

The Future of Pakistan-U.S. Relations: Opportunities and Challenges

by Maleeha Lodhi

Introduction

Relations between Pakistan and the United States are today defined by a paradox. Never have ties been more vital for both countries. But never has the relationship been so mired in mutual mistrust and suspicion.

Both countries acknowledge the crucial importance of each other for the attainment of their respective national objectives. Pakistan is pivotal for the achievement of the key U.S. national security goals of defeating terrorism and stabilizing Afghanistan. But its importance goes beyond that. Pakistan is the world's second largest Muslim nation and its newest nuclear power. It has a critical role to play in many of the pressing issues of our time, such as countering violent extremism, bolstering democracy and development, addressing issues of international peacekeeping (as the largest contributor to United Nations troops), encouraging nuclear nonproliferation, and improving relations between the West and the Islamic world.

For its part, Pakistan needs the help of the international community, especially the United States, to enable it to stage a strategic recovery from the twin, interconnected crises of security and solvency,

and to contain rising militancy in its regions bordering Afghanistan.

Despite sharing a number of common goals, the Pakistan-U.S. relationship is characterized today by mutual frustration and a growing trust gap. While the leaderships of the two countries place a high value on their ties, and acknowledge the dangers of a collapse of their relationship, their publics and legislatures do not share these perceptions and increasingly view the other with suspicion and depict one another as an unreliable ally. In a recent poll, most Pakistanis did not believe the Pakistan-U.S. security cooperation had benefited Pakistan. According to a Gallup Poll, Americans view Pakistan as among their five least favorite nations, along with Iran and North Korea.

Burden of History

These mutually negative perceptions can be ascribed in part to the burden of history. This, after all, has been a rollercoaster relationship, characterized by an erratic stop-go pattern in which Pakistan has swung between being America's most "allied ally" and "most sanctioned friend" to a "disenchanted partner."

Three things stand out about the troubled relationship from a historical perspective. First, relations have lurched between engagement and

estrangement in almost predictable cycles. Second, these swings have occurred under both U.S. Republican and Democratic administrations, and on the Pakistani side, under democratic and military governments alike.

Third, the episodic nature of ties has reflected Washington's changing strategic priorities and shifts in global geopolitics, which in turn have reinforced the popular perception in Pakistan that the country is seen from a tactical perspective, and not in terms of its intrinsic importance. When U.S. geostrategic interests so dictated, relations with Pakistan warmed, and aid and support followed. But when U.S. priorities shifted or when Pakistan pursued an independent stance, as, for example, on the nuclear issue, it led to long periods of discriminatory sanctions. This entrenched the view in Pakistan, at both the official and public levels, that Washington has pursued relations with Islamabad on a transactional and not a consistent or predictable basis.

The post-9/11 transformation in ties, after over a decade of multiple sanctions, opened up a new chapter of intense engagement and cooperation. But in a repeat of the past pattern, the relationship continued to have a single focus (that is, security). The scope and nature of relations remained narrow. The imperative of building a longer term and broad-based relationship was not addressed. Even though official-speak

often referred to the strategic nature of ties, there was a large gap between declaratory statements and operational reality.

Window of Opportunity

This leads to the present state of Pakistan-U.S. relations. A new administration in Washington and a democratic government in Islamabad provide a rare and opportune moment to redefine and reset the relationship, learn from past mistakes, and empower the bilateral relationship with the capacity to negotiate common challenges. Changing the terms of the engagement may in fact determine the extent and quality of cooperation that Washington and Islamabad are able to mobilize to address complex regional problems.

Relations have a bilateral dimension and a regional dimension that relate to Afghanistan. Both dimensions have to be addressed to recraft and strengthen relations. There is need for a Pakistan policy that is not just a function of Washington's Afghanistan policy. Formulating policy only through the prism of Afghanistan ignores the reality that Pakistan is a much bigger and strategically more important country.

President Barack Obama's enunciation of his administration's new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan after a 2-month interagency review seeks to address both of these dimensions but places greater emphasis on the role that Pakistan is expected to play in eliminating al Qaeda and stabilizing Afghanistan.

This urges the need for the two countries to jointly frame common objectives and fashion concrete plans to implement them while launching efforts, in a spirit of candor and openness, to reconcile their differences and remove mutual suspicions.

The two countries share a number of common objectives. These include defeating terrorism and eliminating violent extremism from the region, strengthening peace and stability in nuclear South Asia, and promoting the economic and social development of Pakistan to strengthen its long-term stability as a strategic priority.

Terrorism and Extremism

President Obama's new strategy acknowledges Pakistan's pivotal importance in achieving the goal of defeating terrorism and its stability as the key to regional and global security.

Before considering the implications of Washington's policy review, it is important to examine how and why Islamabad's security challenges have intensified over the years. This will help to highlight the different narratives of the two countries about how we have reached the present point. The years 2007 and 2008 were the deadliest in Pakistan's history, with a record number of suicide bombings and casualties from terrorist violence. According to one unofficial estimate, 6,000 lives were lost last year alone in bombings and terrorist attacks. Since 2001, 15,000 people have been killed in terrorist violence.

The deterioration of the security situation in Pakistan's tribal areas bordering Afghanistan and the challenge of rising militancy are the cumulative outcome of the double blowback effect.

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First was the blowback from the post-1979 joint struggle that Pakistan waged with the U.S.-led international coalition against the Soviet occupation. This famously relied on Islamic fighters to eject the Russians from Afghanistan. This war of unintended consequences bequeathed to Pakistan a witches' brew of problems that continue to plague the nation today, weakening the traditional fabric of society in its western provinces. The explosive legacy of the Afghan jihad included militancy and violent extremism, millions of Afghan refugees, and the exponential growth of *madrassas*, narcotics, and proliferation of arms. The most dangerous aspect of this

legacy was that some 40,000 Islamic radicals were imported from across the Arab world to fight alongside the Afghan mujahideen. They later became the core of al Qaeda.

The second blowback followed 9/11 and the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan. The 2001 intervention relied on the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance to oust the Pashtun Taliban regime, which provoked opposition from the Pashtun tribes that straddled both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border known as the Durand Line. The way the war was waged in Afghanistan, and especially the lack of any hammer and anvil strategy during the crucial military attack on Tora Bora, increasingly pushed al Qaeda militants and Taliban fighters into Pakistan's frontier regions, where many melted away into Afghan refugee camps.

The overmilitarized approach pursued in Afghanistan involved heavy reliance on aerial bombings and high collateral damage of civilian casualties. This fueled support for the growing insurgency and gave the Taliban a rationale to rally traditional resistance against foreign occupation. The slow and under-resourced reconstruction effort stymied any significant campaign to win hearts and minds while corruption and ineffectual governance widened the gap between Kabul and the countryside, especially in the Pashtun south and east.

Lack of clarity about the goals pursued by coalition forces in the past 7 years and the inability to distinguish between al Qaeda and Taliban began to result in the growing confusion about the aims of the war effort. It also led to the growing fusion between Pashtun nationalism and Muslim radicalism, which in turn strengthened the insurgency. The fatal distraction of the Iraq War and the consequential diversion of resources and attention compounded all these problems.

The downward trajectory in Afghanistan caused a devastating fallout on Pakistan, especially in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) where it spread militancy and radicalized some of the tribes in South and North Waziristan. This in turn accentuated the threat of the Talibanization of Pakistan. Much like the war in Vietnam was pushed into Cambodia, the escalation of the military campaign and failure to contain and subdue the Taliban in Afghanistan pushed the conflict into Pakistan's tribal

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belt. Meanwhile, intensified missile strikes by unmanned U.S. Predator drones inside Pakistani border territory not only killed a number of al Qaeda targets, but also inflamed public opinion in the country, undercut Pakistan's own counterinsurgency efforts, and further reinforced support from local tribes for the militants.

The deterioration in the security situation in FATA has been a consequence and not a cause of the collapse of security in Afghanistan. It follows that containing the insurgency in Afghanistan, together with Pakistan's help in curbing the support it receives from militants using its territory, would have a salutary effect in FATA and on its ability to defeat the Pakistani Taliban. Once a disparate group, the Pakistani Taliban are now united by the goal of assisting the Afghan Taliban against the U.S. military surge expected in the coming months.

Against this backdrop, the new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan unveiled by President Obama on March 27, 2009, presents a number of challenges. Several aspects of the strategic review are from Pakistan's perspective consistent with its views and are welcome shifts in approach. But other elements are worrisome for Islamabad.

Washington's new strategy defines the core goal as to "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat" al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan and to prevent its return. This refocusing of the U.S.-led mission, with its emphasis on a civilian surge in Afghanistan to step up reconstruction and development; willingness to negotiate with the Taliban; expansion of Afghanistan's army and police to enable them to shoulder their own security responsibilities; commitment of more economic assistance to both nations; offering to help build their security capacities; and addressing narcotics are all objectives that converge with Pakistan's thinking.

Islamabad's long-held view has included a number of key elements. First, insurgencies cannot only be addressed militarily but also have to be neutralized primarily by political means. Second, an adequately resourced development surge is essential to win hearts and minds. Third, the reconcilable Taliban should be separated from al Qaeda and brought into the political mainstream. Fourth, the Afghan security sector must be strengthened while ensuring that the security

forces reflect Afghanistan's ethnic balance. And fifth, the narcotics trade must be curbed because it fuels the insurgency.

Certain aspects of the new strategy, however, are problematic for Islamabad. The military escalation dimensions of the strategy pose the greatest anxiety. They suggest that despite Washington's new emphasis on "soft and smart power" and the claim that the region's security problems cannot be addressed in military terms alone, substantial reliance is still being placed on military means by the U.S.-led mission.

President Obama's decision to send an additional 21,000 troops to Afghanistan not only contradicts his stated aim to talk to the Taliban, but it is also fraught with risk for Pakistan. The bulk of the troops will be deployed in the insurgency belt in southern and eastern Afghanistan. Increased military engagement on Pakistan's border would escalate rather than diminish the threat of instability in Pakistan for several reasons. A military surge could lead to an influx of militants and al Qaeda fighters into Pakistan and increase the vulnerability of U.S.-North Atlantic Treaty Organization supply routes through the country, as supply needs will likely double. It may also lead to the influx of Afghan refugees as they seek to escape the worsening fighting. And finally, all this could produce a spike in violence with terrorist reprisals expected to intensify.

An even more significant worry for Islamabad is the military escalation signaled by the focus on rooting out "safe havens" in Pakistan's border region and redefining the war as a regional conflict. President Obama's suggestion that if Pakistan did not take action, the United States would step in, implies a widening of the war into western Pakistan even if the President later explained that he would consult Pakistani leaders before terrorist hideouts were pursued.

All this has still left open the prospect of increased U.S. Predator strikes against targets in FATA, a risky course since this action will only inflame public opinion in Pakistan and have destabilizing effects. Drone attacks have already evoked condemnation from the National, Frontier, and Balochistan Assemblies. Any policy that is vehemently opposed by the people will ultimately be unsustainable. The tactical gains claimed from these strikes must

be set against the costs in terms of undermining strategic goals.

Such a perilous approach should be abjured in favor of the only viable one, which is based on the sharing of intelligence and technology, to enable Pakistan and its forces to address the terrorist threat in its own territory. The United States should show strategic patience as well as respect for a sovereign country's red lines in deeds, and not just in words.

Moreover, an approach that attempts to deal with al Qaeda only militarily ignores the fact that the organization has to be defeated in

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the ideological battle because it is ideology that finds followers who are ever ready to replace those "taken out." A counter-al Qaeda strategy must attempt to neutralize the network's ideological appeal in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other parts of the world where it finds recruits and allies. Al Qaeda is now more of an idea. Terrorist operations are increasingly conducted mostly by self-generated "affiliates" drawn from young men in various countries who have been radicalized by al Qaeda's ideology. The notion of fighting al Qaeda only militarily will remain only a partial response.

Islamabad and Washington will also need to close the gap in their perceptions over how they identify the strategic center of gravity of the threat that has to be addressed. Islamabad has long argued that the core of the problem and its solution lies in Afghanistan while acknowledging that support for the insurgency is provided by fighters using Pakistani soil. In Washington's view, it is the safe havens in Pakistan that are now the central front of the battle to defeat international terrorism. Islamabad believes that U.S. strategy downplays the fact that the situation in FATA is the consequence of the collapse of security in Afghanistan and not the other way around.

Islamabad also finds the notion of treating Pakistan and Afghanistan's border region as a

“single theater of combat” unsettling, not least because the security trajectories, causes, contexts, and capacities are so different and because it would be a grave error to think one size fits both. If the flawed concept of “AfPak” has achieved anything so far, it is to unite the militants on both sides of the border in a new alliance to resist the troop reinforcements in Afghanistan ordered by President Obama.

The United States recognizes that the attainment of its redefined goals depends critically on Pakistan’s stability. That is the rationale for the economic and security assistance that President Obama has pledged to give Pakistan. He has urged Congress to pass the bill sponsored by Senators John Kerry and Richard Lugar that authorizes \$1.5 billion in nonmilitary aid over the next 5 years.

But Islamabad has taken strong exception to the proposed conditions and benchmarking of the aid, linking this to its counterterrorism performance. In stating that Washington will not provide a blank check to Pakistan, President Obama struck a note that is counterproductive. This stance reinforces the transactional nature of the relationship that Pakistanis resent, and it strengthens rather than breaks from the paradigm of treating Pakistan as hired help rather than a valued ally.

The metrics that U.S. officials say are being

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developed in consultation with Congress for such benchmarking are already a source of friction in the relationship, recalling an unhappy history of legislative-driven sanctions. Senator Kerry’s remarks in an interview that these metrics might include checks on whether Pakistan is moving its forces away from its border with India to concentrate on the insurgent threat in the west will raise hackles in Islamabad. Any effort to impose conditions that aim to change Pakistan’s national security calculus would be misguided and doomed to fail. No country’s **national security** priorities or structures can be reconfigured from outside.

The only way to change the country’s security paradigm is to engage with the sources of longstanding Pakistan-India tensions.

Peace and Stability

While the threat from terrorism and militancy is a clear and immediate danger to Pakistan, Islamabad cannot ignore the more enduring strategic threat that emanates from the adversarial relationship between itself and Delhi. There are three reasons for this threat perception: a history of conflict (three wars and four near-wars), unresolved disputes including that over Kashmir, and India’s military posture, with the vast bulk of its land, air, and sea forces deployed against Pakistan. These assets can be quickly mobilized, as they were in 2002, for military action or for exercises in coercive diplomacy.

Historically, tensions between the nuclear neighbors have been shaped by military threat perceptions and postures. The heightened tensions in the wake of the terrorist attack in Mumbai last year was a reminder that, in order to address violence on a durable basis, a solution must be found to underlying disputes. How easily relations can revert to confrontation was dramatized by the immediate suspension of what seemed a promising, 5-year-old peace process.

Pakistan recognizes that peace with India is essential to achieve its goal of economic stability and to address the security threat posed by violent extremism. For the United States as well, peace in South Asia is essential to a number of its strategic objectives, including defusing the most proximate nuclear flashpoint.

President Obama often spoke prior to his election of the need to address Pakistan-India relations, asserting that the road to a stabilized Afghanistan runs through a Kashmir solution. But he later dropped any suggestion of an initiative on Kashmir in the face of Indian opposition. His new regional strategy excludes the India-Pakistan equation. The portfolio of his special representative Richard Holbrooke omits this although his original mandate was to encompass South Asia.

This does not mean that the interconnectivity of regional security issues will disappear. Policies have to respond to realities and not the

other way around. The success of Obama’s strategy will be contingent on how calm relations are between Delhi and Islamabad. Unless Pakistan’s security concerns on its eastern frontier are addressed, it will not be able to act decisively in fighting militancy on the western border.

This should urge the United States to consider diplomatic engagement to help promote strategic stability in South Asia. Such a regime needs to be built in three dimensions: finding an acceptable Kashmir solution and institutionalizing both nuclear and conventional military restraints. The India-U.S. nuclear deal represented a lost opportunity in not promoting such a regime when Washington had the leverage. Instead, the deal aroused grave misgivings in Islamabad, which saw this as another example of iniquitous policies followed by Washington. This does not, however, prevent the United States from future efforts to promote strategic stability, using the window of opportunity available prior to the execution of the nuclear agreement.

On Kashmir, tangible progress toward a settlement can provide Pakistan with the context and rationale to move decisively against groups allied to violent extremists and foreign fighters. This means, at minimum, India’s willingness to accede to meaningful self-governance by Kashmiris, significant drawdown of the over half-million-strong Indian security force in Kashmir, and an end to human rights violations against the Kashmiri people. An interim settlement based on these elements can pave the way to an eventual final solution.

Reduction of the threat perception also requires putting in place two other components of strategic stability: nuclear and conventional military restraints that are based on the concept of minimum deterrence. At first, India and Pakistan should translate minimum deterrence into an operational understanding involving a number of measures for mutual restraint. These could include:

- turning the unilateral moratorium on further nuclear weapons testing declared by both nations into a formal bilateral agreement
- maintenance of nuclear weapons on de-alert status

- acceptance of a moratorium on the acquisition and deployment of antiballistic missile systems
- additional confidence-building measures to reduce nuclear risk and avoid a nuclear and missile race.

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The other element of strategic stability relates to the maintenance of a balance in conventional weapons and forces. Any move that disturbs this balance can increase the danger to peace and security by changing nuclear thresholds. The two countries should therefore consider steps to reach an understanding on conventional military restraint, accompanied by, or leading to, an agreement on the non-use of force or a nonaggression pact.

Economic and Social Development

The best means to tame and reverse the growing tide of militancy in Pakistan is to strengthen its capacity to deliver economic and social progress to its people, especially to generate employment in the context of rising demographic pressures and the "youth bulge."

Although the new Obama strategy recognizes the importance of investing in Pakistan's future, the resources it plans to marshal are modest in relation both to the challenges Pakistan confronts as well as the central importance the administration assigns the country in its regional policy.

There are short-term solvency and long-term development needs for which Pakistan needs support. The urgent priority is financial stabilization that will require \$20 billion from the international community over the next few years.

In the near term, preferential trade access by the United States to Pakistan's textiles and clothing would be a bold and substantial step to help the country. Textiles are the lifeblood of

the Pakistani economy and its largest industrial employer. Preferential access would be a transformative measure as enhanced trade would create jobs and durable income streams. Aid often does neither. Present U.S. trade policy imposes higher tariffs on Pakistani goods than that from many developing countries.

The proposed Reconstruction Opportunity Zones legislation that President Obama has urged Congress to adopt envisages designated areas to be mainly established in the North-West Frontier Province. This has a trade component in that certain categories of goods produced there will have duty-free access to the United States. Its impact on the country's **textile industry** would be modest, in sharp contrast to the substantial effect a Free Trade Agreement would have. According to some studies, this would enhance trade by 35 percent.

To implement a comprehensive and bold program of economic and social revival, Pakistan needs international help. Such a plan should entail addressing the internal energy deficit and critical infrastructure needs as well as restore a positive climate for domestic and foreign investment. The cost involved would be what the United States spends in Iraq in 4 months. Given that the economic cost Pakistan has incurred since 2001 is estimated to be around \$35 billion, such investment would signal to the Pakistani people that the international community has a stake in strengthening the country's long-term stability.

For its part, Pakistan has to more purposefully meet the challenge of good governance and manage its economic and security issues with greater energy and competence, while building

public consensus and support for its goals of economic and political stability. This requires something from the politicians that they have shown little of in the past year, consumed and distracted as they have been in power plays and political confrontation: leadership.

Pakistan has to put its own political house in order and seriously address the three interconnected challenges of governance, security, and economy to inspire confidence within the international community. Islamabad needs to evolve a credible roadmap for the stabilization of its tribal agencies to replace the firefighting approach of the past few years. Its counterinsurgency policy must be consistently and coherently executed and anchored in a set of interlocking political processes and aim at rebuilding civilian administrative authority at the local level to ensure that security objectives are sustainable.

In this endeavor to restore internal stability and countermilitancy and to meet regional challenges, Pakistan and the United States need a vastly improved relationship. This requires addressing:

- the trust deficit
- mutually negative public perceptions
- lack of political and public consensus in both countries to support common objectives
- tactical divergences on how to achieve shared goals.

Reconciling policies and tactics on key topics is essential given the urgency of the issues at hand. In the process of enhancing mutual confidence, each side must show greater understanding for the other's security concerns. And Washington must demonstrate in practice and not only in words that it will no longer pursue an "America only" approach.

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