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# PAKISTANI MILITANTS AND THE STATE: FRIENDS, FOES, AND FRENEMIES


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Last month marked the two-year anniversary of Pakistan's long-awaited military incursion into the North Waziristan tribal agency. The operation, named Zarb-e-Azb, is still ongoing, and many assessments are mixed. Pakistan's civilian and military officials promised they would no longer differentiate between "good" militants and "bad" ones and Pakistani officials claim they have not. In reality, the Pakistan military remained selective in its approach. The Haqqani network, which pledges allegiance to the Afghan Taliban and was headquartered in North Waziristan, is

still off-limits. Haqqani militants were tipped off before Zarb-e-Azb began and conveniently relocated once the operation got underway.

Many analysts assert that operations like Zarb-e-Azb will never succeed until the Pakistani security establishmentstops making a distinction between good and bad militants. Others have observed that the military has at least begun to target some groups that previously received a pass, which is progress. Could this translate into a more consequential shift down the road? In "Beyond the Double Game: Lessons from Pakistan's Approach to Islamist Militancy," which the Journal of Strategic Studies recently published, I argue that interpreting Pakistan's actions vis-à-vis the militants on its soil requires doing away with the binary concept of "good" and "bad" militants.

There are four types of relationships that exist between the Pakistani state and the militants based on its territory: collaboration, benign neglect, belligerence, and coopetition. The policies Pakistan pursues regarding Islamist militants on its soil depends on how the security establishment understands the utility they offer and the threats they pose. Of course, Pakistan, like any country, will prioritize dealing with some threats over others. Thus, we must also recognize that the security establishment will consider the dangers posed by Islamist militants relative to other threats, such as include regional competitors, and endogenous movements motivated by ethno-separatist sentiment. Pakistan is also hardly the only country to treat Islamist militants on the basis of their usefulness or the threats they present. Indeed, this way of thinking about militant-state dynamics forms part of the foundation for a forthcoming book of mine that explores what the United States can expect from partner nations when it comes to counterterrorism.

Unpacking the Pakistani Calculus

Pakistan's security policy is preoccupied with countering Indian hegemony and preserving the internal integrity of the state. These two priorities reinforce one another. Weakness at home makes it more difficult for Pakistan to check Indian hegemony abroad. Simultaneously, India and Afghanistan are suspected of designs to weaken Pakistan from within by supporting ethnic separatists in Balochistan province and Islamist militants at war with the state. Viewed through this prism, Pakistani decision-makers in the security establishment believe they face threats from regional competitors (India and Afghanistan), as well as from both ethno-separatist and Islamist militants supported by them.

There is no open source evidence of Indian support, but New Delhi has abetted ethnic separatist movements in Pakistan in the past, so its presence in Afghanistan since 9/11 has stoked suspicion. Pakistani militants displaced by military incursions into FATA and the Swat Valley in 2009-2010 regrouped across the border in Afghanistan and began launching cross-border raids into Pakistan. After years in which Afghanistan was on the receiving end of attacks by Pakistan-supported militants, elements in the Afghan intelligence service (the National Directorate of Security or NDS) reportedly began enabling these cross-border attacks. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani sought toimprove relations with Pakistan after he took office in September 2014. It is unclear whether or how involved the NDS is when it comes to ongoing cross-border attacks, but many Pakistani militants still operate with relative impunity in parts of eastern Afghanistan. At

the very least, it is fair to assume that the capacity-strapped Afghan security forces are more focused on the insurgents attacking their country then the ones using Afghan territory to launch operations in Pakistan.

Pakistan is more divided than most other states when it comes to security policy. Divisions about whether and how to treat the militant infrastructure exist between civilian leaders and the military, as well as within the military and security services. The military controls Pakistan's security policies and is more wedded to a policy of supporting state-affiliated militant groups than civilian leaders, but has also been more forward-leaning about confronting belligerents.

Both the civilian parties and the military have leveraged various Islamist organizations with ties to militant groups to serve their own domestic political purposes. The utility that Islamist militants provide to Pakistan's political parties is not always consonant with the utility they provide to the military. Recognizing the heterogeneity of the state, most of what follows focuses on the perceptions of and actions taken by the military, which is the most powerful arbiter when it comes to militant policy.

Beyond the Double Game

As I noted earlier, there are four types of relationships that exist between the Pakistani state and the militants based on its territory: belligerence, coopetition, collaboration, and benign neglect. The first three are most relevant in the context of Zarb-e-Azb.

First, belligerence exists when the security establishment perceives a militant group to pose a high threat and have little or no utility low. Belligerence can be nuanced, since the state may classify a group as a primary, secondary, or even tertiary threat. Moreover, Pakistani capacity is not uniform throughout the country, which contributes to the variegation of responses to belligerent groups.

For example, although the TTP became the face of the Islamist insurgency in Pakistan, historically not every TTP faction qualified as a belligerent. Different ideological camps existed under its umbrella. One camp prioritized the fight against the state, the other focused mainly on fighting in Afghanistan. Because the TTP was never a unified actor, the security establishment has not treated it as one. As one would expect, the military and security services have prioritized fighting against TTP factions that favored revolutionary jihad at home. These actors were the primary focus of Zarb-e-Azb. Pakistani security forces have also targeted militants who split from organizations that originated in Punjab province and turned their guns against the state. Although the military has gone after these actors in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and reactively in the settled areas, some of them remain able to access the infrastructure outside FATA that belongs to the organizations from which they split.

Efforts to capture or kill members of core al-Qaeda declined after 2005, though the group and its local affiliates – al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) – still qualify as belligerents. Central Asian militants qualify, as well. Many of them are associated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and have cooperated closely with anti-state factions of the TTP. Some former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and TTP militants have announced their allegiance to the

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which the security establishment also appears to treat as a prominent threat in part because of its sectarian tendencies. Al-Qaeda, which is the group of most concern to the United States, was not the main targets of Zarb-e-Azb, but military efforts in North Waziristan combined with an ongoing presence in other tribal agencies almost certainly made it more difficult for al-Qaeda to operate.

Coopetition is the second type of relationship that may exist between militants and the state. The term is traditionally used to describe collaboration between business competitors that hope to realize mutually beneficial results. I use it to categorize the state's relationship with the mélange of groups that either have both a potentially high threat and utility or shift between collaboration, belligerence, and benign neglect. We might call these "frenemies" of the Pakistani state.

Various militant leaders have alternated between attacks against and collaboration with the military. For example, TTP commanders Hafiz Gul Bahadur and Maulvi Nazir each signed peace accords with the military after initially attacking it. Unlike other militants who also inked peace deals, Bahadur and Nazir largely abided by their accords. This was partly a function of priorities. Both men favored fighting in Afghanistan over attacking the Pakistani state. Tribal dynamics also factored into their calculations. As members of the Wazir tribe, they opposed Baitullah and Hakimullah Mehsud, the first two TTP amirs and members of the Mehsud tribe. The Pakistan military again exploited tribal dynamics in summer 2014 to reach a modus vivendi with TTP leader Khan Said (commonly known as Sajna) who opposed the current TTP amir, Mullah Fazlullah, on the grounds that he was not from the Mehsud tribe.

Cutting deals and pursuing coopetive relationships made sense when it was necessary to play FATA-based factions off against one another. As the military made progress against belligerent elements of the TTP, however, conservation of enemies became less necessary. As part of Zarb-e-Azb, the military targeted Hafiz Gul Bahadur, Sajna, Mangal Bagh, and has also eliminated other militant leaders who previously rode the line between friend and foe.

Third, Pakistan maintains a collaborative relationship with the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network. The military has historically avoided targeting either of them and this remained the case during Zarb-e-Azb. In return for the provision of sanctuary and other support continues, these state-affiliated organizations coordinate at least some of their activities with the military and refrain from launching attacks in Pakistan. The cessation of support would likely lead to a concomitant rise in anti-state violence.

The utility these organizations provide is the most apposite explanation for why the state supports or tolerates them. It is not the only reason. Although the Taliban and Haqqani Network do not directly counter revolutionary groups, they help reorient anti-state militants toward Afghanistan. Both also have acted as diplomatic interfaces with anti-state militants (and frenemies) to mediate cease-fires and peace deals.

Beyond Zarb-e-Azb

Many of the factors that informed how the military prosecuted Zarb-e-Azb will have resonance for counter-militancy efforts beyond the FATA. For example, Punjab, which is Pakistan's most

populous and powerful province, remains a hotbed of sectarian and jihadist groups. These include Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Sippah-e-Sahaba (SSP, which has since rebranded itself as Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaa), and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). Although their base is in Punjab, these organizations are active in other parts of Pakistan too.

Pakistani officials argue they are moving sequentially to avoid blowback and that actions against these groups will come as Pakistan implements its National Action Plan (NAP). Yet the NAP was passed in December 2014, and progress on implementation has been minimal. Moreover, the security establishment continues to apply the same type of segmented approach that was on display with Zarb-e-Azb to groups outside the FATA.

In terms of collaboration, LeT remains Pakistan's most reliable state-allied organization. The group is not only the military's most useful proxy against India, but has also has carried out a propaganda campaign against al-Qaeda and the TTP, demonizing them for attacks in Pakistan. The Pakistani security services used LeT to gather intelligence on anti-state militants and, at times, to neutralize them. LeT has provided similar services against separatists in Balochistan.

The security establishment has had coopetive relations with LeJ and JeM since 9/11.

LeJ is Pakistan's most active anti-Shia organization and has also been involved in numerous attacks against the state. Yet, there are allegations that military and ISI officers in Balochistan colluded with LeJ militants as part of a broader effort to quell the separatist insurgency there. LeJ leaders also enjoyed de facto protection from the government in Punjab, where they provided electoral utility to various politicians partly because of the popularity of the group's sectarian ideology. In the past year, the authorities have carried out a series of extrajudicial killings that eliminated top LeJ leaders, possibly because the group was drifting toward ISIL.

Progress against LeJ is offset by efforts to rehabilitate JeM, first for internal security purposes and then for use against India. Many JeM members began attacking the state after 9/11. After the group's leaders purged problematic cadres, the security establishment began using JeM to re-recruit militants who had become involved in anti-state violence and reorient them back toward fighting outside Pakistan. Resurrecting JeM also had potential utility against India. In January 2016, a team of JeM militants attacked the Pathankot Air Force Station in India.

SSP still benefits from benign neglect despite the fact that LeJ and other anti-state militants have repeatedly used its infrastructure to regenerate their ranks and launch attacks against the state. Civilian and military elites fear that a crackdown on organizations like SSP could result in a wave of terrorist attacks. SSP also provides electoral utility to various political parties, which count on it to deliver vote banks, and some of its members have even run for office themselves.

Maintaining distinctions between these groups might spare Pakistan another conflagration, but it also guarantees that militant violence will remain a constant feature of the landscape for the foreseeable future and potentially raises the cost of a future reckoning. Dismantling the militant infrastructure in Pakistan would take at least a generation and would come with considerable costs. It is naïve to suggest the security establishment will go after every group at once. Yet there is little indication the Pakistani security establishment has a plan for moving beyond a segmented

approach. We should not overlook what Pakistan has accomplished with Zarb-e-Azb, but we should be skeptical about Pakistan's intention to build on these gains.

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