November 26, 2018 marked the 10-year anniversary of Lashkar-e-Tayyiba’s terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India. Though there were no shortage of headline grabbing attacks at the time, the duration and brutality of the siege of Mumbai stood apart, captured by images of the iconic Taj hotel on fire. Ten gunmen terrorized the city for nearly four days and killed over 180 people, including six Americans. The grim anniversary brought attention once again to Pakistan’s relationships with militant groups, because Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) was, and is, Islamabad’s most reliable client. Lashkar has received comparatively less attention in recent years, especially compared to its main rival Jaish-e-Mohamed (JeM), which conducted a suicide attack in February in Pulwama that killed 40 and spurred a military confrontation between India and Pakistan. As India has grown increasingly less tolerant of attacks by Pakistani militant groups in recent years, even in Kashmir where it has traditionally absorbed operations without retaliation, the combination of LeT’s well-established responsiveness to the Pakistani security establishment and ability to conduct major attacks in India beyond Kashmir has the potential to ignite a larger conflict between India and Pakistan.

The lack of another major attack outside of Kashmir is not an indication that Lashkar has grown weaker over the past 10 years; if anything, the group has grown stronger. Above all, the absence of another significant attack reflects the strength of the organization’s ties to the Pakistani security establishment, particularly the military, and its desire to avoid a confrontation with India, as well as international pressure. Consequently, the group has exercised restraint and hidden its role in

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smaller attacks in India, which reflects Pakistan’s post-9/11 policy of maintaining plausible deniability for attacks outside of Kashmir to avoid international pressure: a policy likely to expand to include attacks in Kashmir after the blowback for Jaish’s recent attack in Pulwama. Instead of major attacks in India, Lashkar has focused on the insurgencies in Kashmir and Afghanistan, activities consistent with the Pakistani military’s policies. The group operates quite differently in Pakistan, where it recruits and fundraises openly. There it eschews violence—a policy dating back to its inception—and has continued its longtime provision of social services. Recent years have brought a significant change to the group’s activities in Pakistan with the formation of a political party, seemingly at the behest of the Pakistani military, which is a sharp reversal of the group’s longtime condemnation of democracy.

The United States faces a difficult reality: as long as Lashkar retains close ties to the Pakistani state, little can be done to weaken the group. In the years following the Mumbai attacks, the United States increased the pressure on Islamabad to break ties with Lashkar. Failing that, it has sought to contain LeT by working with countries outside of Pakistan, aggressively applying sanctions, and indicting individuals involved in the Mumbai attacks. While laudable efforts, these measures have done little to disrupt its terrorist capability or how comfortably the group operates in Pakistan, where its leader boasted, in response to a U.S. offer of $10 million for information leading to his conviction: “I am here, I am visible. America should give that reward money to me. I will be in Lahore tomorrow. America can contact me whenever it wants to.”

While the policy prescription would seem to be that the United States should use all means at its disposal to sever the ties between Lashkar and the Pakistani state, that course of action is currently both fruitless and dangerous in its own right. While Pakistan’s proxy policies came under tremendous pressure on all fronts—in Afghanistan, in India, and even at home in Pakistan—since 2001, it has now emerged with key relationships intact and firmly convinced of the utility of them. Of all its militant clients, its relations with Lashkar are the most secure and least susceptible to disruption by the United States. Unfortunately, the scenarios in which Lashkar breaks from the Pakistani state (or vice versa) are farfetched and beyond the influence of the United States. Moreover, after over 30 years of state support and protection, Lashkar has become a formidable organization, capable of conducting more frequent and damaging attacks than it currently does. A Lashkar untethered from the Pakistani state would be far less restrained in its violence, increasing the risk that it would attack in the West,
precipitate a military conflict between India and Pakistan, and even destabilize Pakistan. Thus, the United States is left with few options beyond vigilance in pressuring Islamabad to impose continuing restraint on the group.

**Pakistan’s Proxy Policies: Weathering the Challenge**

The crux of the U.S. approach toward Pakistan’s proxy strategy since shortly after 2001 has been to persuade or compel Pakistan to cut ties with all militant groups. However, one of the primary motivations for Pakistan’s proxy strategy has been its material and political weakness compared to India—a condition that dates back to its inception and one that the United States simply cannot affect. This relative weakness creates a sense of insecurity that shapes the military’s policies in Afghanistan as well, where it fears a pro-India government will allow India to encircle Pakistan. Its concerns extend within its borders, where the Pakistani military sees an Indian hand behind the insurgency in Balochistan and even in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). It is a pervasive concern that shapes all of Pakistan’s national security and foreign policies, including its support for militant groups.

Admittedly, after 9/11, Pakistan’s support for militant groups was a distant second priority for the United States—much to New Delhi and Kabul’s dismay—as long as Islamabad cooperated against al-Qaida. Indeed, Islamabad has been a key partner in U.S. efforts to degrade al-Qaida. However, with the gains made against al-Qaida, the United States has elevated Pakistan’s relationship with Afghan insurgents, specifically the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network, to the top priority in the bilateral relationship. Even with the shift toward greater scrutiny of Islamabad’s relations with these groups, Lashkar has been and remains a distant second or even third priority. Irrespective of the change in U.S. priorities, Pakistan’s policy of using militant groups, including but not limited to Lashkar, as an instrument of its national security in Afghanistan, India, and at home has emerged from the post-9/11 period intact. This section will examine the tremendous pressure on Pakistan to abandon militant proxies in the years since 9/11 as well as how Islamabad’s policies have nonetheless persisted.

**Pressures to Sever Support to Militant Groups**

The years after 9/11 put Pakistan’s long-standing policy of supporting militant groups under unprecedented pressure on all three fronts. In Afghanistan, Pakistan...
lost a major client when the Afghan Taliban crumbled quickly in the face of the United States and the Northern Alliance’s—a coalition of primarily Tajik, Uzbek and the Hazara parties that opposed Taliban rule—assault in 2001. With the Taliban’s fall, Pakistan lost the only government in Afghanistan that it saw as securing its interests, particularly against India. In its wake, a Northern Alliance-dominated government friendly to India emerged: Pakistan’s worst nightmare for its neighbor to the west.

To the east, concerns mounted that Pakistan’s anti-India clients had grown too powerful and exceeded the state’s ability to manage them. This was an alarming prospect, because it raised the specter of a Pakistani group conducting action against India that would ignite a war between the two nuclear powers. These fears appeared realized in December 2001, when Jaish-e-Mohamed—the perpetrator of the February Pulwama attack and an Deobandi militant group that has long received support from the Pakistani military—attacked the Indian Parliament in New Delhi. The brazen attack on Indian lawmakers killed nine people in addition to the five attackers and brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war.

The subsequent mobilization of Pakistani and Indian forces along the Line of Control, the de facto but not internally recognized border that demarcates the disputed region of Kashmir, came at a time when the United States needed Pakistani forces’ assistance intercepting al-Qaida operatives fleeing Afghanistan into Pakistan. It was the first indication of how Pakistan’s proxy policies would hinder U.S. counterterrorism efforts, and it brought Pakistan’s patronage of militant groups, including anti-India groups, into the U.S. Global War on Terrorism—an outcome the Musharraf regime had assiduously sought to avoid. In response, the United States designated both Lashkar and Jaish as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, something it had previously been reticent to do.

Over the next few years, bombings in New Delhi and Mumbai killed hundreds of people. Pakistani-sponsored groups, primarily Lashkar, were widely suspected, but decisive proof of their culpability was often lacking and the state of their ties with the government uncertain. Then in November 2008, LeT deployed 10 armed assailants into Mumbai via sea. They spread out across the city, striking a train station, hotels, and a community center in a siege that lasted nearly four days. When it concluded, over 180 people were dead, as were nine of the 10 attackers. Though no military confrontation ensued, the attack spurred tensions between India and Pakistan and severed a promising but fragile back-channel effort to resolve their disputes.

The attack on India came at a tumultuous time, when Pakistan’s internal security was particularly tenuous and shortly after Pakistan’s rocky transition to civilian rule. Back in Pakistan, violence had skyrocketed beginning in 2004. Militant organizations that had long received support from the Pakistani government, most notably Jaish-e-Mohamed, splintered, and rejectionist elements combined
with anti-Islamabad groups, including al-Qaida, to target the Musharraf regime. They objected to the Pakistani government’s support for the U.S. war in Afghanistan and campaign against al-Qaida. In the years that followed, additional groups formed within Pakistan to challenge the state. At the peak of violence in 2009, Pakistan appeared to be at risk of becoming a failed state.

Each of these developments added to U.S. pressure on Pakistan post-2001 to abandon its support for militant groups. The result was a steady stream of U.S. demands that spiked following specific events, particularly the 2008 Mumbai attacks. U.S. policymakers and numerous analysts argued that Pakistan’s woes were a product of its proxy policies, which at best had outlived their usefulness and at worst were self-defeating. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton famously remarked that “you can’t keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbors. Eventually those snakes are going to turn on whoever has them in the backyard.” From the U.S. perspective, the prescription that followed was obvious: Pakistan had to break ties with and confront its current and former proxies in order to defeat the threat within.

**Bucking the Pressure**

Instead, Pakistan’s proxy policies remained intact—even when the Taliban collapsed after 9/11, when some militant groups threatened to destabilize Pakistan, and when other organizations’ actions risked war with India. Islamabad rejected the U.S. diagnosis, seeing the threat instead as the result of blowback for supporting the U.S. war in Afghanistan and then capitulating to its pressure to conduct military operations in the FATA. It accused India, Afghanistan, and even sometimes the United States of supporting militants attacking Pakistan. In other words, Pakistan’s diagnosis placed the blame on external factors that did not require a change to its proxy policies; so no such change occurred.

Even shortly after 9/11, there were clear indications that Pakistan was unwilling to seriously reconsider its use of militant clients. Soon after the Afghan Taliban’s ouster, Musharraf’s government resumed support, most importantly by allowing the routed Taliban to find safe haven as early as 2002. Due to the Afghan government’s governance failures, the Taliban found fertile ground to resurge; thanks to Pakistani assistance, it had the resources and breathing room to do so. In its report from January of 2019, the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction estimated that the Afghan insurgent group controls or influences 17 percent of Afghanistan and contests another 27 percent. With negotiations between the United States and the Taliban ongoing, the group is clearly poised to regain a major role in Afghanistan’s future, thereby securing Pakistan’s interests to the west. The United States has even asked Pakistan to use its influence with the...
Taliban in the ongoing talks, a clear validation of Pakistan’s decision to support the group.

For its part, Lashkar gained utility on the Afghanistan front. In the years after the Mumbai attack, it increased its participation in the insurgency in Afghanistan. Afghanistan not only offered an outlet for its fighters, it provided a venue to strike Indian interests. Lashkar’s once arm-length posture toward the Taliban and Haqqani Network softened, and the group has even conducted joint operations with the Afghan groups.

At home, violence peaked within Pakistan in 2009 and has declined significantly each year since 2014. Though there are worrying indicators about growing intolerance within Pakistani society, the Pakistani military has succeeded in diminishing the internal threat from hostile militant groups considerably. It brought some militants back into the fold and cracked down harshly on those unwilling to do so, often sending them fleeing into Afghanistan. Lashkar also contributed to this effort, propagating an ideology that delegitimized groups that engaged in violence in Pakistan. Though groups like the Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and the Islamic State in the Khorasan can still conduct major attacks in Pakistan, Pakistan’s internal security has reached an equilibrium.

It has tamed the snakes in its backyard.

Finally, the Pakistani security establishment gradually repaired relations with its other major anti-India client group: Jaish-e-Mohamed. Jaish was indeed beset with internal divisions and splits in the years after 9/11, which damaged its relationship with the Pakistani security establishment and resulted in some factions turning against the state. But what remains of the group has reconsolidated under its longtime leader, Masood Azhar, and repaired ties with the military. While back in the fold, Jaish does not exhibit the same level of loyalty or responsiveness to the Pakistani state as Lashkar, which is both a liability and an asset. Jaish is more apt to conduct attacks without the state’s blessing, but this trait also gives Islamabad greater deniability for Jaish’s actions. Since mending relations with the Pakistani security establishment, Jaish has demonstrated that it still possesses formidable capability in Indian Kashmir. In addition to the February attack in Pulwama, it also conducted an attack in Uri in 2016, which killed 19 Indian soldiers, injured more than 30 people, and prompted India to conduct surgical strikes against Pakistan.

In contrast to Jaish, throughout the turmoil of this period, Lashkar was always loyal to the state and remains so today. Though it experienced internal dissent over its close ties to Islamabad in the years immediately after 2001, it has
steadfastly followed the security establishment’s policies, even when they contradicted the group’s preferences. As a result, the group has emerged with significant power within Pakistan and as a formidable threat to Pakistan’s neighbors.

A Capable and Faithful Proxy

Lashkar got its start in the anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan during the 1980s. From its inception, it was a dual organization. Lashkar was the wing responsible for violent jihad—an activity it undertakes only outside of Pakistan—while Markaz-ud Dawa-wal-Irshad engaged in service provision and proselytization at home. This two-pronged effort persists to this day, though Markaz-ud Dawa-wal-Irshad was subsequently renamed Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JUD).

Lashkar was among the groups willingly redirected to the contested territory of Indian Kashmir by Pakistan’s intelligence service, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), during the 1990s. Hailing from a small Sunni sect called the Ahl-e-Hadith, the organization has had a more limited support base than indigenous Kashmiri groups or its Deobandi counterparts in Pakistan, like JeM. Kashmir soon became Lashkar’s priority, and the group emerged as ISI’s most reliable proxy, executing its campaign in Kashmir in a way that closely hewed to ISI’s vision. Over the course of the 1990s, it received an increasing amount and array of support from ISI including funding, training, weapons, equipment, intelligence, assistance infiltrating across the Line of Control, and the asset that would become the most important in later years: safe haven. The group flourished, becoming one of the most capable groups in Kashmir.

In 2000, Lashkar expanded its operations in India beyond Kashmir with an attack on the Red Fort in New Delhi, which it proudly proclaimed in its publication al-Dawa. It is no coincidence that the move came just two years after Pakistan gained overt nuclear capability, a development that emboldened Pakistan’s use of militant groups against India.

The post-9/11 pressures produced difficult changes. Though it experienced tensions, unlike Jaish, Lashkar managed the situation without experiencing major splits or a rupture in its relations with ISI. One major shift was the need to hide responsibility for attacks in India outside of Kashmir. Lashkar was still permitted to conduct them, but had to do so in a way that would not bring pressure on Pakistan, as Jaish’s 2001 attack on Parliament had done. As long as Lashkar could maintain plausible deniability for attacks, so could its patron. This pretense was badly shattered in the 2008 Mumbai attacks. The sole surviving attacker was detained in India and confessed to Lashkar’s culpability. Damning intercepts between the attackers and their handlers in Karachi soon surfaced as well.
In the immediate aftermath of the attack, it was unclear if the group sought autonomy during a tumultuous time in Pakistan. Pakistan had just transitioned from a period of military rule to a civilian government; internal violence was rocking the nation. No part of society escaped unscathed. While Lashkar eschewed attacks within Pakistan and condemned those that conducted them, an array of other organizations struck in markets, restaurants, hotels, places of worship, schools, hospitals, and political rallies, among others. They assassinated civilian politicians as well as military officials, including in Islamabad. They even managed to attack the military’s headquarters in Rawalpindi in 2009. Meanwhile, back-channel talks between India and Pakistan had made substantial progress on finding resolutions to their disputes, though opinions vary on how viable the effort was. Either way, Musharraf’s ouster and the Mumbai attacks derailed the process, and it has never recovered.

Importantly, rather than the 2008 Mumbai attacks being an instance in which Lashkar acted autonomously, ISI officers were intimately involved in planning every step of the operation. In late 2009, the Federal Bureau of Investigations arrested an American who conducted the reconnaissance for the attack. He revealed ISI’s extensive involvement in the plot, disclosures later corroborated by another Lashkar operative extradited to India from Saudi Arabia in 2012. In other words, the Mumbai attacks were not an indication that the group had grown too powerful and was pursuing its own policies. It saw itself as acting on behalf of the Pakistani military.13

Since 2008, Lashkar has not conducted another major attack in India. It has occupied its cadre with the insurgencies in Afghanistan and Kashmir as well as smaller-scale attacks in India. There have been reports of major plots against India, but none have come to fruition to date. This restraint is all the more remarkable given the organization’s deep antipathy toward Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the rash of violence against Muslims in India, not to mention its rival Jaish’s audacity in Kashmir. With no lack of capability or intent, its abstinence almost certainly comes in response to ISI instructions.

In parallel, JUD developed a significant presence at home. Its central operating and recruitment base is in Punjab, Pakistan’s political epicenter. It functions openly in the province, including a sprawling compound in Muridke that serves as its headquarters. The group’s social service provision efforts are concentrated around education, health care, and disaster relief. While the core of its leadership and recruitment are in Punjab, it now operates in all four provinces.
In 2017, the group created a political party, the Milli Muslim League. Though the policy has been dubbed “mainstreaming,” there is no information to suggest that Lashkar agreed to moderate its violence in order to enter the political sphere. Interestingly, while the organization has long had political and street power, particularly in Punjab, the formation of a political party was an abrupt reversal of its long-time position that democracy is inherently un-Islamic. The group has done little to explain or justify the change, but once again, it has undertaken a major change without experiencing fractures. The Milli Muslim League fared poorly in the July 2018 elections, further reducing the likelihood that political participation will serve as a substitute for violence. Nonetheless, Lashkar has developed a deeply entrenched presence within Pakistan, and its lackluster electoral showing does not capture the extent of its influence and power in Pakistani society.

What Could Cause a Disruption in Lashkar’s Relationship with the State?

At this point, it is difficult to see what would cause Lashkar’s relationship with Pakistan to rupture. Pakistan’s patronage of militant groups remains firmly intact, despite the challenges. Of all of Pakistan’s client groups, it is least likely that it would break with Lashkar, its highly capable and loyal proxy. Their relationship weathered the turmoil of the post-9/11 period successfully, a time that deeply tested all of Pakistan’s proxy relationships. The group now has utility in Afghanistan, Kashmir, India, and at home. However, the two do have differences that could become more salient. This section analyzes four scenarios to see what impact they would have on the relationship, specifically: a change in Pakistan’s security calculus, a resolution on Kashmir, a shift in Lashkar’s responsiveness, and a major Lashkar attack in the West. It discusses in what ways these hypothetical scenarios would affect Lashkar’s relationship with the state and whether they offer viable opportunities for the United States to exploit.

A Change in Pakistan’s Security Calculus

The change that would lead to the most comprehensive revision to Pakistan’s proxy policies would be a shift in its security calculus, particularly the centrality of India in it. Though not the only motive, supporting militant groups is one pillar of the Pakistani security establishment’s strategy for managing the threat it perceives from India and its dissatisfaction with the status quo vis-a-vis its neighbor. A former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan argued that “The only way to achieve a cessation of such support [for Lashkar] is to change the Pakistan government’s own perception of its security requirements.”
The centrality of the military in Pakistan has undoubtedly defined those requirements. Civilian governments have had to learn, sometimes painfully, the limitations of their authority. Though Pakistan experienced its second transition of civilian power last year, the military sets and executes policy on Afghanistan, India, internal security, and by extension, support for militant groups. Civilians who overreach find that at best they cannot impose the changes they seek or at worst are badly undermined and even overthrown.

Because of this entrenched dynamic, at times the United States has sought to help create stronger civilian institutions in the hopes that these institutions could shift support away from militant groups. However, civilian institutions remain too weak to consider this plausible in the foreseeable future. Moreover, while the military drives the policies, most civilian governments have supported or enabled the same militant groups as well. They see militants’ utility in voting blocs or for their own foreign policy agendas. Thus, a strong civilian government—still a far-fetched proposition—may not even result in a decision to relinquish proxies.

Of the scenarios examined, however, such a change is perhaps the least likely scenario, especially now. The India-centric understanding of Pakistan’s interests and circumstances is deeply embedded in the psyche of the security establishment. Moreover, a reckoning with the proxy strategy would be destabilizing, which creates a rationale to postpone it indefinitely. When the internal security situation was unstable, confronting more groups was untenable. Now that the internal security situation has stabilized, there is little incentive to undertake an effort to rein in the proxies, which would damage it.

In other words, seeking to change Pakistan’s security calculus is not a viable policy approach at present. Since 2001—a period that has spanned three different U.S. administrations and three Pakistani civilian governments as well as a Pakistani military regime—the United States has tried different tactics. It tried positive inducements—like assistance, capacity building, and strategic dialogues—and it has tried punitive measures—like conditioning and withholding aid—based on whether Islamabad maintains support for militant groups. None of these approaches made a dent in Pakistan’s calculus. Other U.S. actions, such as the nuclear deal with India, have exacerbated it, but none have alleviated it. Ultimately, the United States simply lacks carrots or sticks large enough to meaningfully shift the Pakistani calculus. Should such a shift occur within Islamabad, the United States could encourage it at the margins, but it cannot instigate the change.
A Resolution on Kashmir

Finding a resolution to the Kashmir dispute is among the solutions frequently raised as a potential avenue to persuade Pakistan to relinquish Lashkar as well as Jaish. To briefly summarize, Pakistan was created as a homeland for Muslims in South Asia, and the new state’s leaders expected that Muslim majority provinces would become part of Pakistan at partition. The decision of which country to join was left to the individual princely states, but at the time of partition, Kashmir’s maharaja had not selected either India or Pakistan. When Pakistan opted to deploy Pashtun tribesmen to Kashmir in 1947 in an effort to compel Kashmir’s ascension to Pakistan, the maharaja sought help from the Indian army. The Indian army agreed to assist if he decided to join India, a condition he agreed to, thereby creating a Muslim-majority state in India and birthing a dispute that persists to this day. For many Pakistanis, Indian Kashmir violates the founding rationale of the two-state solution: the need for Pakistan to be a homeland for South Asia Muslims. For many in the Pakistani security establishment, India’s insistence on keeping Kashmir is seen as synonymous with a refusal to accept Pakistan’s very existence.

The dispute over Kashmir has been the source of open wars and simmering tensions between the two countries since partition. Pakistan has stoked the indigenous insurrections in Kashmir, including by directing Lashkar to the conflict in the 1990s. Thus, some see the outstanding dispute over Kashmir as the core of the India-Pakistan conflict and, by extension, Pakistan’s decision to support militant groups. By this logic, a resolution to Kashmir would eliminate the core reason for Pakistan to support militant groups. Indeed, the dispute over Kashmir has featured prominently in the Pakistani security establishment’s calculus about the utility of militant groups. Support for militant groups operating in Kashmir has allowed Pakistan to impose significant costs on India for the status quo while avoiding full-blown war, especially now that the two countries have nuclear weapons.

While Kashmir is at the forefront of Pakistan’s enmity toward India, even some form of resolution to the Kashmir dispute would unfortunately not eliminate the security establishment’s concerns about India, which run far deeper, and thus would probably not be sufficient for Pakistan to abandon its proxies. Moreover in the current situation, Lashkar has utility beyond Kashmir, including at home and in Afghanistan, so even a resolution to Kashmir would not be enough for Pakistan to relinquish its closest client.

But a resolution on Kashmir would trouble Lashkar. Kashmir has been the group’s top priority since the 1990s, but the solution it seeks—the full unification of all of Kashmir with Pakistan—will almost certainly not be the outcome of any negotiated settlement between the two countries. Realistically, a resolution to the Kashmir issue will not involve Pakistan acquiring much, if any, of the land it claims is rightfully part of its territory. A resolution short of Kashmir’s unification...
with Pakistan would likely strain the security establishment’s relationship with its anti-India client groups, even the faithful Lashkar. A compromise on Kashmir would pit Lashkar’s core cause against its long-time patron, potentially driving a wedge between the two.

It is worth recalling how Musharraf’s decision to acquiesce to the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan caused serious strife with client groups and led some to break with the state. At that time, of all of the Pakistani-sponsored groups, Lashkar had the weakest ties with the Taliban. Nonetheless, the Pakistani government’s decision to work with the United States spurred internal dissension even within Lashkar. While unlike Jaish-e-Mohamed, Lashkar managed the internal tensions and emerged without major splinters, it was a challenge. One of the reasons Lashkar conducted the 2008 Mumbai attacks—and ISI supported the operation—was organizational: to secure the loyalty of its restive rank and file. If this was the impact of a Pakistani decision on Afghanistan, which is secondary to Kashmir for Lashkar, then the consequences of a compromise on Kashmir would likely be far worse.

While a potential source of friction between Lashkar and the Pakistani state, the prospects for rapprochement between India and Pakistan, let alone a breakthrough on Kashmir, are currently dim, even without weighing the recent military confrontation between the two states. More broadly, India and Pakistan are trapped in a cycle, a cycle in which each country has ample reason, particularly their current domestic politics, to sustain the policies that contribute to their hostilities, despite potential benefits of better relations. Moreover, India rejects any U.S. role in mediating the dispute, making this an issue that the United States has little ability to influence. If anything, Lashkar could act as a spoiler if there were miraculous progress between India and Pakistan that could compromise Kashmir, just as its 2008 Mumbai attacks disrupted a promising back-channel effort.

Reining in the Group

Even without a change in the security establishment’s calculus or some kind of broader change in hostilities between India and Pakistan, relations between Pakistan and various proxy groups have varied over time. Individual client groups have risen and fallen from favor over the years. In Afghanistan, Pakistan supported Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—an Afghan warlord and leader of the Hezb-e-Islami political party—for years before shifting much of its support to the Afghan Taliban when it emerged in the mid-1990s. Its favored proxies against India have also ebbed and flowed. ISI is widely believed to have orchestrated some of the splinters within the Pakistani Deobandi groups—in fact Jaish-e-Mohamed broke from another Deobandi group in 2000—in an effort to better manage the individual groups, prevent any one organization from becoming too powerful, and thereby keep its clients responsive to its instructions.
The Pakistani security establishment could, at some point, see Lashkar as becoming too powerful or insufficiently responsive. Indications that Lashkar had become less reliable would include unsanctioned plotting or attacks in India or in the West. Another, though far less likely, indication would be if the group engaged in some kind of violence within Pakistan or grew close to anti-state groups. Rather than such actions occurring as a result of the group’s policies, it is more likely that elements within the group would engage in such activity without permission. Nonetheless, such behavior would suggest that Lashkar’s command and control was diminishing and could also indicate that the group was becoming less reliable.

The way that ISI handled Jaish-e-Mohamed in the aftermath of 9/11 offers some insight into how it would likely respond. Admittedly, there is still debate about whether ISI sanctioned the Jaish’s attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001. Irrespective, factions of the organization subsequently turned violently against the Pakistani state. This led to serious splintering within Jaish. ISI undertook two approaches to the rogue elements of the group. First, it tried to entice them to cease their attacks within Pakistan and channel their violence elsewhere, mainly Afghanistan and Kashmir. Second, it cracked down, killing, capturing, or expelling those who would not cease their opposition to the government. During this period, Jaish as an organization was largely quiescent, with little command and control over its members. Eventually, ISI succeeded in eliminating or coopting the anti-state elements of the group and then shoring up a loyal core. In recent years, Jaish has reemerged as a largely cohesive organization with its ties with ISI mended, though it is still not as reliable or responsive as Lashkar.

While the specifics of the scenario would surely be different, should Lashkar’s organizational cohesion deteriorate and lead to actions that ran counter to ISI’s guidance, it would most likely undertake this kind of targeted effort. Rather than dismantle the group as a whole, ISI would focus on the rogue elements, leaving Lashkar smaller but more responsive. Even if Lashkar undertook a major unsanctioned action, most likely ISI’s response would be to selectively target the problematic elements, not dismantle the group as a whole.

A note of caution is warranted. In the unlikely event that ISI decided to undertake a broader action against the group, though Lashkar has been quite loyal to date, the group would probably not simply allow itself to be dismantled. It would resist such action and has the ability to pose a serious threat to the state, if it were to become hostile to LeT.
A Lashkar Attack in the West

Lashkar is unusual among terrorist groups in that it has the capability to strike more often and in more places than it actually does. Many militant groups seek to conduct attacks, but struggle to produce the capability to strike when and where they wish. In Lashkar’s case, there was significant concern after the Mumbai attacks that the group would commence attacks beyond South Asia, particularly in the West. Many observers saw the Mumbai attacks as a precursor to Lashkar expanding its attacks and targets. After all, the group deliberately targeted a Jewish community center in the attack, marking the first time it had intentionally struck a foreign civilian target in India. The death of six Americans and reports that the attackers looked specifically for Americans among their victims raised the specter that the group would seek to strike U.S. interests more broadly. The group has also provided training to Americans, most notably an operative who conducted the surveillance for the Mumbai attacks as well as a group of Virginia residents who returned home and played paintball, allegedly in an effort to further their training. In recent months, two Americans have been arrested for attempting the join the group, suggesting it still has some appeal in the United States.

There have also been plots that have raised alarm bells. A French court convicted French national Willie Brigitte for planning terrorist attacks in Australia in 2003 in conjunction with Lashkar’s chief of external operations. It is unclear whether this was the work of an enterprising individual or the group as a whole. However, a plot in Denmark more clearly had the support of Lashkar leadership as well as ISI. The group sought to attack the Danish newspaper that printed cartoons of the Prophet Mohamed. But it abandoned the plot in the wake of the Mumbai attacks and the ensuing international pressure.

In addition, Lashkar has been engaged in the insurgency against Coalition Forces and the Afghan government since around 2005, and the group’s involvement increased significantly after 2008. The group has had to restrain its activities in India, including in Kashmir in the years immediately after the Mumbai attacks, which made Afghanistan an outlet for its violence. In so doing, there is a possibility that a subset of the group, particularly the younger generation, have come to see the United States as the primary enemy after over a decade of involvement in that insurgency.

However, to date the group has not undertaken any major attack without what it perceives as a greenlight from ISI. And it has consistently halted plots upon instruction from ISI. Thus, it is unlikely that it would undertake such an expansion.

It is possible the younger LeT have come to see the U.S. as the primary enemy.
without believing it had ISI’s permission, though there is room for misunderstanding. Lashkar had a front row seat to the U.S. response to 9/11. It is certainly aware that the U.S. response to such an attack would be far more sweeping and would bring tremendous pressure on Pakistan. Therefore, as long as the group remains tied to the state, such an expansion is unlikely.

The Threat from an Untethered Lashkar

If it were plausible, persuading Pakistan to break ties with Lashkar would come with major downsides. Not least of all would be the threat in Pakistan. The Pakistani state has faced insurgencies in Balochistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and even Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. All have posed a serious threat at their peak, but an insurrection by Lashkar would bring such violence to Punjab.

Lashkar’s headquarters are in Punjab. It draws much of its manpower from the province as well as most of its leadership. Indeed, the profile of its recruits resembles those that join the Pakistani Army. The group’s ranks even include former and retired members of the security establishment. Lashkar’s personnel have received extensive training from the military, gained significant insurgency experience in Kashmir and Afghanistan, and have robust terrorist capabilities.

A confrontation between Lashkar and the Pakistani state could destabilize Punjab, which carries implications for the stability of the entire country. A hostile Lashkar-e-Tayyiba would threaten Pakistan in a way no other militant group has to date. It has a presence in every major city in Pakistan; thus, while the crux of the threat would be in Punjab, it would extend throughout the country.

Without the restraining influence of the Pakistani security establishment, Lashkar would be far more active in India both within and beyond Kashmir. Though it has not conducted a major attack in the past 10 years, it has certainly plotted and retained the capability. It has numerous plots that it could pursue, some probably ready for execution. Due to past Pakistani deceptions, the Indian government may not initially believe that Lashkar was acting independently. Therefore, even if it had broken from the state, the group’s actions could provoke conflict between India and Pakistan.

As discussed, Lashkar also has the intent and capability to expand its operations beyond the region, a capability it has restrained largely because of its ties to the Pakistani state. Its ideology calls for violence beyond its current operations. To date, its nationalist streak and desire to avoid international pressure on Pakistan
has limited its attacks outside of India and Afghanistan. A rupture in the relationship with the state would free Lashkar to engage in such attacks, even in the West.

**A Difficult Policy Reality**

There are dim prospects for a rupture in ties between Lashkar and the Pakistani state and serious consequences should such a break occur. These are sobering conclusions, but also the reality within which the United States has to make policy. Lashkar is the least likely of all the proxy groups to break from the state as well the least likely to be disavowed by it. Put simply, it is the toughest nut to crack in Pakistan’s lineup of proxy groups.

There is utility to the United States offering Pakistan assistance in breaking ties or with the demobilization, should its calculus change. But actively changing Pakistan’s calculus is simply not feasible. A resolution on Kashmir looks equally implausible at the moment. There are no signs that the group has become less responsive to the state in a way that would precipitate some kind of crackdown. Lashkar’s willingness to abstain from attacks in India also suggests it is not going to broaden its area of operations anytime soon.

In this circumstance, the United States has to continue focusing on preventing the group from conducting another major attack in India. After 10 years and in the face of competing priorities, the U.S. attention on Lashkar has invariably waned. But Lashkar probably faces some organizational pressures to strike again after 10 years, especially given its enmity toward Modi, so it is imperative that the United States be clear that it is still vigilant and raise the group on the bilateral agenda. In the wake of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the U.S. response was hampered by uncertainty about whether ISI was complicit and whether ties between Lashkar and the Pakistani state remained strong. Those questions were subsequently answered in the affirmative, and the past 10 years have only deepened their relationship. Thus, in accepting the reality that the United States is unable to persuade Islamabad to break ties with Lashkar, the United States should clearly communicate that it will not wait for definitive evidence of ISI involvement in the next Lashkar attack; it will assume it and hold Islamabad responsible.

This vigilant posture is all the more essential now because recent events have demonstrated that the U.S. position as a mediator in a crisis between India and Pakistan has eroded significantly. Simultaneously, India has increasingly sought ways to retaliate militarily against Pakistan for provocations, even ones in Kashmir that once fell below India’s redlines. Therefore, the potential for miscalculation or inadvertent escalation is immense. While Lashkar will take pains to hide its involvement in future attacks to avoid repeating the exposure of the 2008 Mumbai assault, any doubts that the group is an arm of the security establishment...
have been erased. Thus for now, preventing another attack in India has to remain a priority. The key to that effort is the Pakistani security establishment imposing restraint, and the United States communicating that it expects Pakistan to do so.

Notes

2. India immediately blamed both Jaish and Lashkar, though there is little available evidence implicating the latter.


