

Reports of the death of Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud demonstrate that cooperation between the U.S. and Pakistan against militants located in the tribal border areas is beginning to bear fruit. Although U.S. officials have not yet confirmed the demise of Mehsud, several senior Taliban leaders and Pakistan's foreign minister have declared he was killed by a U.S. drone missile strike in South Waziristan on Wednesday. If it was indeed successful, this strike represents the culmination of a campaign targeting Mehsud and his forces, an effort that has reportedly been facilitated by Pakistani intelligence.

In addition to continuing military cooperation--especially these highly effective drone attacks against militants--the U.S. and Pakistan must work together to implement economic development programs and political reforms, particularly in Pakistan's tribal areas, that are critical to long-term success in the struggle against terrorism.

A Boon for the Pakistani and International Fight against Terrorism

The elimination of Mehsud would constitute a significant victory for Pakistan's fight against terrorism, especially coming so closely on the heels of the Pakistani military's ousting of pro-Taliban forces from the Swat Valley in the settled areas of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Although many internally displaced persons remain fearful of returning to the Swat Valley, the Pakistani military operations there received widespread public support, and both the Pakistani military and civilian leadership appear determined to prevent the militants from returning to the region.

Mehsud's death could also change the debate about the use of drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal border areas, thereby helping to quell public anger over the U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorism partnership. In the past, Pakistani officials have denounced U.S. missile attacks in the tribal areas as counterproductive. The elimination of Mehsud, however, would make it difficult for Pakistanis to argue that the drones are not improving security in their own country, given that he was reportedly responsible for dozens of suicide bombings over the last 18 months that have killed several hundred Pakistani civilians and security personnel as well as the wife of current Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and political icon Benazir Bhutto.

Over the last several months, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship has been fraught with tension and frustration, particularly over the issue of Pakistani peace deals with militants. Tensions came to a head in mid-April when the Taliban moved from the Swat Valley into neighboring Buner district just one week after President Zardari approved a peace agreement with militants occupying the Swat Valley. Most observers believe that by moving into districts outside the Swat Valley, the militants overplayed their hand and revealed their long-term intentions of expanding influence throughout the NWFP. Pakistanis living outside of the northwest province had previously believed the Taliban's activities could be contained within the tribal areas and Swat Valley. A video that circulated in the Pakistani national media in early April showing Taliban leaders

whipping a young girl also helped turn Pakistani public opinion against the militants.

Though the death of Mehsud will likely provide a morale boost for the Pakistani security forces and public, overcoming the broader threat from militancy in Pakistan will be a long-term task. The government has declared most of the Swat Valley region cleared of Taliban fighters. However, the Pakistan military will have to remain in the region until the civilian government is able to re-establish its writ, build up democratic institutions, and prove it is capable of delivering basic services to the people or face the prospect of the Taliban's re-emergence in the region.

The rise of Mehsud itself provides a cautionary tale for those who support negotiating peace deals with militants from a position of weakness. The Pakistani government's peace deal with Mehsud in 2005 gave him the space to strengthen his position in South Waziristan and boosted his legitimacy, allowing him to attract more recruits.

Mehsud's death would also be a fillip for international counterterrorism efforts. Mehsud is suspected of being behind a 10-man cell arrested in Barcelona in January 2008 for plotting suicide attacks in Spain. There is no public record of his direct involvement in plots against the U.S. homeland, but he threatened to launch an attack in Washington last April. Mehsud's forces also cooperate closely with the al-Qaeda leadership and provide protection for al-Qaeda bases and training camps in South Waziristan. He also pledged his allegiance to Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar last February.

A Long Struggle

U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal border areas have been effective in disrupting al-Qaeda's activities and its ability to plan and train for attacks in Afghanistan and across the globe. Senior U.S. intelligence officials acknowledge that the campaign of sustained drone attacks in Pakistan that began about a year ago have led to greater success against al-Qaeda and its affiliates than any other tactic employed since 9/11.

However, drone attacks alone will not degrade the terrorist threat emanating from this region over the long term. Militant leaders can always be replaced. Achieving long-term gains against the terrorist threat in Pakistan will require:

- * Comprehensive military action by Pakistani security forces to establish government authority in the region;
- * Joint U.S.-Pakistan efforts to provide economic development and job opportunities; and
- * The institution of Pakistani political reforms that seek to incorporate the semi-autonomous border regions into the Pakistani nation-state.

Efforts to significantly increase U.S. economic aid to Pakistan over the next decade and to create Reconstruction Opportunity Zones near the border areas that would allow Pakistani goods U.S. duty-free access are currently under review by the U.S. Congress. Such measures would go a long way toward solidifying the U.S.-Pakistan partnership.

Moreover, these steps could facilitate change in the political and economic dynamics of the Pakistani border regions by creating economic opportunities that will help drain support for militant activities. None of this will be possible, however, unless the U.S. and Pakistan continue to work together with the recognition that the militants operating along the border pose a genuine threat both to the future of Pakistan as well as the safety and security of the broader international community.

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