate constituencies among them, who are willing to renounce violence, dissociate from al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies, and participate in the political process largely on the terms of respective state parties and international forces. The ISAF under Petraeus is likely to pursue such creative and focused counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan, perhaps more forcefully.

Prospects of U.S.-Pakistan Counterterrorism Ties

The Obama administration has preferred taking Pakistan on board on the issue of combating terrorism through regular high-level consultations with its civilian and military leaders. It has not solely opted for the sort of coercive diplomacy to force Pakistan to “do more” in the War on Terror the Bush administration had resorted to, especially during its second term. President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton, Holbrooke, and almost all of the top U.S. military commanders have
consistently appreciated Pakistan’s successes in Swat and south Waziristan and the arrest of senior Afghan Taliban leaders.

In February 2010, for instance, Petraeus acknowledged Pakistan’s “constructive involvement in reaching out to the Afghan Taliban to encourage reconciliation on the basis of its past ties to the militants.” He played down the possibility of any new, large-scale Pakistani military offensive against insurgents like the Haqqani group. Given the way the military is stretched, it is understandable that poking more short sticks into hornets’ nests becomes a difficult proposition,” the ISAF commander said. As for politically sensitive issues in Pakistan, such as the U.S. drone attacks in tribal areas and the safety and security of its nuclear assets, some tacit understanding or cooperative arrangement over these may exist between the United States and Pakistan, which is not made public for fear of public backlash in Pakistan. Then, on June 29, 2010, during his confirmation hearing before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, Petraeus said Pakistan’s involvement would be “essential” if any reconciliation pact was agreed on in Afghanistan.

The rapidity with which the terrorist events have occurred in Pakistan since the Red Mosque operation in Islamabad in the summer of 2007 has brought about a qualitative shift in the country’s security situation and its security establishment’s subsequent response to domestic terrorism. During this period, a number of “firsts” have occurred regarding how Pakistan’s security establishment, civilian government, and society as a whole perceive the threat from terrorism and desire to combat it. There exists broader political and societal consensus in Pakistan to eliminate terrorism. The public opinion is heavily tilted against the Taliban and supportive of the army operations. Pakistan’s army and paramilitary forces are waging a counterinsurgency campaign against domestic terrorist organizations, particularly TTP. And the country’s civilian government fully owns this campaign. Even if this campaign has so far targeted only those groups involved in domestic terrorism, this is a development worth acknowledging. In the years preceding the Red Mosque operation, the country’s security establishment pursued a lenient approach even toward home-grown Taliban or pro-Taliban groups in the tribal areas and Swat region. This approach might have continued if the TNSM had not revolted in the Malakand Division and expanded its terrorist agenda beyond the Swat Valley in early 2009, or if the TTP had not made south Waziristan a base to orchestrate a lethal terrorist campaign across the country.

Thus, it is clear from the above discussion that it was the severity of the domestic terrorist threat that left Pakistan’s civilian government and security establishment with no option but to undertake a resolute military offensive against domestic terrorist-insurgents groups like TTP and TNSM. That this development has brought about some compatibility between U.S. and Pakistani counterterrorism approaches during the time the Af-Pak strategy has evolved or been implemented is, therefore, largely coincidental. However, since the same period has also seen credible expansion of political and security cooperation in U.S.-Pakistan
ties, the possibility of such cooperation indirectly contributing to the existing convergence between the two countries’ counterterrorism approaches cannot be overlooked.

As already pointed out, the most serious area where the counterterrorism stances of the United States and Pakistan seemed to seriously diverge until recently pertains to Pakistan’s reluctance to extend the security operation to north Waziristan. In its bid to defeat TTP, the country’s security establishment has cut deals with two Taliban groups, one led by Mullah Nazir in south Waziristan and another led by Hafiz Gul Bahadur in north Waziristan, both of which allegedly provide safe haven to the Afghan insurgent group of Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin Haqqani. For months, the United States urged Pakistan to target the Haqqani network and its supportive local groups with as much interest as it has displayed in fighting TNSM, TTP, and al-Qaeda-linked Uzbek warriors. The United States is additionally concerned about Pakistan’s failure to bring to task the al-Qaeda leaders and other terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. All of these concerns were expressed by President Obama in a letter delivered by his National Security Advisor James Jones to President Asif Ali Zardari when he visited Pakistan in November 2009. In the letter, Obama warned Pakistan that its use of insurgent groups to pursue policy goals “cannot continue,” while calling for “closer collaboration against all extremist groups, including al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and TTP.”48 However, at the same time, to encourage the country to act against these groups, President Obama in the same communication guaranteed Pakistan “an expanded strategic partnership,” including “an effort to help reduce tensions between Pakistan and India.”49

The promise of beginning a genuine strategic partnership has been manifested in the first round of the U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue in March 2010, which will help address the principal Pakistani grievance with the United States, arising out of the latter’s abandonment of the country in the aftermath of the Soviet troops’ withdrawal from Afghanistan. The sustained multibillion dollar civilian assistance Pakistan will receive under the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act, several additional pledges of U.S. support for the country’s energy and other civilian sectors, as well as enhanced security and military assistance, create the essential framework for a long-term strategic relationship between Pakistan and the United States in the foreseeable future. Obviously, to sustain such a relationship, Pakistan’s security establishment would have to pragmatically reshape its counterterrorism approach in the region. Its preference to first crush those to strike the country’s security personnel and unarmed civilians is understandable and justifiable. Any other country in Pakistan’s place would have done the same.50 Likewise, cutting a deal with an insurgent group if it helps a country’s security forces to decimate their principal domestic terrorist enemy can also be rationalized. North Waziristan is a case in point.
However, because terrorism is principally a regional or international phenomenon, boundaries between groups committing domestic terrorism and organizations engaged in regional terrorism have really become blurred. That is why the so-called Punjabi Taliban in Pakistan, including sectarian outfits such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and even groups known to have practiced militancy in disputed Kashmir region, are also said to have been involved in some of the most spectacular acts of terrorism against both the country’s security establishment and its civilian population. Given that, Pakistan would have to evolve a comprehensive counterterrorism approach, one that makes no distinction between the so-called good Taliban and bad Taliban. Even if this is a critical choice that Pakistan itself has to make, the importance of other factors for the purpose, especially the ones emanating from the uncertain situation in Afghanistan, cannot be overlooked.

The Af-Pak strategy is supposed to pragmatically evolve in line with the way the intricate realities of the Afghan war take shape in the near future. It is quite uncertain at this stage to predict how this war effort will evolve over time: whether the Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan will recede or resurge in response to the new counterinsurgency options being exercised under the Af-Pak strategy. With the tacit approval of the United Nations, the Afghan government, led by President Krazai, has in recent months initiated the process to reconcile Taliban and other insurgent groups. Such reconciliation, conditional on the insurgent forces’ willingness to renounce violence and rejoin the political process, is an option the Af-Pak strategy also does not rule out. At the London Conference on Afghanistan and during his subsequent visit to Islamabad, Karzai has publicly acknowledged Pakistan’s crucial future role in facilitating the reconciliation process with Taliban-led insurgents in Afghanistan. He has even accepted Pakistan’s offer to train Afghan security forces.51 In June 2010, media reports suggested the Afghan leader had met with Sirajuddin Haqqani, with the chiefs of Pakistani army and ISI having played a key role in facilitating this meeting.52

Following the January 2010 London conference on Afghanistan, the Obama administration has also supported the Afghan-government-led process to reinte- grate low-level and mid-level Taliban insurgents. It is still unclear whether it wants to go a step further and support the Afghan government-led reconciliation process as well. However, the possibility of U.S. support to the Afghan reconciliation process at some time in the ongoing counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan cannot be foreclosed. If and when such possibility occurs, Pakistan’s role in reaching a pragmatically grounded political compromise in Afghanistan will be quite crucial. Consequently, the prevailing divergence between U.S.-Pakistani counterterrorism approaches pertaining to terrorist groups using Pakistan’s tribal areas to fuel Afghan insurgency may be over. If, simultaneously, the India-Pakistan peace process also makes sustained progress, with proactive U.S. support for the purpose, then the possibility of Pakistan abandoning its hitherto soft approach to
home-based Kashmir and India-specific terrorist organizations may not be ruled out.

While pursuing the Af-Pak strategy, the Obama administration has preferred to intensify U.S. engagement with Pakistan, rather than unduly pressure it to “do more”—as the Bush administration did, producing no concrete gains. It is only by engaging Pakistan more intensively in cooperative relationship that Afghanistan and India can hope to create a regional security framework, within which the problem of terrorism in South Asia can be jointly tackled. Pakistan must also be willing for such an engagement. For its alleged resort to irregular warfare as an instrument of national security policy has not only played havoc internally in the shape of unprecedented wave of terrorism in recent years, the country’s ties with India and Afghanistan, with which it shares long borders in the east and the west respectively, have also been severely strained due to the same reason.

The possibility of strategic partnership with the United States, the sole superpower, and a sustained friendship with strategically significant Afghanistan and economically rising India constitute unique opportunities for Pakistan to overcome its acute socioeconomic crisis and address its principal security dilemma. For Pakistan to benefit from this opportunity and tackle the challenges that it entails, India has to pragmatically reshape its outlook toward the country, considering it a crucial part of the solution to the regional conflict rather than a principal source of trouble in South Asia. The U.S. and Afghan governments have started to perceive Pakistan in this manner. The same could be said about India if the peace process made headway in the foreseeable future. The resumption of peace process with Pakistan is in India’s interest, as it frees Pakistan from its security concerns vis-à-vis India and helps its security establishment to fully concentrate on combating terrorist insurgent forces along the country’s western frontier with Afghanistan. Even otherwise, the continuity of lingering unresolved issues between the two countries, primarily the dispute of Kashmir, help al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups in the region to justify their terrorist cause and activity.

India’s principal grievance with Pakistan regarding crossborder terrorism is as much justified as Pakistan’s major frustration with India vis-à-vis the Kashmir dispute. Afghanistan may have suffered because of Pakistan’s interference, but the cost of recurrent warfare in Afghanistan for Pakistan has been equally high. It is by duly recognizing each other’s legitimate concerns and interests in the region that Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India together can lay the basis of a pragmatic relationship that will not only contribute to their relative growth and prosperity, but will also bring lasting peace and stability of the whole of South Asia. The Af-Pak strategy is construed in a manner that the possibility of negotiating peace with the very insurgent forces of today is not ruled out. The current intensification in the use of force in Afghanistan is also toward the same end. In the end, the Afghan conflict will be resolved through a compromise deal, but one guaranteeing that terrorism will not flow across the Afghan frontiers to destabilize the region and
the world. Whatever pivotal role Pakistan may likely play in Afghan settlement will also be for the same purpose.

The current regional and international climate certainly does not support a country that uses irregular warfare as an instrument of foreign policy. If Pakistan did opt for such a course in the aftermath of the Soviet troops’ withdrawal from Afghanistan in the late 1980s as part of a “bleed India” strategy, then the price it has paid eventually for doing so is no less. Pakistan cannot hope to be at peace if its two major next-door neighbors remain a victim of terrorism—and vice versa. Whatever pragmatic deal is reached in Afghanistan in the future, and whatever pivotal role Pakistan plays to secure it, its aim should be to prevent the war-torn country from once again becoming a principal source of regional and international terrorism. Neither Afghans nor any other nations in the region or the world can afford a chaotic Afghanistan with an extremist regime giving refuge to an international terror network. Given that, the United States and the international community must help Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India foster a relationship not just to help realize the Af-Pak strategy’s pragmatic objective of defeating al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies in the short run but also, and more important, to become a pivotal link between the energy-starved South Asia and Central Asia laced with hydrocarbon riches.

NOTES

1. Security establishment is an implicit reference to the Pakistan Army and the directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) because of their pivotal role in the country’s domestic and regional counterterrorism policies.


5. Ibid.


9. Ibid.

10. See full text of the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act, http://thomas.loc.gov/home/gpoxmlec111/s1707_enr.xml


18. The Afghan leader said: “Indeed, Pakistan has a significantly important role to play in that and Afghanistan will welcome that role. We in Afghanistan are fully aware and recognize that without Pakistan, and without its cooperation in Afghanistan, Afghanistan cannot be stable or peaceful.” Baqir Sajjad Syed and Ahmad Hassan, “Pakistan Will be Privy to Talks with Taliban: Karzai,” Dawn, March 12, 2010.


20. In June 2010, the chief of Afghan intelligence, the National Directorate of Security, Amrullah Saleh, and the country’s interior minister, Hanif Atmar, both known critics of Pakistan in the Karzai administration, resigned. Saleh’s reason for resignation was that Karzai was “increasingly looking to Pakistan to end insurgency.” See Jon Boone “Afghan Intelligence Chief Resigns, Accused by Karzai of Attempting to Sabotage Afghan Peace Plan,” Guardian, June 9, 2010.


24. Pakistan’s security establishment is often criticized for scuttling the country’s democratically elected civilian governments’ bids to improve relations with India. However, there are also forces in India who spare no opportunity in derailing the two countries normalization process. For instance, on the eve of Krishna’s visit, Indian Home Secretary G. K. Pillai accused Pakistan’s ISI of “literally controlling and coordinating the attacks from the beginning till the end,” a statement which the Indian External Affairs Minister said in Islamabad was “uncalled for.” Ibid.


43. Hirsh, “Replacing McChrystal Doesn’t Change Anything.”
47. I have written extensively on these issues in recent years. My several news columns on terrorism problem and counterterrorism progress in Pakistan published in Weekly Pulse since the Red Mosque operation in Islamabad in July 2007 can be accessed by clicking on the “commentaries” section of my official Web site, http://www.ishtiaqahmad.com/
49. Ibid.
50. The United States should naturally prioritize the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network as principal targets in its counterterrorism strategy because they threaten the U.S.-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. India’s primary concern should be terrorist organizations such as Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, whom it accuses of conducting crossborder terrorism in the country.