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The U.S. and South Asia: New Priorities, Familiar Interests

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Introduction

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon turned U.S. South Asia policy temporarily upside down, bringing Pakistan to center stage and putting parts of the U.S.-India agenda on hold. In the medium term - after the military operation most observers expect to take place in Afghanistan - the U.S. agenda will become more complicated. Besides pursuing its long term geopolitical interests, the United States will be trying to promote stability in the countries at the epicenter of the terrorism campaign. It will also need to deal with the incompatible agendas of its coalition partners.

Analysis

Pakistan: Besides sharing a long and porous border with Afghanistan, where apparent terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden has set up his home base, Pakistan has been exceptionally close to the Taliban regime. Pakistan provided financial and other assistance for the Taliban's rise to power in the mid-1990s and steady support since then. In a high-pressure bid for support, the United States made four main requests: intelligence on Afghanistan and on bin Laden; use of Pakistani airspace; logistical support; and use of Pakistan's full relationship with the Taliban as leverage in conveying U.S. demands. Putting its positive response into action, Pakistan sent two delegations to talk with Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Both groups included the head of the Inter-Services Intelligence Division (ISI), the Taliban's "home base" in Pakistan. The government has also been actively involved in military discussions with the United States.

Hopes and fears: Either a "yes" or a "no" in response to the United States carried serious risks to the Pakistan government. President Pervez Musharraf believed that the economic and political costs of a negative decision were potentially fatal to his government and to his hopes for the country. Musharraf lined up the support of the army before agreeing to the U.S. requests. He reached out to the mainstream political parties, and has thus far been able to keep the opposition of the religious parties and militant groups within manageable limits. He appears to be closing down the offices of the Harakat ul Mujahideen, one of the

militant groups that figured on the U.S. terrorism list, though this group has already re-invented itself once with a new name. Pressures from these groups and from "the street" will grow if there is military action in Afghanistan. Fissures could develop within the army if other top generals become dissatisfied with Musharraf's ability to keep things quiet, or if they feel he has not done justice to Pakistan's goals in Afghanistan or Kashmir.

Musharraf couched his decision in terms of the Indian threat. In a speech to the nation, he argued that India wanted Pakistan to be branded as a terrorist state, and that he was not going to fall into that "trap." He listed four key national interests that Pakistan would defend at all costs, including its nuclear arsenal and its "sacred cause in Kashmir." This list of issues reflects Pakistan's hopes for eventual U.S. political support and its extreme sensitivity about any suggestion that it is making common cause with India against fellow Muslims.

Conflicting agendas: The United States will not want to distract attention from its focus on bin Laden's Afghan refuge in this first phase, but will soon have to deal with diverging U.S. and Pakistani interests and expectations.

The United States will want to decrease violence in Kashmir, so as to reduce the risk of an India-Pakistan confrontation. Pakistan remains dedicated to pursuing its claims in Kashmir. Groups that are at least temporarily under wraps in Pakistan and Afghanistan may be all the more eager to be active in Kashmir. The bombing and gunfight at the state assembly building in Srinagar on October 1, for which Jaish-e-Mohammed militants claimed responsibility, is an ominous sign. Pakistan wants a firewall between the antiterrorism campaign and Kashmir, but rising violence in Kashmir will make that difficult, especially if civilians are targeted. Similarly, Pakistan stands by its goal of installing a friendly government in Afghanistan, whereas for the U.S., stable leadership in Afghanistan is the key post-crisis objective.

The United States will also be concerned about future stability in Pakistan itself. The need to calibrate U.S. approaches to Pakistan on Kashmir, Afghanistan, and other issues against fears of a further weakening of the Pakistani state has been a central issue in U.S.-Pakistan relations for the past several years. Economic aid will be an important element in U.S. policy. The crisis has already sent a new flood of refugees toward the Pakistan border, and they will need international support. In the present context, U.S. interest in stability

