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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Pakistan's Unconvincing Strategic Shift

Islamabad needs to go after all terrorists, not merely those who hurt Pakistan.



Gen. Raheel Sharif last year in North Waziristan. PHOTO: NOMAN KHAN/EPA

By **SADANAND DHUME**

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Ever since last year's horrific attack on a school in Peshawar, Pakistan's government has gone into overdrive to convince the world that its attitude toward terrorism has changed. As the argument goes, the Islamic republic is in the midst of completing a wrenching strategic shift away from fomenting terrorism and toward fighting it instead.

But though this view appears to have become popular wisdom in Pakistan, it finds few takers elsewhere. In recent weeks, top U.S., Afghan and Indian officials have called on Islamabad to put a lid on a cauldron of jihadist groups that constantly threatens to bubble over.

Last month, the U.S. threatened to withhold \$300 million of military aid to Pakistan after U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter refused to certify that it had acted adequately against the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani network. On a visit to Islamabad, National Security Adviser Susan Rice urged Pakistan to do more against militants

operating from its territory.

Many Pakistanis view international skepticism toward their country's war on terrorism as evidence that the world refuses to give Pakistan a fair shake. The columnist Aisha Sarwari, for instance, accuses Western critics of peddling "orientalist jargon" and disregarding the sacrifice of Pakistanis "who have perished in the demonic war of terrorism."

This notion of victimhood is misguided. In fact, the path toward changing global perceptions of Pakistan is straightforward enough. The Pakistani army only needs to show that it's as much at odds with terrorists who attack Afghans, Americans and Indians as it is with those who attack Pakistanis.

This is not to suggest that nothing in Pakistan has changed. When it comes to fighting the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP)—the Afghan Taliban's Pakistani cousins—Chief of Army Staff Gen. Raheel Sharif deserves credit for showing far greater resolve than his predecessors. Over the past 15 months, the army has pounded the TTP in its stronghold of North Waziristan. Just a few years ago, support for the TTP from Islamist-friendly politicians such as Imran Khan, and a fear that army morale would suffer in a fight with fellow Muslims, had made an attack on North Waziristan appear exceedingly unlikely.

Similarly, security forces have finally taken off the gloves with anti-Shiite militants who have enjoyed both political patronage and pockets of popular support for more than three decades. In July, police gunned down Malik Ishaq, founder of the anti-Shiite group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and 13 supporters in what was widely seen as an officially sanctioned execution. Analysts had long regarded Ishaq, accused of more than 100 murders, as too well connected with both politicians and the army to be touched.

For many Pakistanis, the army's resolve contrasts favorably with the dithering of the political class, not least Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (no relation to the army chief.) To his fans, Gen. Sharif has emerged as a sort of South Asian Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the strongman who pulls his country back from the fundamentalist abyss. That Gen. Sharif comes from a family of war heroes who earned their spurs battling India only enhances his appeal.

Until a spate of attacks in Kabul last month soured relations, Pakistan could also point toward better relations with Afghanistan as evidence of change. Since he took office last year, President Ashraf Ghani put repairing ties with Islamabad at the heart of his foreign policy.

Unlike his predecessor, Hamid Karzai—a fierce critic of Pakistan's role in destabilizing Afghanistan by backing insurgents—Mr. Ghani had seen Islamabad as part of the solution rather than part of the problem. But last month he accused Pakistan of continuing to provide sanctuary to mercenaries who "send us messages of war."

What can Pakistan do to get the world to see its counterterrorism effort in a more

sympathetic light? In Washington, a parade of visiting Pakistani diplomats and retired generals counsel patience. They portray their country's fight against the TTP as evidence of a change of heart. Eventually, the argument goes, the army will move against all jihadists. Who can reasonably be expected to take them all on at one go?

The trouble with this story boils down to asking the world to trust Pakistan to do the right thing when it has spent at least the past 35 years doing precisely the wrong thing: arming, funding and training assorted jihadists to fight in Afghanistan and India.

Neither the Afghan Taliban and its affiliates nor the India-focused Lashkar-e-Taiba show any sign of losing their appetite for violence. That only bolsters suspicion that when it comes to terrorism the Pakistani army will always play both sides of the street.

Given this reality, perhaps it's time for Gen. Sharif to try a different approach. He could quickly disarm skeptics by going after the terrorist groups widely regarded as the army's jihadist proxies: Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Haqqani network. If, say, LeT founder Hafiz Saeed and the bloodthirsty Sirajuddin Haqqani were to meet the same fate as Ishaq, Pakistan could credibly claim to have overcome its credibility crisis.

For now, Pakistan doesn't show the slightest inclination to touch the likes of Messrs. Saeed and Haqqani. Skeptics are right to dismiss Pakistan's alleged strategic shift as nothing more than a clever move to dress up narrow self-interest as a profound national reorientation.

Mr. Dhume is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a columnist for WSJ.com.

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