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A Sea Change in Pakistan? Breaking Down the Arguments

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Pakistani forces have seized a number of high-ranking Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) leaders in recent weeks. Pakistan has actively supported the QST in Afghanistan (which it created in 1995) as a proxy force to ensure Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan and defend against Indian encroachment there. The recent arrests have caused a flurry of speculation about possible changes in Pakistani policy. Some analysts argue that these recent arrests signal Pakistan's wholesale abandonment of the Afghan Taliban while others are quick to dismiss these actions as self-serving. Pakistani decision making is rarely so clear, however, especially regarding an issue of such momentous importance. There appears to be a fissure in Pakistan's long-standing support for the QST.

Scenario 1: The Optimists

Supporters of the optimistic assessment that Pakistan has definitively turned against the QST argue that Pakistan is actively targeting the movement for two possible reasons. Either the QST's growing nexus with Pakistani Taliban poses too great a threat to Pakistan's internal security or the Pakistani establishment has come to believe that the coalition will be successful in Afghanistan and wants to be on the winning side.

The **first argument** is based on the assessment that the QST has grown too close to Pakistani militant organizations that have been at odds with the Pakistani establishment for years, but increasingly since late 2009. As these Pakistan-focused groups have become more powerful over the last two years, they have launched increasingly brazen attacks on the Pakistani establishment. Much of these groups' motivation appears to come from what these groups perceive as Pakistani kow-towing to the U.S., including Pakistan's docility in the face of U.S. drone strikes in Pakistani Taliban territory over the last several years. The back and forth between the government and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in particular reached a peak when Pakistan's Army launched an unprecedented assault on the TTP's South Waziristan sanctuary in the fall of 2009.

Currently, as Pakistan's Army consolidates its gains in South Waziristan and appears to be considering taking on militants groups elsewhere, some believe Pakistan has finally had it with their longtime ally, the QST and have decided to wrap them up as well. Senator John Kerry

announced that the capture of the QSTs second-in-command, Mullah Baradar, signaled Pakistan's determination to "go after the Taliban wherever they are."

The **second argument** optimists' offer is that Pakistan now believes that the coalition will be successful in Afghanistan and has decided to back the winning horse—which means giving-up the QST. According to this scenario, the Pakistani establishment has been convinced by substantial American military gains in Afghanistan as well as substantial U.S. and Saudi aid and diplomatic engagement that it is no longer beneficial to continue supporting the QST. Many analysts posit that the recent arrests of as much as half of the Taliban's senior leadership, including Mullah Baradar and, allegedly, Maulvi Kabir, are not accidental, but rather evidence of Pakistan's shift in strategic posture.

These optimistic assessments do not hold water. The QST is only concerned about defeating the coalition and Afghan government in Afghanistan and does not actively support attacks against the Pakistani state. In fact, on several occasions, the QST has sent emissaries to meet with the Pakistani Taliban to try to convince them to cease attacks on the Pakistani state and instead direct their efforts in support of the QST in Afghanistan. There is no evidence that the QST has operated against Pakistani interests or actively supported other groups in doing so, and thus no reason for the Pakistani establishment to have suddenly come to see the QST as a threat.

It is also unlikely that Pakistan's leaders have decided to give up the QST because they have concluded that the coalition will ultimately succeed in Afghanistan. Despite the influx of more than 30,000 troops and a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy, there has not yet been any defining event that could possibly have swayed Pakistan away from years of support for the QST. Military progress in Helmand progress, moreover, has been offset by President Obama's announcement of a July 2011 deadline for the start of an American withdrawal—a deadline that has received a great deal of attention in Pakistan as evidence of America's waning commitment. Optimists also point to substantial aid packages, high level diplomatic engagement and Saudi intervention as motivating factors that sweetened the deal. None of these developments address the core Pakistani interest in maintaining influence in Afghanistan, however.

Scenario 2: The Pessimists

Given Pakistan's longstanding support for the QST, it is prudent to be skeptical of the claim that Pakistan has rapidly reversed its stance towards its traditional proxies. That said, after Pakistan's arrest of a significant portion of the QST's senior leadership circle, some are still arguing that Pakistan's action against the QST does not represent a real a shift in its policy towards the Afghan Taliban.

The pessimists argue that Pakistan is instead acting selectively against specific targets with more Machiavellian goals in mind. They point to reports of a recent rift between the pragmatic Mullah Baradar and the more hard-line elements of the QST, including Mullah Omar. The pessimists allege that the Pakistanis only arrested Baradar and his coterie after they had been "expelled" from the Taliban's leadership and acted to make sure that less obedient members do not fracture the QST's cohesiveness. Baradar was allegedly conducting secret negotiations with Kabul that excluded the Pakistanis and had reportedly sent his subordinates to meet with UN representatives

in the Maldives and Dubai over the past several months.ⁱ Arresting those members of the QST who were looking to negotiate would allow the Pakistanis to make sure that Islamabad is not excluded from any kind of settlement in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has acted similarly in the past. In 2007, Pakistan arrested then-Taliban No. 2, Mullah Obaidullah in Quetta to coincide with a visit from Vice-President Cheney. The arrest allowed the Pakistanis to excise an uncooperative member of the QST while relieving U.S. pressures to “do more.” Similarly motivated arrests would be unlikely to herald a shift in strategic calculus. Seizing these senior leaders works to relieve international pressure to “do more” in the fight against the Taliban; demonstrate Pakistani primacy in any kind of talks for Afghanistan’s future; warn remaining members of the Afghan Taliban about straying too far from the nest; and deter any further cooperation with anti-Pakistan terrorist groups operating along the border.

However this skeptical interpretation of Pakistani action does not account for many of the key differences between this recent set of actions and past Pakistani practice, however. For instance, in late February, The New York Times reported that the C.I.A. and its Pakistani counterpart, the ISI, have been working hand-in-hand, carrying out dozens of raids throughout the past year.ⁱⁱ According to multiple sources, the C.I.A. was also reportedly involved in the capture of Mullah Baradar. Such joint activity exhibits a meaningful and unprecedented degree of agency to agency cooperation.

Furthermore, if the Pakistanis were merely trying to relieve U.S. pressure and send a message to errant Taliban members, they needn’t have acted quite so expansively. Unlike the singular arrest of Obaidullah in 2007, Pakistan has arrested a significant portion of the QST senior leadership—an action that risks weakening the QST politically and militarily even as it faces its most significant challenge to date with the change in American and NATO strategy in Afghanistan. Additionally, both CENTOM Commander General David Petraeus and Ambassador Richard Holbrooke have publicly dismissed the characterization that Pakistan is acting in order to undercut negotiations with, or reassert control over, the Taliban.

Scenario 3: The Pragmatists

The most sensible interpretation of recent Pakistani action recognizes that very little is actually known about the arrests or their circumstances. When trying to interpret state behavior, it is important to consider the reality that a state is not a single, unitary actor. Rather, Pakistan’s internal decision making process is subject to the same pressures as any other state. Decision making doesn’t take place in a vacuum—it is a dynamic process subject to push and pull from internal actors that might not see eye to eye. This is to say, it is possible that Pakistan’s various actors no longer have a consensus and their policy vis-à-vis the QST is experiencing flux.

The decision to act against the QST will ultimately be made among the highest echelons of the Pakistani military establishment. Word has been circulating for some time that debate within that circle is ongoing as to whether and when Pakistan would begin to shed its Taliban proxies. Those who would continue wholesale support for the QST are no longer the only voices in the room and Pakistan’s actions towards the QST may be reflective of these differences.

In the end, it's too early to tell if the Pakistanis have reversed their policy towards the QST—or even if they will. It would be equally shortsighted to ignore the significance of the recent actions Pakistan has taken. We do not have all the pieces of the puzzle, nor do we really know which pieces are missing. For the first time we are seeing significant pressure being put on the QST in Pakistan at the same time that they are being squeezed militarily in Afghanistan. This novel situation and the opportunities it presents require careful consideration and are in many respects more important than understanding what exactly caused it.

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ⁱ Christiane Amanpour, "Kai Eide discusses time in Afghanistan and future strategy," CNN International, February 18, 2010

ⁱⁱ Mark Mazzetti and Jane Perlez, "C.I.A. and Pakistan Work Together, Warily," The New York Times, February 25, 2010