

West must rethink way it deals with Islamabad

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The death of Osama bin Laden, next door to Pakistan's Military Academy, will send ripples across the international security landscape, not all of them benign.

A team of US special forces did more than rid the civilised world of its iconic adversary. They have eliminated any credibility the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment may have retained as a serious ally against terrorism.

This raises profound questions about whether Western nations, including Australia, should continue to focus their supposed partnership with Pakistan so heavily on its army.

In Afghanistan, the elimination of bin Laden a decade after his crimes of 9/11 may come too late to help its people.

In the short term, bin Laden's demise will be a much-needed shot of confidence to US and allied forces in their UN-mandated efforts to help Afghanistan provide for its own security.

It is proof that a decade of hard experience has taught the US how to do counter-terrorism of the most audacious and surgical kind.

The message to al-Qa'ida senior figures and other terrorist leaders is simple: wage war and you are safe nowhere.

The Abbottabad operation and its rapid announcement by Washington was a public relations victory in a conflict where the terrorists almost always seem to have the initiative.

Yet there is a real risk these positive consequences will be short-lived. The narrative that has propelled the war on terror and the Western presence in Afghanistan may now prove harder to sustain.

With the US budget under great strain and a population weary of strategically questionable military commitments, support for a withdrawal from Afghanistan will grow. Political success in the US thrives on symbolism and simple narratives. Now that bin Laden is gone, voters will see US honour restored and might be satisfied with a military drawdown sooner rather than later.

Indeed, even the US counter-terrorism effort may become a victim of its own success. With a rising China testing US will and authority across Indo-Pacific Asia, the debate over allocation of US security and intelligence resources is running hot.

None of this means that the threat of terrorism has now diminished. Bin Laden had not been able to direct global terror operations for years. Instead, al-Qa'ida long ago shifted to a franchise model.

These days, Western agencies are deeply concerned about Lashkar-e-Toiba, the vicious group that was originally groomed by Pakistani intelligence to bleed India in Kashmir, but more recently is reported to have been scouting targets in Europe.

Indeed, jihadists everywhere will now feel under pressure to strike back to show that they are still in the game. For the near-term, there is a heightened risk of attempted atrocities in many places. But these will likely be desperate deeds, rather than planned and sophisticated attacks.

There will assuredly be continued terrorism within Pakistan. Even though Islamabad's direct role in the US raid was almost certainly zero, many jihadists will feel let down by an army they have sometimes seen as a partner.

But it is the rest of the world that should be left deeply worried about the loyalties of the Pakistani security establishment. The fact is bin Laden felt secure, perhaps for years, in the neat cantonments of a Pakistani military town, not some forsaken cave or village.

His death confirms that all roads in the global struggle against terrorism lead to the murky military and intelligence power structures of the Pakistani state. For the US, Australia and other Western countries that have sought to train the Pakistani military, it should be the catalyst for a fundamental review of Pakistan policy.

We should divert much of our co-operation and resources to Pakistan's demoralised police forces and the courageous moderates in its civil society. Now is not a time to be thanking Pakistan's generals for anything.

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