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The United States and Pakistan: Partnership in Crisis

Yoram Schweitzer and Dan Barak

The killing of Osama Bin Laden by American Navy SEALs forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan in early May represents a new peak in the ongoing tension between the United States and Pakistan regarding the issue of combating terror in general, and in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas within Pakistan's sovereign territory in particular. Nevertheless, at this stage, the two sides are avoiding an irreparable divide based on their clear mutual interests: Pakistan needs the economic support of the United States and aims to prevent unilateral American backing for India, Pakistan's bitter rival, and the United States needs comprehensive Pakistani assistance in the war against regional and international terrorist elements – the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and al-Qaeda – whose ability to act against the interests of the United States is dependent, to a large extent, on Pakistan's policy toward them.

The flagrant violation of Pakistan's sovereignty by American commando forces who operated in the heart of a large city without coordinating with the authorities in Islamabad resulted in vigorous public and political criticism in Pakistan. The Pakistani parliament held a special session on the military-security establishment's failure in not knowing and preventing either the American military action or the presence of Bin Laden in the heart of the country. According to information published after the killing, Bin Laden lived in a compound in the heart of the country for at least five years, and even hosted visitors there. This raised questions in the West concerning the possibility that Bin Laden enjoyed cooperation and assistance from elements in the local security forces. This in turn further increased American frustration with the unsatisfactory level of security cooperation with Pakistan in the war on terror – especially with what was seen as a lack of willingness on Pakistan's part to allocate sufficient forces for the war in the tribal region in Waziristan (FATA) – and with Pakistan's request to limit attacks by American drones. These attacks are the main effective means of action for the United States in the war against the terror

Dan Barak is an intern in the Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict Program at INSS.

organizations mentioned above; the principal targets were the senior leadership of these organizations who concentrate in the tribal regions. Therefore, although on occasion they caused harm to unarmed civilians – either because they were used by terrorists as human shields or were killed accidentally – a restriction on these attacks by the Pakistani government would impede the war on terror.

A previous point of friction in the complex relations between the two countries centered on an incident that occurred three months ago, when Ray Davis, a CIA contractor, shot two local intelligence agents to death in Lahore in broad daylight because he suspected they intended to rob him. Davis was imprisoned immediately after the incident, and although he had diplomatic immunity, the Pakistani public demanded that he be tried on the charge of premeditated murder, a crime for which the punishment is the death penalty. After about a month of contacts, Davis was smuggled out of the country following a compromise agreement that involved the United States government paying blood money to the families of those killed, as is allowed in certain circumstances by Islamic law. The incident sparked heightened public discussion on the breadth and depth of American clandestine intelligence activity in Pakistan and became a cause célèbre for local political elements that oppose all American activity in the country.

For example, members of the Islamist opposition in Pakistan used the incident in their domestic political game to attack the secular government headed by President Zardari, calling the deal to free Davis “a national tragedy.” Zardari’s government has coped with frequent coalition crises and is working against the attempt to weaken the secular political forces in the country. This trend was particularly evident in two political assassinations, in January, Salman Taseer, the governor of the Punjab region and a prominent spokesman against Islamic religious extremism and attempts to apply the blasphemy laws¹ against minorities in Pakistan, was murdered by his bodyguard, and two months later, Shahbaz Bhatti, the Christian federal minister for minorities, was assassinated as well.

In the face of public allegations in the United States about Pakistan’s impotence, as manifested in the Bin Laden affair, and in light of President Obama’s recent promise that he would launch more unilateral raids into Pakistan whenever he felt they were required, senior officials of the Pakistani military and security establishment made serious statements in the Pakistani parliament. At the end of the debate, the government of Pakistan announced officially that it criticized the flagrant violation of its sovereignty by the United States; firmly denied any involvement or operational or logistical assistance to the operation; and claimed that such actions harm the two countries’ joint efforts in the war on terror. This announcement was also intended as a clear warning to the United

¹These laws, which are part of Pakistan’s Islamic constitution, mandate a death penalty for those who violate the name of Prophet Muhammad or the Quran and impose severe penalties for “harming religious feelings.”

States against carrying out future similar actions on its sovereign territory. Likewise, the Pakistani parliament adopted a resolution to take a number of steps restricting American freedom of action in Pakistan, such as in the supply and transfer of equipment on Pakistani territory if the American aerial attacks continue. At the same time, it was decided that a comprehensive internal examination will be carried out to review the related intelligence and security failures.

While the friction between the two countries is real, it appears that there are mutual attempts to cool the atmosphere, mainly through conciliatory announcements and official visits. Examples of this are President Zardari's conciliatory letter in the Washington Post, which was published immediately after Bin Laden's killing and was intended to minimize the serious criticism of Zardari in American public opinion; Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's tempered comments to the effect that there is no proof of Pakistani government involvement or assistance in hiding Bin Laden on its territory; and Clinton's recent visit to Pakistan with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen. Thus in spite of the increasing tension, the two governments are interested in preserving their ties, in view of their shared interests and the benefits in maintaining security and economic cooperation. The United States sees Pakistan as an essential partner in stabilizing Afghanistan and an important aid in the war on terror underway within Pakistan. Furthermore, geo-strategic considerations regarding Pakistan's status as a nuclear state with a key role in preserving regional stability in the ongoing conflict between Pakistan and India, and the signals from Pakistan that it intends to strengthen its ties with China as a possible alternative to its pro-Western policy, discourage the United States from taking strong measures against it.

Pakistan, which suffers from a difficult economic situation, has enjoyed generous American economic and security aid since 2002 as a result of its pro-Western policy, to the tune of approximately \$20 billion. A reduction or an end to this aid is liable to cause serious damage to the local economic system and paralyze state institutions. Furthermore, Pakistan is coping with a complicated security challenge within the country and is continues to feel under constant threat from India. Pakistan is very well aware of the price of a rift in relations with the United States, which would likely serve India's interests, and this factor encourages it to maintain strong ties with the United States and sanction its presence as a stabilizing element in the region.

It is still too early to say how the current crisis between the two states will evolve and whether it will lead to a strategic turning point and a change in the entire regional system of power. However, it appears that the advantages inherent in preserving the partnership are likely to urge their leaders to curbing this current deterioration in relations and prevent an irreparable divide.