Testimony of

Joshua T. White

Research Fellow, Center on Faith & International Affairs, Institute for Global Engagement;
Ph.D. Candidate, Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies

Before the

United States House of Representatives

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs

On

"Afghanistan and Pakistan: Understanding a Complex Threat Environment"
March 4, 2009

Thank you Chairman Tierney, Ranking Member Flake, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to appear before you today.

The timing of this hearing could hardly be more appropriate. Against the backdrop of the strategic reviews currently being conducted by this administration, it is a critical time in which to evaluate the precise nature of the threats posed to the United States by the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. My testimony will focus specifically on threats emerging from the Pakistani theater, and their implications for U.S. policy. I will begin by outlining what I consider to be three distinct threats which arise from the Pakistani context. I will then discuss in brief several troubling trend lines which have emerged in Pakistan's frontier areas over the last four years. And finally, I will suggest implications for the Subcommittee's oversight work as it evaluates the full spectrum of U.S. government efforts in Pakistan.

I. Major Threats to U.S. National Security

In the simplest of terms, the United States faces three distinct but overlapping threats in the Pakistani context.

a) Transnational terrorists. The first and most obvious threat is that which arises from Islamist terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda, which are deeply ideological in character, transnational in scope, and hostile both to the American and Pakistani state systems. The ongoing presence of an al Qaeda safe haven in the Afghan-Pakistani border areas has rightly been seen by U.S. policymakers as a serious long-term threat to U.S. national security interests.

b) Afghan-focused Taliban. The second threat is linked to self-identified Taliban groups who have adopted as their primary focus armed opposition to U.S. and NATO efforts in Afghanistan. These Taliban operations are largely carried out from Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the border regions of nearby Balochistan province. Pakistani Taliban use their safe havens to channel arms and recruits across the border, and thwart coalition efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.

c) Pakistani-focused Taliban. The third threat arises from self-identified Taliban groups within Pakistan which are intent on challenging and destabilizing the Pakistani state itself. Given Pakistan's geostrategic significance, its role as a leading country in the Muslim world, its history as a welcoming environment for a wide range of Islamist organizations, and its status as a nuclear power, this aspect of the Taliban agenda is in many ways more troubling than its aforementioned threat to the Afghan state. It remains

unlikely that Islamists will "take over" the Pakistani government, but it is easier to imagine scenarios in which the state is significantly weakened, and forced *de facto* to cede strategically meaningful portions of its territory to Islamist groups.

Implications. It is exceptionally difficult to disentangle these transnational, Afghan-oriented, and Pakistan-oriented primary threats.[1] Many so-called Taliban groups claim all three agendas, and to a certain extent policymakers should take them at their word. But in formulating and evaluating U.S. policy, it is nonetheless important to consider these threats as distinct challenges which often require distinct policies.

Moreover, there are real policy trade-offs at stake. By setting a high priority on the use of aerial drone strikes to disrupt al Qaeda activities, for example, the United States makes it politically difficult for the elected government in Islamabad to take firm action against Taliban groups which target NATO forces in Afghanistan, or even the Pakistani state itself. Similarly, an over-emphasis by the United States on pushing Pakistan to deal forcefully with cross-border Taliban operations into Afghanistan might encourage militant groups to turn their attention toward confronting the Pakistani state instead. Ultimately, any strategic review document which seeks to address the Afghan-Pakistan situation must evaluate not only macro issues — such as the state of Indo-Pakistani relations, global Islamist trends, etc. — but also must delve into the practical policy trade-offs that arise from trying to combat three distinct but overlapping threats.

---

[1] There is, arguably, a fourth distinct threat which is present in the Pakistani context, but is not as immediately implicated in the Afghan-Pakistani theater: that is, the threat from militant groups which target India and/or seek to disrupt Indo-Pakistani peace efforts. The erstwhile Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which orchestrated the Mumbai attacks in November 2008, is but the most prominent example of this threat. The Lashkar and other Punjabi groups like them have increasingly been partnering with Afghan-oriented Taliban operating from the Pakistani tribal areas.

II. Troubling Trend Lines

Over the last four years, several troubling trend lines have emerged among Islamist groups operating in Pakistan, and particularly along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

a) Consolidation. One of the most enduring features of the Afghan-Pakistani frontier areas is the formation of alliances-of-convenience between and among tribal blocs and Islamist groups. Most of these alliances are short-lived, asymmetric (involving a weaker power and a stronger one), and focused on confronting an "enemy of an enemy." In the troubled Waziristan tribal agencies, for example, the recently announced Shura Ittihad-ul Mujahideen (Council of United Mujahideen) is but the latest in a trend toward the apparent consolidation of radical groups. Over the last several years, a number of local movements such as the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) in the Swat valley of northern Pakistan have placed themselves under the umbrella of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Policymakers need to take these developments seriously, but at the same time should not assume that they represent the forging of longstanding alliances, or that they will result in real operational coordination between groups. There is a tremendous "branding" value to these alliances which often masks the fact that they represent little more than a temporary alignment of interests.

b) Fragmentation. At the same time that there is a trend toward apparent consolidation, there is also a very real trend toward fragmentation of Islamist groups in Pakistan. The label "Taliban," for example, has increasingly become a franchise term, used not only by true ideologues, but also by an array of local strongmen, tribal leaders, criminal gangs, smuggling networks, anti-Shia sectarian militias, and *ad hoc* groups of

unemployed, well-armed and disaffected youth. In recent months, for example, there have been reliable reports of Punjabi sectarian militias (which once were focused entirely on the conflict in Kashmir) operating alongside tribesmen in Waziristan; of Waziri tribesmen and foreign fighters operating alongside local TNSM activists in the Swat valley; and of child-kidnapping rings around Bannu district which claimed to be part of the Taliban movement. This trend toward fragmentation has real policy implications both for Pakistan and the United States. Neither country has the benefit of dealing with a single coherent Taliban organization, and the sheer diversity of the Pakistani Taliban makes it difficult for Islamabad to find points of leverage by which it can act against the movement as a whole. Perhaps most troubling, the practical result of this fragmentation has been a rise in the "swarm effect," in which militant groups converge on one or two regions of Pakistan at a time in an attempt to keep the government off balance.

      c) Expansion. Regardless of any other trends in the threat environment in Pakistan, one thing is clear: the reach of the Pakistani Taliban has expanded dramatically since 2005. Not only the FATA, but also provincially administered tribal areas such as Swat and Malakand, and so-called "settled" areas with modern systems of government such as Peshawar, Kohat, and Bannu are under threat from Taliban groups which challenge the authority of the state. While we should be wary of hyperbolic analyses — such as those which extrapolate the Taliban gains of the last four years to conclude that the entire North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) will soon slip out of the hands of the state — there is good reason to worry about the government's capacity to deal with the rising tide of militancy within its own borders. Realistically, the Taliban's strategy in the Pakistani frontier is likely to be quite sophisticated: they will 1) seek outright control of certain

strategic areas of the FATA; 2) attempt to blend in to the population in areas like Swat, and take advantage of local discontent regarding the failure of government services; and 3) cultivate "sleeper cell" capabilities in urban environments such as Peshawar, slowly expanding their influence without confronting the state directly.

III. Implications for Congressional Oversight

The combination of these aforementioned trends suggests that neither the United States nor Pakistan have the luxury of employing a single, one-size-fits-all approach to the growing threats in the Afghan-Pakistani border areas. In effect, there is not one monolithic Pakistan-based Taliban insurgency, but many localized insurgencies. And while remote tribal areas such as Waziristan are rightly in the news on a regular basis as the leading examples of militant safe havens, other regions such as Swat or Peshawar have very different dynamics and may require very different approaches. As the U.S. government conducts its strategic reviews of the region, it would do well to account for this variation. In particular, there are several issues which may deserve the ongoing attention of this Subcommittee.

a) **Aid and Development.** The Kerry-Lugar bill promises a major expansion of U.S. assistance to Pakistan. Well spent, this money could indeed bolster both the perception and the reality of long-term U.S.-Pakistani bilateral relations; mitigate a number of the secondary drivers of the Taliban insurgency in the border areas; and incentivize the continuation of civilian governance in Islamabad. But the Congress also needs to ask real questions about how the money is being spent, and where. It is, for example, questionable

whether underdevelopment is as important a contributing factor to radicalization in the Swat region as it is in Waziristan. In some locales, it is likely that a failed judicial system constitutes a critical factor in driving Taliban recruitment; in other locales, it may be the presence of mass unemployment, or the opportunities that the Taliban provide to profit from smuggling enterprises. Unless aid and development programming is targeted to these micro threat environments, it is unlikely to have the intended effect.

b) Governance. The Taliban, al Qaeda, and affiliated groups benefit from the systemic weakness of the Pakistani state, particularly in the border areas near Afghanistan. Although USAID has implemented several small and well-received governance programs, for the most part, governance has been a missing dimension of post-9/11 U.S. strategy toward Pakistan. Today the governance gap not only affects the delivery of goods and services, like healthcare and education, but handicaps the government's ability to respond to growing Talibanization. This is especially true in the tribal areas, which are governed indirectly by the hundred year old Frontier Crimes Regulation, and in which the state has hardly any presence at all. The sad reality is that American development assistance is simply not going to be effective in the FATA in countering radical ideologies unless the government of Pakistan and its allies find ways to increase the presence of the state in those areas. That challenge, in turn, requires building on traditional tribal and religious values to promote new institutions that expand the reach of the state.[2] This is ultimately a task for Pakistan to fulfill, but one that the United States can and must encourage, support, and incentivize.

---

[2] For more on this problem, see Joshua T. White, "The Shape of Frontier Rule: Governance and Transition, from the Raj to the Modern Pakistani Frontier," *Asian Security* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 2008).

c) Security Training. The Department of State and the Department of Defense, in close cooperation with the government of Pakistan, have undertaken important steps to provide training and equipment to the Frontier Corps and other Pakistani forces operating in the frontier. These programs are a welcome development. Over the last few months, however, it has become increasingly clear as a result of the army's operations against militants in Bajaur, Mohmand, and Swat, that Pakistan lacks the necessary police, paramilitary, and military capabilities to contain the Taliban groups which are threatening the state itself. In particular, it now seems evident that the government needs a well-equipped stabilization force which can hold territory (e.g., the urban areas of the Swat valley) after regular army units withdraw to their barracks. Additionally, it seems clear that the government needs a rapid-response police or paramilitary force which can contain the Taliban's territorial gains and provide support to local community *lashkars* (i.e., *ad hoc* militias) which want help in pushing back against insurgents. This Subcommittee would do well to examine the training and equipment programs currently underway, in light of their relation to these specific needs of the Pakistani state and to the overall U.S. objective of seeing a stable Pakistan capable of defending its own territory from internal threats. In this respect, it may also be worth considering the establishment of mechanisms by which the relevant U.S. combatant commander — in this case, CENTCOM's Gen. Petraeus — can, in consultation with Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, directly program counterinsurgency-oriented equipment and training, in addition to continuing with current modes of security assistance such as Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and counter-narcotics.[3]

---

[3] The FMF program, while valuable, is known for its inordinately slow procurement process, and is insufficiently targeted to allow the United States and its Pakistani partners to respond rapidly to changing ground realities.

d) Integrated Strategy. The United States, either by itself or in partnership with

the government of Pakistan, has not yet pursued a truly integrated strategy along the

Afghan-Pakistani border which incorporates targeted aid and development, security

assistance, and robust governance reforms. It may ultimately be that the rapidly

deteriorating security environment in these areas forces U.S. and Pakistani policymakers to

consider the necessity of closely coordinating these now-disparate programs.[4] As the

administration's new strategic plan is introduced, the Congress in its oversight role should

ask pointed questions about 1) whether — and how — the development, security, and

governance aspects of the plan actually reinforce each other in specific ways, and in

specific places such as Swat, or Bajaur, or Peshawar; 2) the pros and cons of providing aid

over large areas, versus providing geographically-focused assistance to small, threatened

regions of the frontier (adopting an "inkspot" counterinsurgency theory);[5] and 3) whether

U.S. development and security assistance in areas such as the FATA and Swat are actively

building state governance capacity for the long term, or merely bypassing it.

Conclusion. The increasingly complex threat environment in Pakistan — and, by

extension, Afghanistan — calls for a strategic approach which takes into account the

practical policy trade-offs that exist in confronting multiple threats; the importance of

addressing the drivers of conflict in local environments; and the value of integrating

development and security assistance with governance reforms that extend the scope of the

state and gradually reduce the presence of safe havens.

---

[4] If current trends continue, it is likely, for example, that the U.S. government will find it increasingly difficult to program development assistance in the NWFP and FATA without closely coordinated and geographically targeted security assistance.
[5] For discussion of an inkspot approach in the FATA, see the Epilogue of Joshua T. White, *Pakistan's Islamist Frontier: Islamic Politics and U.S. Policy in Pakistan's North-West Frontier,* Religion & Security Monograph Series, no. 1 (Arlington, VA: Center on Faith & International Affairs, 2008), available at http://www.cfia.org/go/frontier.

Such an approach will not be easy. Many observers have rightly noted that building Pakistani state capacity to deal with these threats is only half of the equation. Recent events, such as the peace deal negotiated by the government in Swat, have raised pointed questions about the state's long-term interest in expending the resources and political capital necessary to decisively hold its own sovereign territory, much less deal with Taliban groups which are focused across the border in Afghanistan. These are real and persistent concerns. But at the end of the day, the threats which emerge from the Pakistani context are ones for which cooperation with Islamabad is, for practical purposes, indispensible. The administration's new strategic framework will undoubtedly recognize that reality, and would do well to carefully scale up its engagement with the Pakistani state to address these challenges over the long term.