

LOSS OF CONTROL

A state of bedlam in Kabul, Islamabad

Following Imran Khan's arrest, Pakistan has been thrown into turmoil. This explosion of political unrest, coupled with the Afghan Taliban regime's support for terrorists, has grave implications for global security

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Afghanistan and Pakistan are sinking deeper into disarray, and the United States bears a significant share of the blame. As long as this long-troubled region remains mired in turmoil, Islamist terrorism will continue to thrive, with grave implications for international security.

Begin with Afghanistan. In the nearly 22 months since the US abandoned the country to the Pakistan-backed Taliban militia, a terrorist super-state has emerged. Beyond committing atrocities against the Afghan people and re-imposing medieval practices, including reducing Afghan women's status to that of chattels, the Taliban has sustained cozy ties with al-Qaeda and several other terror groups.

As a leaked Pentagon assessment reports, Afghanistan has become a safe haven and staging ground for al-Qaeda and Islamic State terrorists planning attacks on targets in Asia, Europe, and the US. This should come as no surprise. The Taliban regime's cabinet includes a veritable who's who of international terrorists and narcotics traffickers, and it was in Kabul last year that an American drone strike killed al-Qaeda leader and United Nations-designated global terrorist Ayman al-Zawahiri.

While the Islamic State may be seeking to expand its international operations from Afghanistan, it is al-Qaeda's alliance with the Taliban that poses the greater long-term international threat. When the US withdrew suddenly from the country, it not only abandoned its allies there, but also left behind billions of dollars' worth of sophisticated American military equipment, in addition to several military bases, including the strategically valuable Bagram airbase. The Taliban is now the world's only terrorist organization with

its own air force, however rudimentary.

In a 12-page document issued last month, President Joe Biden's administration sought to shift the blame for the Afghan fiasco onto Donald Trump, claiming that Biden's "choices for how to execute a withdrawal from Afghanistan were severely constrained by conditions created by his predecessor." But, while the Trump administration undoubtedly cut a terrible deal with the Taliban, it was Biden who - overruling his top military generals - made the choices that triggered Afghanistan's descent into chaos and facilitated



the Taliban's swift return to power.

US policy toward Pakistan has also been deeply misguided. It is thanks to a long-standing partnership with the US that Pakistan's military and its rogue Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency have been able to use terrorism as an instrument of state policy against neighboring countries. The Trump administration seemed to recognize this, and pledged to keep Pakistan at arm's length until it ended its unholy alliance with terrorist organizations.

But the Biden administration has reversed this policy. Even though Pakistan played an

integral role in enabling the Taliban - which the ISI helped create in the early 1990s - to defeat the US in Afghanistan, the Biden administration helped the Pakistani government stave off debt default last year. Soon after, the US unveiled a \$450-million deal to modernize Pakistan's US-supplied F-16s (which it values as delivery vehicles for nuclear weapons). The US then helped Pakistan get off the "gray list" maintained by the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force, the inter-governmental agency combating terrorist financing.

Today, Pakistan is facing profound politi-

cal instability, rooted in a skewed civil-military relationship. Pakistan's military has long been untouchable. It has ruled directly for 33 years. And when not technically in power, it has insisted on a pliant civilian administration that defers to the generals' de facto leadership. Pakistan's military, and its intelligence and nuclear establishment, have never answered to the civilian government. On the contrary, since 2017, two prime ministers have been ousted after falling out of favor with the military.

But supporters of one of those prime ministers, Imran Khan, are now mounting the first direct challenge to the military's authority since Pakistan's founding 75 years ago. Following Khan's arrest on corruption charges earlier this month, mass protests erupted across Pakistan. Demonstrators stormed military properties, including the army headquarters and a major ISI facility, and set ablaze a top army commander's home.

As the political crisis unfolds, Pakistan continues to teeter on the brink of default. It is being kept afloat by short-term loans from allies, until it can convince the International Monetary Fund to restart a suspended bailout program. This gives the international community leverage to force change in the country.

It is developments at home, especially the unprecedented anti-military protests, that have the greatest potential to force a rebalancing of civilian-military relations. But the military will not go down without a fight: the creeping shadow of military rule has already led to mass arrests, with the chief of army staff announcing trials under military law of civilians charged in the recent violence. The military could declare a state of emergency, in order to give itself carte blanche to stifle dissent, or it could stage another coup. The conflict could also erupt into civil war - ideal conditions for international terrorist forces to thrive.

For now, Pakistan remains a hub of terrorism and is contributing significantly to Afghanistan's destabilization. Unless the nexus between Pakistan's military and terrorist groups is severed, the situation in Afghanistan will not improve, and the battle against international terrorism will not be won.

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