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Obama's Challenge: Addressing Muslim Radicalization in Pakistan

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President Barack Obama's new administration is confronted by a host of crises not the least of which includes two wars and a historic financial slump facing the US economy. However the issue of Muslim radicalization in Pakistan is one that must be addressed if Obama is to make an impact on the strategic landscape of South Asia.

DURING Barack Obama's campaign for the presidency of the United States, he stated repeatedly that his candidacy was about "change". Change is exactly what is needed in the US approach to confronting the security landscape of South Asia. To effect a positive change in the region, the Obama administration must act in partnership with the Pakistani government. Together, they must develop a comprehensive approach to deal with the issue of Muslim radicalization which is gripping Pakistan and affecting the region as a whole.

Strategic Landscape of South Asia

General David Petraeus, commanding General of CENTCOM, the US Central Command, recently described the theatre of operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan as having "merged into a single problem set". As such, he stated, "the way forward in Afghanistan is incomplete without a strategy that includes and assists Pakistan". Any strategy to assist Pakistan must address the issue of Muslim radicalization if the security challenges facing the region are to be tackled effectively. A case in point is the tragic events which took place in Mumbai, where the Pakistan-based group Lashkar-e-Taiba is alleged to have staged attacks killing nearly 180 innocent civilians. This attack heightened tensions between Indian and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed powers, to uncomfortable levels.

Muslim radicalization in Pakistan also carries direct security implications for the stability of Afghanistan. Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives use Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) as a staging ground from which to launch attacks into Afghanistan. They have also taken advantage of the culture of radical Islam in the area to garner new recruits for jihad against coalition forces.

The stability of Pakistan's civilian government is equally threatened by homegrown radical Islamist

groups. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto is but one example of the level that radicalization has reached in Pakistan. The threat of further destabilization takes on yet another dimension when considering the possibility that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal may fall into the wrong hands if things spiral too far out of control. For these reasons the Obama administration must work in concert with the Pakistani government to address the roots of Muslim radicalization in Pakistan.

Tackling the Roots of Muslim Radicalization

The causes of Muslim radicalization in Pakistan are complex. They comprise both domestic factors such as political restiveness and economic under-development, as well as external factors, such as the aversion to US involvement in Pakistan and the larger problem of testy relations between the Muslim world and the West, in particular the US. But the challenge is not a new one and must be tackled if stability is to be achieved in the region. One area in Pakistan which has been particularly radicalized is the tribal belt. The majority of inhabitants in this region lack access to public education for their children. Failure of the state to provide education in this region has contributed to slow economic growth and has fed into the development of privately-funded madrassas.

While not all madrassas espouse intolerance or are amenable to radical Islamist ideology, the fact is that there are madrassas which serve as a recruiting ground for militant Muslim groups. It is these madrassas that the US government should pressure the Pakistani government to address while at the same time pushing it to provide public education in Pakistan's outlying areas which currently lack sufficient government programmes. A comprehensive approach is necessary to deal with Muslim radicalization in Pakistan.

Three-Pronged Approach

The Obama administration, in partnership with the Pakistani government, should implement a comprehensive approach consisting of three key factors: developmental aid, military aid and funding for the development of a Pakistani de-radicalization programme.

The Biden-Lugar bill provides \$15 billion in developmental aid to Pakistan. While this is a good start, there must be a focus given by the Obama administration to programmes designed specifically to address Muslim radicalization. Possible programmes might include public awareness campaigns designed to offer alternative sources of information; the building of a public school system which would teach students marketable skills; and public works programmes designed to develop infrastructure and jobs. However all of these programmes are not possible without adequate security in place.

It is therefore necessary that economic aid programmes like the ones described above be implemented in concert with the military assistance already being provided to Pakistan. Military aid should continue with the caveat that big ticket items like F-16s be shelved and replaced with an increase in sales of such hardware as helicopters, communication equipment and night-vision goggles, all of which would give advantage to the troops on the ground who are actively engaged in combating militants. Other military aid should include counterinsurgency training with the US military implementing a "train the trainer" approach, facilitating the Pakistani government in their fight against radicalization.

Finally, the Obama administration should provide the Pakistani government with funding for the development of a Pakistani de-radicalization programme. Current de-radicalization programmes in countries like Indonesia, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Egypt, utilize a mix of Islamic scholars and former militants to engage programme participants in theological and ideological dialogues designed to change their way of thinking about violence. All of these programmes have achieved, to varying degrees, tangible success in the countries where they are implemented and would offer the Pakistani government a similar edge in their fight against radicalization.

Enabling the Pakistanis to own the Fight

The Obama administration should however note that US operations in the region are extremely unpopular with the Pakistani population at large; as are efforts by the Pakistani government to

cooperate with the US in this regard. In fact, some argue that the US factor is a major cause of Muslim radicalization in Pakistan. Therefore implementation of the strategy outlined above must be seen as organic in nature, with Pakistani efforts taking centre stage. Any aid supplied by the US in these efforts should take place well behind the scenes so as to not look like intervention into Pakistani affairs.

By partnering with the Pakistani government and not dictating it to combat Muslim radicalization, the Obama administration will help bring about the change he promised on the campaign trail. Should President Obama succeed in Pakistan, this will also directly impact the security environment of South Asia as a whole.

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