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Pakistan After the Lahore Bombing Shaping the Security Response

Summary

- Pakistan's military and civilian leadership have historically resisted calls for an indiscriminate crackdown on groups that use terrorism as a tactic but have acted against groups seen as directly threatening state interests.
- The Pakistani army has taken new unilateral security measures in Punjab in the wake of a suicide bombing in Lahore in late March, raising tensions with the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government.
- Shifts in Pakistan's internal security policies, particularly since the establishment of a National Action Plan (NAP) against terrorism in December 2014, have increased the Pakistani military's role in setting and implementing internal security policies.
- Despite an official announcement on April 6 of new joint operations in Punjab, enduring competition between the military and civilian government over who has discretionary authority over operations in Punjab is likely to shape both security and political responses in the coming weeks and months.

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Introduction

A suicide bomber entered the grounds of Lahore's Gulshan-e-Iqbal park on Easter Sunday evening, March 27, and detonated his suicide vest in the middle of a crowd of Pakistani families and park-goers. Seventy-five people died, including dozens of children, women, and members of the Christian minority community; and hundreds suffered injuries.¹ In response, the Pakistani army conducted unilateral raids and arrested an uncertain number of militant targets, raising tensions with the ruling PML-N government.

After more than a week of behind-the-scenes meetings, on April 6, the military announced joint operations with police and civilian law enforcement agencies.² As of this writing, the parameters of those operations and degree to which tensions with the political leadership have been resolved is unclear. In all likelihood, this debate will impact not only Pakistan's struggle to confront domestic militancy, but will also compound a broader reconcentration of the Pakistani military's power within the Pakistani political system.

Pakistan's Complex Militant Landscape

The Lahore attack was claimed by Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a splinter group of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which had previously claimed responsibility for the bombings of two Lahore churches and the Wagah border crossing with India, among others.³ Despite the continued high-profile incidents, overall casualties from terrorist attacks in Pakistan have actually significantly declined since the start of concerted military operations in North Waziristan in June 2014; fatalities in 2015 were at roughly half their total during the peak of TTP operations in 2009–10.⁴ As military operations have intensified, attacks against soft targets such as the Lahore park represent the best remaining option for TTP militants competing against one another to demonstrate their continued relevance and viciousness against the Pakistani state and its citizens.

Punjab has been a source for militant recruitment networks for many years. However, the most well-entrenched of Punjab's militant networks have not usually sought to confront the Pakistani state through direct attacks. Leaders of the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), the political wing of the Sunni sectarian terror group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, have contested elections despite a nominal ban on their activity, partnering at the local level with mainstream political parties. Lashkar-e-Taiba maintains an active charitable services branch, despite U.S. and United Nations sanctions on its leadership following its involvement in the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

Some cases of collaboration between militant groups targeting or working within the confines of the Pakistani state have been documented, and the proliferation of "violence specialists," even those seen as partners or proxies by mainstream political or military actors, contributes to a general decay in the Pakistani state's ability to guarantee security within its territory. But most groups possess different strategic objectives and different (and sometimes competing) bases of support. Pakistan's military and civilian leadership have historically resisted calls for an indiscriminate crackdown on groups that use terrorism as a tactic, despite the alienating effect their presence has had on Pakistan's relations with its regional neighbors and international partners.⁵

An undifferentiated response to terrorism would require action against proxy groups that Pakistan has sought to cultivate for its own regional security purposes, would threaten the PML-N's claims of bringing stability and development, and would be costly and contentious due to the socially and politically embedded nature of many militant groups operating in Punjab. Collectively, these factors have forestalled a major counterterrorism initiative by the police or military in the province. However, this has not precluded action against militant targets that carry out attacks against the state and are seen as a direct threat to Pakistani interests.

Shifts in the Internal Security Response

The Lahore bombing is the deadliest terrorist attack on Pakistani civilians since a TTP attack in December 2014 on the Army Public School in Peshawar. Following that incident, Pakistani civilian and military officials agreed, almost unanimously, to a sweeping NAP against terrorism. The NAP includes points to restrict "hate speech," create new anti-terrorism units and coordinating bodies, and increase the regulation of seminaries, among others.⁶

The NAP's most high-profile outcome to date is the constitutional amendment creating a separate military-run court system tasked with trying "hard core" terrorism cases referred by the civilian provincial governments. These powers echo earlier measures instituted in 2011 that gave legal authorization to the Pakistani military's broad powers of detention, search, and interrogation in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The Supreme Court of Pakistan is currently considering a batch of petitions from military court convicts who argue the expedited and closed-door process

has denied them their basic rights.⁷ Official pledges aside, actions under the NAP remain selectively targeted at militant and terrorist groups regarded as a direct threat to the Pakistani state.

The political consensus behind the new NAP powers is due in part to the Pakistani police and judicial system's limited ability to effectively prosecute domestic terrorist groups. The NAP's sweeping objectives and sacrosanct political status have led to an increasingly broad range of security and political issues being placed under its scope—mirroring an earlier phenomenon in which broad definitions of terrorism within the Pakistani criminal code have led to a widening array of offenses being prosecuted by dedicated, anti-terrorism courts first set up in the 1990s.⁸ Less remarked on than the establishment of the new military courts system, but of potentially greater influence over the long term, has been the creation of new “apex committees” at the provincial and national levels, officially tasked with overseeing the NAP's implementation. These committees, comprising elected government officials and military commanders, have formalized the military's role in the policy formulation and oversight process.

Government and Military at Odds

The new announcement of operations in southern Punjab follows an initially disjointed civil-military response to the Lahore attack, which was followed by a week of closed-door meetings as the key officials sought to negotiate the terms of the security response. Chief of Army Staff Raheel Sharif was previously reported to have ordered the paramilitary Punjab Rangers and military intelligence forces to conduct unilateral raids against militant targets, without authorization from the provincial government, which holds the constitutional authority to call in the army for domestic security operations.⁹ During a cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on March 29, objections were reportedly raised to granting the paramilitary forces policing powers out of fear that such an operation could ultimately result in the investigations spreading to target the PML-N's own provincial and national assembly members—some of whom have partnered with groups such as ASWJ in the past.¹⁰

Ceding the power to determine which laws will be enforced against which targets is a risky step for Pakistan's political elites. Prior to the NAP's formulation, the most significant domestic military action backed by the PML-N government gave the paramilitary Sindh Rangers policing powers to crack down on rising levels of criminal and political violence in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city. Though officially endorsed by all major political parties, in practice, the Karachi operation has targeted leaders and armed cadres affiliated with the city's dominant local political party, the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM). The pressure on the MQM has escalated as the party has sought to rebuff the crackdown; in recent weeks, the city's former MQM mayor has reappeared and announced the formation of a new splinter party.¹¹ In mid-2015 the operation expanded to include corruption and criminal investigations against leaders and organizations linked to the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), which heads the provincial government and had previously cooperated with the PML-N in support of the Karachi operation. The PPP has sought to use its powers at the provincial level to push back and has joined other opposition parties in calling for comparable anticorruption measures to be taken against the PML-N at the national level and in Punjab.¹²

Prime Minister Sharif holds a firm majority in the national parliament and in Punjab, where his party's uninterrupted rule for the past eight years has strengthened its control over the police and civil service bureaucracy. This has reduced the need for costly coalition balancing but has also left him isolated from smaller provincial and political rivals, including the PPP and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf party that leads the provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and has led sit-in movements challenging the legitimacy of the PML-N's election. These parties have little reason to collaborate with the PML-N in a direct showdown with the military over the latter's decision to respond unilaterally to the attacks in Lahore.

Implications for the Future

The operations initiated by General Raheel Sharif in North Waziristan, Karachi, and now in Punjab have been the most significant internal military operations undertaken in Pakistan since the 1971 civil war that saw East Pakistan split to form Bangladesh. None have been conventional military campaigns, and all have increased the intervention of the Pakistani military within Pakistan's domestic political as well as security space. But all of these operations have also involved collaboration with political elites at the provincial and national levels. The military's ability to intervene unilaterally and indefinitely in Pakistan's internal security, while significant, is limited; beyond the legal requirements, internal counterterrorism operations also require local political sanction and the use of police and civilian intelligence resources to be sustainable and effective.

It is highly unlikely that the military operations currently underway in Punjab will prove to be wholly indiscriminate. Prime Minister Sharif's government has, to date, been generally effective at maintaining an uneasy alliance with the country's security services, and it is possible a new working civil-military relationship has been negotiated with the announcement of military action. The durability of this agreement has yet to be fully established, however. Absent an institutional consensus on the domestic counterterrorism mission, competition between the military and government over who has discretionary power to set and implement policy is likely to continue shaping security and political responses.

Notes

1. Saeed Shah and Qasim Nauman, "Lahore Park Bombing Leaves Pakistan Reeling," *Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2016, www.wsj.com/articles/lahore-park-bombing-leaves-pakistan-reeling-1459185570.
2. Mateen Haider, "Under Army's Leadership, Security Operation Underway in Southern Punjab," *Dawn*, April 6, 2016, www.dawn.com/news/1250325/under-armys-leadership-security-operation-launched-in-southern-punjab.
3. The Jamaat-ul-Ahrar announced its formation in August 2014 and is based around a TTP faction from the FATA's Mohmand Agency subdivision; the main TTP group and Jamaat professed to have reunited in March 2015 but continue to issue separate statements in connection to attacks.
4. South Asia Terrorism Portal, "Fatalities in Terrorist Violence in Pakistan 2003–2016," www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/casualties.htm.
5. Stephen Tankel, "Domestic Barriers to Dismantling the Militant Infrastructure in Pakistan," *Peaceworks* no. 89 (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2013), www.usip.org/publications/domestic-barriers-dismantling-the-militant-infrastructure-in-pakistan.
6. See Raza Rumi, "Charting Pakistan's Internal Security Policy," Special Report no. 368 (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2015), www.usip.org/publications/2015/05/13/charting-pakistan-s-internal-security-policy.
7. Nasir Iqbal, "SC Asks if Terrorists Can Be Tried Under 'Ordinary Laws,'" *Dawn*, April 5, 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1070278/fair-trial-issue-phc-stays-military-courts-sentence/>.
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9. Arshad Shaheen and Rizwan Asif, "No 'Joint Action' with Police: Gen Raheel," *Express Tribune*, March 29, 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1074727/no-joint-action-with-police-gen-raheel/>.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief assesses Pakistan's responses to attacks like those in Lahore on March 27 and how the responses affect both internal security and the overall political balance of power in the country. Colin Cookman is a program officer supporting the USIP Asia Center's research and publications program.

10. Abdul Manan, "Govt Decides Not to Call Rangers in Punjab," *Express Tribune*, March 30, 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1075365/govt-decides-not-to-call-rangers-in-punjab/>.
11. "Mustafa Kamal Decimates MQM Chief Altaf, Announces New Political Party," *Dawn*, March 3, 2016, www.dawn.com/news/1243282/mustafa-kamal-lashes-out-at-mqm-chief-altaf-in-dramatic-press-conference.
12. These complaints also feed into historical tensions between Punjab—the country's most populous province and its cultural and political center—and Pakistan's other three provinces, who have frequently chafed against majoritarian central government control.



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