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# A Pakistan-Based Terrorist Attack on the U.S. Homeland

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## Author Bio

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## *INTRODUCTION*

Several Pakistan-based groups have the capability to strike unilaterally against the United States. The chance of a joint attack by a syndicate of different actors heightens the threat. The impact would depend on a variety of factors. Under any circumstances, U.S.-Pakistan relations would be severely strained at a particularly delicate time with implications for U.S. operations in Afghanistan, ongoing counterterrorism efforts in Pakistan, and wider efforts to promote stability in the region.

## *THE CONTINGENCY*

Pakistan-based terrorist groups could either unilaterally or collaboratively launch an attack against the U.S. homeland. Al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan remain preoccupied with striking America, though al-Qaeda's independent capacity to orchestrate another major attack against the homeland has been limited by counterterrorism efforts since 9/11. However, its leaders might work with or through associated Pakistani outfits. Even a joint operation would help al-Qaeda demonstrate that it remains relevant.

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is the most likely Pakistani outfit to attempt a unilateral strike against the United States or to cooperate with al-Qaeda. The TTP has threatened attacks against the U.S. homeland, considers itself at war with Pakistan, has been a regular target for U.S. drones, and already attempted one attack against the United States when it trained and deployed Faizal Shahzad to trigger a car bomb in Times Square in 2010. Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the Haqqani network are instruments rather than foes of the Pakistani state. Its army and Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) are believed to be putting pressure on both organizations to refrain from striking Western interests abroad. Unless the Pakistani security establishment wants a showdown with the United States, this is unlikely to change. However, LeT killed American citizens during the 2008 Mumbai attacks and members from both groups are believed to have been involved in a nascent plot to launch Mumbai-style raids in Europe in 2010. Both also could provide support for an attack. Integration among these and other groups in Pakistan has increased the threat of a collaborative strike.

An operation involving conventional explosives is most likely. It is impossible to rule out the use of a nuclear or radiological attack, but this is highly unlikely given the difficulties inherent in material acquisition, construction of a device, and transiting it to the United States. This contingency is limited to a conventional attack, which could still claim numerous lives. The casualty count likely would be among the largest determining factors in terms of how Washington responds, and it is difficult as well as unrealistic to affix a precise number. This contingency presumes an attack claiming at least fifty people and as many as five hundred, assessing possible responses along this range.

## WARNING INDICATORS

Unless precise information pertaining to a planned attack was intercepted or obtained in some other way, the United States would have to rely on circumstantial evidence to provide advance warning. Relevant indicators include: notable declaratory statements by militant leaders, heightened Internet “chatter” among sympathizers, evidence of special recruitment and training—particularly of U.S. citizens, residents, or Westerners from other countries able to take advantage of America’s Visa Waiver Program—the pre-positioning of money and support personnel, suspicious purchases, and the “casing” of potential targets. Unusual activities that could be interpreted as designed to lessen the exposure of a militant group or its leaders to anticipated U.S. retaliation *following an attack* could constitute another indicator. Connecting the dots in an accurate and timely way, however, would still present a major challenge.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS

A successful terrorist attack of any proportion by a Pakistan-based group or groups would have significant domestic and foreign policy implications for the United States. Although the economic repercussions are unlikely to be as severe as those following 9/11, even a small attack could trigger a short-term dip in already shaky global markets. An attack also would reintroduce a sense of domestic vulnerability, particularly if it claims hundreds as opposed to tens of lives and/or the target is an iconic one. The origin of the attack—Pakistan—would cause a distraction from other pressing foreign policy concerns. All of these issues would be magnified by the forthcoming presidential campaign season.

The immediate impact on U.S.-Pakistan relations would depend on several factors—the nature and scale of the harm committed; which group(s), if any, claimed responsibility; the immediate public response by the Pakistan civilian government and military; and the level of cooperation they subsequently offered. The number of people killed is likely to be among the largest determining factors in a response, though an attack against a political or military target that causes few casualties could also have a major impact. Any indication that individuals or entities associated with the Pakistan army or ISI had foreknowledge of the strike or had in any way aided it would have severe consequences for the bilateral relationship. Even if there were no smoking gun, the involvement of a culprit with institutional ties to the state would be incredibly deleterious, as would Pakistan’s failure to cooperate with U.S. authorities in the wake of the attack.

Much rests on the bilateral relationship. A complete rupture is unlikely because both sides have a lot to lose. A further deterioration in relations could seriously compromise counterterrorism and nonproliferation interests, not to mention regional diplomatic initiatives, especially in Afghanistan. Pakistan’s security establishment also might enact a short-term closure of corridors through which U.S. supplies pass into Afghanistan. Were a complete rupture to occur, this could lead to an indefinite closure of these corridors, an end to Pakistani support along the Durand Line, and an increased flow of insurgents across the border. The U.S. diplomatic mission to Pakistan could shrink significantly, Pakistani counterterrorism cooperation could cease, and in a worst-case scenario the threat to American interests from outfits being restrained by the army and ISI could grow.

## *PREVENTIVE OPTIONS*

In addition to the extensive homeland security measures already in place, a range of policy tools are available to help prevent a terrorist attack by a Pakistan-based actor or actors. These can be mixed and matched in different ways to produce different policy “packages” that vary according to the emphasis given to certain approaches over others as well as the level of cooperation received from Pakistan.

### **International Counterterrorism Cooperation**

Cooperation with allies outside of Pakistan is ongoing, but could be expanded in some areas. U.S. counterterrorism professionals are already working with European counterparts to track Westerners traveling to Pakistan, and can be expected to continue to do so. Counterterrorism cooperation with India has increased since the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Deepening this relationship could enhance efforts to monitor, degrade, and dismantle terrorist networks in Pakistan’s near abroad. For similar reasons, the United States could expand its counterterrorism cooperation with Bangladesh and Nepal. Increasing cooperation with India is not without costs, since the Pakistani security establishment will perceive this as threatening to Pakistan’s national security interests. If the ISI is unwilling to share intelligence to disrupt these networks, this reduces the costs, but Pakistani cooperation in other areas might still suffer. The United States could press Gulf allies for greater assistance with monitoring or dismantling logistical networks, particularly where they differ from those dedicated to financing, which have received more attention.

### **Bilateral U.S.-Pakistan Counterterrorism Measures**

There is a disconnect between U.S. and Pakistani perceptions of security, especially when it comes to various militant outfits. Absent a paradigm shift by the Pakistani security establishment it is unlikely the militant infrastructure will be dismantled. Pakistan is facing an insurgency and the security establishment seeks to avoid antagonizing those entities that abjure attacks against the state. Most of those entities also provide an asymmetric means of redressing Pakistan’s conventional military imbalance with India. Attempts to secure cooperation are also hampered by the state of civil-military relations in Pakistan, where the army predominates and promotes a more hawkish line than civilians. Despite this, both the Pakistan army and the U.S. government have a stake in the civilian government’s survival: for the former, it does not wish to rule overtly; for the latter, a military coup would force it to face the externalities (in Pakistan and internationally) of supporting another martial regime. The ISI remains answerable to the army, but its line-level officers have significant autonomy and pose a higher risk of rogue activity.

Washington can pursue medium- to long-term regional solutions to promote the type of geopolitical transformation necessary for sustainable Pakistani action against militancy. The United States has significant influence in shaping a sustainable resolution to the war in Afghanistan, and one suitable to Pakistan. Washington can encourage a breakthrough in Pakistan-India relations and could act as a safety net to keep nascent talks on Kashmir from stalling. The United States could also increase diplomatic overtures to Pakistani allies China and Saudi Arabia with the aim of convincing them to signal their concerns about support for militancy. An unstable Pakistan whose territory continues to be used by militant outfits is in neither country’s interests, particularly as some of those outfits are hostile to them. Nor would either country wish to find itself in conflict with the United States in the

event of an attack. Finally, the U.S. government can continue investing in Pakistan's civilian institutions to rectify the civil-military imbalance.

None of these efforts are likely to lead the Pakistani security establishment to dismantle the entire militant infrastructure or take serious action against groups like LeT or the Haqqanis in the short-term, and the United States enjoys limited leverage when it comes to encouraging such action. Neither the provision of civilian aid nor threats to end it are likely to change Pakistan's behavior, though continuing this assistance is an important means of signaling America's long-term commitment to Pakistan as well as to encouraging the growth of stronger civilian institutions. Threatening to cut or postpone military aid has been shown to provide only minimal and short-term leverage of a tactical nature. It is also not without costs, as cutting assistance could undermine Pakistan's military capabilities and hamper cooperation. The current practice of unilaterally creating benchmarks is unlikely to be sustainable, suggesting a renegotiation might be in order. Another possible approach would be to transition toward a more structured military assistance package with disbursements based on negotiated security objectives and criteria for degrading the militant infrastructure in Pakistan and subject to verification of progress vis-à-vis mutually agreed benchmarks. This could prove a more constructive arrangement, though it is questionable whether either side is prepared to embrace anything other than a short-term transactional relationship at this stage. The basic incentive structures for both sides remain in place at the macro-level in terms of maintaining the bilateral relationship, but both sides appear to be rethinking whether that should remain the case and neither side trusts the other. Relations have been seriously strained since the 2010 U.S. troop buildup in Afghanistan, and they plummeted after the Raymond Davis affair in January 2011 and then the U.S. raid that killed Osama bin Laden in May.

Cooperation from Pakistan continues to be sought on multiple fronts and is most likely to be successful at the operational level to degrade the threat from actors both sides can agree on (al-Qaeda and the TTP). The Pakistani security establishment has decreased the space for U.S. capacity-building to enable actions against these actors, which makes other elements of an insulation strategy aimed at preventing a terrorist attack more critical. Washington could push for more action, including the provision of additional intelligence about specific militant organizations, especially regarding their transnational networks. Increased pressure can also be placed on the army and ISI to disrupt threats as they arise and neutralize important operational leaders, or to allow civilian agencies to take such action. Re-granted access to and mobility in Pakistan for U.S. intelligence officers and Special Operations forces could help in this regard.

The United States would have more leverage after an attack than it does trying to prevent one, but American officials need not wait until an attack occurs to telegraph to Pakistan likely responses. Experience suggests this is best done through diplomatic channels as opposed to via the media, though there is a range of public means to support such messaging. Issuing threat advisories regarding specific attack plans signals the United States has intelligence and can act on it and thus can help compel Pakistan to act. Congressional hearings provide a venue for discussing retaliatory options should an attack occur. Privately, CENTCOM could create a target package that includes assorted terrorist infrastructure, including that of valued assets. Elements of this package could be shared with Islamabad and the army. Although this risks inflaming tensions and tips America's hand in the event it chose to launch strikes following an attack, it is a means of explicitly outlining possible repercussions.

### **Unilateral U.S. Offensive Counterterrorism Measures**

Unilateral action removes the prospect that elements in Pakistan will compromise an operation, and adds credibility to any future U.S. threat to act on its own in the event of intransigence by Pakistan.

Drone strikes have allowed the United States to degrade militants' capabilities, disrupt their operations, impede effective command-and-control, and sow mistrust regarding possible infiltrators. However, although American intelligence has shown itself able to launch these strikes without Pakistani approval or assistance, their overall efficacy is reduced when done without cooperation. Further, few strikes have been carried out beyond the tribal areas and most are believed to kill low-level militants. While Washington could consider extending their scope, this response would be technically challenging. It would also provoke a harsh response from Pakistan's leaders as well as fuel anti-American sentiment among the populace, which could hinder cooperative efforts to contain and degrade the militant threat. Moreover, escalating drone strikes in advance of an attack could reduce the space for escalation in the event of one. These strikes also create additional foot soldiers and sympathizers.

The United States could execute additional commando raids of the sort that killed Osama bin Laden, but these pose even greater operational and political risks. For example, following the bin Laden raid, Pakistan pressed Washington to reduce the number of intelligence agents, Special Operations forces, and military trainers on its territory. Hence the benefits of such raids must be weighed against the likely impact on further Pakistani cooperation.

### *MITIGATING OPTIONS*

Domestic opinion and the need to avoid being viewed internationally as unable or unwilling to hold Pakistan accountable for an attack emanating from its soil would put intense pressure on the Obama administration to take immediate, direct, and visible action. The level of pressure will depend on the nature and scale of the attack, the available evidence about the perpetrators, and their possible links to official elements in Pakistan. Avoiding hasty actions based on erroneous or incomplete information will be essential. While the principal goal should be to punish those responsible for the attack and deter others, U.S. policymakers must ensure that responses do not cause irreparable harm to relations with Pakistan or destabilize it in ways that are harmful to U.S. interests. This, after all, may be one of the perpetrators' objectives. Furthermore, U.S. responses should be calibrated to reduce collateral harm to ongoing and future counterterrorism cooperation as well as the success of ongoing military operations in Afghanistan, including current plans to draw down U.S. forces and promote political reconciliation. The potential harmful impact of U.S. responses on regional stability—notably relations between Pakistan and India—as well as global counterterrorism initiatives, also need to be weighed. Several measures can be taken before an attack to help U.S. decision-makers manage its aftermath, and a range of post-attack responses are conceivable.

#### **Pre-Attack Measures**

Public diplomacy is unlikely to lead to a significant decrease in anti-Americanism among the overall populace, but emphasizing America's commitment to Pakistan through visible contributions and attempts to cooperate on a range of issues remains important, at the least to avoid ceding the field. Private messaging to opinion-makers, politicians, and military leaders is equally if not more important, and could also include discussion of the possible U.S. responses to an attack as well as the likely ramifications for Pakistan should Washington's expectations not be met. Obvious requests Washington likely would make could be discussed and U.S. assistance offered in advance to help Pakistan implement them. Transmitting these messages via diplomatic channels as opposed to the media could help avoid embarrassing or angering Pakistani officials.

Domestic outreach is also necessary. Given the important influence of public and especially congressional sentiments on any U.S. response, one pre-attack measure the White House might take would be to reach out to congressional leaders in both parties to sensitize them to its concerns, the likely policy options it would have in the event of a terrorist strike and current efforts underway by both the United States and Pakistan to prevent an attack. Such outreach could help facilitate coordinated messaging by both branches to Pakistan in the event of an attack.

Washington would want to develop a campaign plan that accounts for a variety of scenarios and potential Pakistani responses. Broadly speaking this would include a mix of options for unilateral direct action coupled with diplomatic initiatives, including inducements, rewards and punitive measures. The United States will want to build up its knowledge of terrorist networks in Karachi and Punjab province (significant information already exists regarding the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA) that could be necessary in the event of either a joint or unilateral military response. Although Pakistan is unlikely to close supply corridors to Afghanistan indefinitely (barring a complete rupture in relations), campaign planning should consider potential disruptions and include a buildup of larger emergency reserves and/or the use of routes via Central Asia. U.S. (and Coalition) Forces also would need to prepare to manage the Durand Line without Pakistani cooperation.

### Post-Attack Measures

If al-Qaeda or the TTP were responsible, it would be difficult for the United States to take advantage of the situation to press for immediate action against other outfits and it would be necessary to weigh demands for Pakistani cooperation against the desire to push for broader progress against militancy. Were the Haqqanis or LeT involved, Washington can be expected to push for either a military offensive in North Waziristan or a vigorous and sustained crackdown on LeT. Regardless of the culprit, an aggressive public diplomacy campaign would be needed to explain the United States is targeting specific militants who attacked it (as opposed to targeting Pakistan) and to provide evidence of those militants' culpability. Washington can be expected to insist the civilian government and military publicly support this messaging as well as pledging Pakistan's cooperation on any response.

Additional demands on Pakistan will vary, but could be expected to include some or all of the following: assistance with investigations and cooperation with the FBI; a law enforcement or military crackdown against the group(s) involved in the attack; arrests of known leaders and key operatives, followed by the provision of access for U.S. investigators to those detained and then either indictments or extradition; intelligence-sharing regarding potential targets for retaliatory drone strikes; a jointly planned military response in FATA with close U.S. oversight; and authorization for U.S. Special Forces to increase their presence in FATA for the purposes of joint operations. The United States could begin with manageable requests along the lines of a joint investigation and access to detainees, building from there depending on how the situation develops. If the casualty count is low then Washington could limit its demands and accept some portion of those made. The higher the casualty count the less flexibility Washington will have, hence limiting space for compromise and time for Pakistan to respond. This would also be the case in the event official culpability came to light, in which case Washington could be expected to demand a purge of whichever official entity was involved. If such a purge were not carried out, U.S. policymakers could be expected to interpret this as a sign that Pakistan's military leaders lacked authority within their institutions and/or were hostile to American interests.

The civilian government will take its cues from the Pakistan army, whose willingness to cooperate is likely to be influenced by the level of destruction, identity of the perpetrators, and involvement (or

lack thereof) of any military or intelligence officials. The White House will have the best optics on Pakistan's response and outreach to Congress throughout the crisis would be necessary to ensure both branches are in sync regarding Pakistan's efforts. Were the Pakistan army unwilling to cooperate to the degree the United States required or if it sought to block civilian authorities from doing so, Washington could signal the negative and positive incentives available to it.

The United States already has resorted to curbs on military assistance and could do so again as a means of signaling its readiness to impose costs. Washington has the ability to impose other punitive measures including a complete cessation of military aid, labeling Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism, and targeted sanctions. In a worst-case scenario, the United States could attempt to isolate Pakistan internationally, thus diminishing its access to financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund and Asian Development Bank (whose support dwarfs U.S. civilian aid). These measures could be threatened or employed as part of a phased escalation that also included the threat or use of expanded drone strikes or direct actions raids. Significantly increased unilateral action or efforts to achieve international isolation risk destabilizing Pakistan and thus heightening security threats to U.S. interests as well as to the South Asian region, and would need to be treated as a last resort. Any phased escalation to compel Pakistani cooperation could also be coupled with positive inducements such as increased aid flows and the provision of specific military hardware, as well as reassurances of U.S. intentions in Afghanistan and perhaps even a commitment to limit Indian influence there. Finally, the ability of the United States to build international support, necessary to bring pressure to bear on Pakistan, would depend partly on the evidence it was able to present as well as the forum in which it could be displayed.

While Washington should be prepared to escalate, the Pakistani security establishment is unlikely to allow a situation to develop wherein the United States is forced to take such extreme measures. If history is a guide, it can be expected to sign off on most U.S. demands, save the introduction of foot soldiers or expansion of drones outside FATA, before the crisis escalates to a critical stage. However, it could also be expected to backtrack over time. Thus it would be necessary to ensure follow through, suggesting oversight mechanisms should be part of any agreed upon cooperative response and that the United States will need to retain a credible threat to guard against slippage.

Throughout the crisis, Washington should be expected to transmit to New Delhi via diplomatic channels its preference that India avoid attempting to capitalize on the crisis as well as to communicate with Kabul regarding the impact on U.S. intentions and activities in Afghanistan.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States should work bilaterally with Pakistan where possible and unilaterally when necessary to avert a terrorist attack by a Pakistan-based militant group. However, whereas both countries share an interest in avoiding such a contingency, U.S. leverage is limited when it comes to prevailing on the Pakistani security establishment to dismantle fully the militant infrastructure that could make such an attack possible. Given these circumstances, the United States should do the following:

- *Enhance counterterrorism measures to reduce the likelihood that a homegrown or Western actor trained in Pakistan could execute an attack.* U.S. authorities are already tracking the travel of Westerners to Pakistan and should press the relevant authorities there to interdict those attempting to connect with Pakistan-based militant outfits. U.S. authorities should increase the focus of counterterrorism cooperation and intelligence sharing with allies in the Gulf on networks that could be used to recruit operatives or support attacks, as well as expanding similar cooperation with, and support to, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal to confront networks in Pakistan's near abroad. Either in concert

- with allies or unilaterally, the United States should infiltrate and/or dismantle these networks.
- *Pursue cooperative efforts with Pakistan to contain the terrorist threat and explicitly outline the severe repercussions that would result were an attack against America to emanate from its territory.* Signaling should be done through private diplomatic channels to avoid inflaming anti-American sentiment or promoting the public perception that actions are being taken as a result of U.S. pressure. Private pressure should be brought to bear on the army and ISI to provide intelligence regarding the most relevant militant groups, to assist in the disruption of specific threats as they arise, and to neutralize important operational leaders or to cooperate with the United States to do so. This pressure should include allowing civilian intelligence and law enforcement agencies in Pakistan to take action against militant outfits and to cooperate with their American counterparts. Washington should also continue to push for a military incursion into North Waziristan, though the likelihood of success remains limited.
  - *Increase efforts to build counterterrorism capacity among civilian law enforcement and intelligence agencies in Pakistan.* The United States should enhance aid for civilian investigative and intelligence agencies as well as law enforcement departments throughout the country. It should consider making any military aid package contingent on acceptance of this civilian counterterrorism aid as well as access for American trainers to work with law enforcement and civilian intelligence agencies. In addition, it should explore the feasibility, costs, and benefits of assisting (directly or through a third party such as Saudi Arabia) Pakistani efforts to develop a deradicalization program.
  - *Recalibrate the use of direct action.* The United States should continue to use drone strikes to eliminate high-value targets and essential mid-level commanders, but it should consider significantly de-escalating their overall use. Doing so could help to reduce bilateral tensions, overall anti-American sentiment, and the risk of mobilizing recruits who join militant outfits out of anger or a thirst for revenge. De-escalation now could also provide greater space for a threat of re-escalation in the event leverage was needed later.
  - *Restructure how the United States provides aid to Pakistan.* To clarify U.S. expectations and enhance leverage in the relationship, the United States should reinforce the separation of civilian aid from military assistance. It should also maintain civilian aid as a means to improve bilateral ties and the capacity of Pakistan's civilian institutions. In addition, it should restructure Pakistan's military assistance package with disbursements, including Coalition Support Funds, based on mutually agreed security objectives and criteria for degrading the militant infrastructure and subject to verification of progress vis-à-vis negotiated and observable benchmarks.
  - *Prepare for an attack.* The United States should develop a response plan that includes a mix of inducements, rewards, retributive measures, and unilateral actions vis-à-vis Pakistan and that takes into account the need for U.S. military forces in Afghanistan to prepare for an escalating crisis. Washington should also clearly communicate to the Pakistani security establishment the need for the United States to take direct and visible action in the event of an attack, and the expectation that Pakistan will support these efforts and acknowledge doing so publicly. The United States should also be prepared for a phased escalation in the event of Pakistani reticence, but avoid an immediately overaggressive unilateral response as well as the temptation to expand military action beyond the perpetrators responsible. In addition, it should ensure the inclusion of oversight mechanisms as part of any agreed upon cooperative response and be prepared to retain a credible threat to ensure Pakistani commitments are kept.
  - *Maintain perspective.* Despite the frustrating nature of the relationship, neither the United States nor Pakistan can afford a rupture. Avoiding one will remain a high priority, requiring a balanced effort in retaliating against the perpetrators responsible in the event of an attack.

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