

A Troubled Geostrategic Marriage: US-Pakistan Relations

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Introduction

The targeted killing of Osama Bin Laden by the United States in early May 2011 and the complex sequence of related events, including the terrorist attack by the Pakistan-based Haqqani network¹ on the American Embassy in Kabul in early September, have thrown the complicated relationship between the US and Pakistan into the spotlight. The two nations are deeply divided with regard to the war on terrorism, reflected in recent months by increasingly loud calls by members of Congress to end military and economic aid to Pakistan in light of suspicions and accusations by senior army officers, chief among them then-outgoing Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, that the Pakistani intelligence services have helped Haqqani's network and have not taken a firm enough stand against terrorist organizations located within the state's borders. During a surprise visit to Kabul in late October, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton even declared that Pakistan must be part of the solution to the Afghanistan issue and take a more aggressive stance at home in the war on terrorism.² For its part, the Pakistani parliament has threatened sanctions and demanded the end of American drone attacks in Pakistani territory.³ Likewise, following the White House's rebuff of Admiral Mullen's comments,⁴ Pakistani Prime Minister Raza Gillani claimed that the Pakistani nation had scored a victory against the Americans, as the unification of the political parties caused the US to signal that it needed Pakistan and could not win the war on terrorism without Pakistan.⁵

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Nonetheless, in the midst of this sparring, the two nations, partners in the war on radical Islamic terrorism, are trying to maintain a correct relationship. Prime Minister Gillani repeatedly stressed that although US-Pakistan relations have fluctuated, they are starting to return to the proper course, with a shared drive to continue to work together towards peace in the region and advance issues besides the war on terrorism.⁶ President Obama too tried to temper the atmosphere: in a speech in early October he stated that while the US would not feel comfortable with its strategic links with Pakistan should Islamabad fail to consider American interests, at this point the US would continue its assistance despite the concern about connections between the Islamabad intelligence community and radical Islamic elements in Afghanistan.⁷

This essay surveys Pakistan's national interests and the rationale underlying its posture vis-à-vis the United States, especially regarding cooperation in the war on terrorism. It also examines the regional struggles in which Pakistan is involved, specifically, its bitter conflict with India and its relations with China. Despite the recent US criticism of Pakistani conduct and deteriorating bilateral relations, a comprehensive examination of the geostrategic regional situation and the interests of both the United States and Pakistan reveals the sensitive complexity of the arena in which Pakistan operates and the fact that American involvement is indeed bearing fruit and contributing to regional stability.

The Pakistani Paradox

Pakistan was established as a secular state after it was apportioned territory from India in order to realize the autonomous ambitions of India's Muslim minority. In practice, religion has always served politicians and the military, especially during the rule of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, when the function of the military was defined as defending not just the state and the people but also Islam itself. Yet despite the centrality of Islam in Pakistan, the country produced a Western-oriented secular elite, a product of the era of British control. Many members of this elite were educated in the West and adopted a liberal democratic outlook. However, the regional instability of central Asia in the last decade and the lack of internal peace in Pakistan have challenged the development of a democratic society with an efficient public sector and proper educational and employment infrastructures: a difficult economic situation, high unemployment, the

lack of human capital, and natural disasters together with a low rate of tax collection, which quickly depletes government coffers and makes it hard to implement the structural reforms required to stimulate economic growth, have all led to growing alienation between the Western secular elite and the tradition-minded majority that has experienced counter processes of religious radicalization, and to an undermining of political stability and functional political administration in Pakistan.⁸

The religious radicalization of the Muslim population and the tension with the secular elite became highly apparent with the violent ouster of national leaders from the secular liberal elites, namely Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who established the Pakistan Peoples Party, and his daughter, Benazir: Zulfikar was found guilty in a controversial trial and hanged in 1979,⁹ while Benazir Bhutto was assassinated by radical Islamic elements in 2007 during her term as prime minister.¹⁰ In addition, inspired by clerics of the Red Mosque in Islamabad and led by Baitullah Mehsoud,¹¹ 2007 also saw the establishment of the organization known as the Pakistani Taliban, a union of a number of Islamic militias. The organization's goal is to topple the secular regime and end the support to the US in the war on terrorism. To date, it has carried out many acts of terrorism in Pakistan, exacting hundreds of civilian and security service lives.¹² 2010, for example, was notable for particularly "quality" attacks, with a growing number of explosions taking place in major cities (unlike previous years when attacks were generally carried out in outlying areas), where the average number of injured and dead per attack also rose. In addition, the assassinations of liberal political figures continued; in 2011, Salman Taseer, the governor of the province of Punjab and a leader of the resistance to religious radicalization and the imposition of infidel laws, and Shahbaz Bhatti, the Roman Catholic Federal Minister for Minorities, were murdered, the former by his own bodyguard and the latter ambushed by the Pakistani Taliban.¹³ Nonetheless, the concerted efforts of the Pakistani and American security services led to a drop in the number of attacks in 2010 compared to the previous year.

Over the years, religious tensions, problems of governance, and the shaky democratic infrastructures in Pakistan have created a political culture that positioned the military as the strongest force in the country. Consequently, throughout its existence Pakistan has alternated between military and civilian rule. The undermining of internal stability during civilian regimes triggers military intervention and control; the renewed

imposition of military order generates public disgust with the military regime and the return to civilian rule, and thus the cycle begins anew. Still, the extensive power and freedom of action enjoyed by Pakistan's military and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) have made it difficult for the government to channel the nation's resources towards the promotion of national interests. This has dramatized the leadership crisis in the country, manifested by the election of President Asif Ali Zardari by virtue of his status as the widower of Benazir Bhutto rather than on his own record, and challenged American efforts to advance democracy in Pakistan.

This dynamic is also a result of the ongoing conflict between Pakistan and India, its neighbor to the east, regarding the region of Kashmir. Two-thirds of the region was given to India during the division between the two countries in 1947, despite the region's Muslim majority. The national ethos of the struggle with India has contributed much to securing the undisputed status of the military establishment in Pakistan.¹⁴ In addition, India's extraordinary development in recent decades has determined its military superiority over Pakistan, which has since then worked tirelessly to acquire military aid from its major allies, the US and China, which increases Pakistan's dependence on them and limits its political scope for maneuver.¹⁵ Today the balance of military power against India rests on Pakistan's nuclear program, which includes 80-100 nuclear warheads and impressive missile capabilities. However, this effort comes at an enormous monetary cost: fully one-quarter of the national budget is earmarked for security.¹⁶ In tandem with the balance of nuclear terror between the two countries, Pakistan supports terrorist organizations active against Indian targets in Kashmir. These organizations carry out joint activities and share a similar ideology with al-Qaeda, the Haqqani network, and the Afghani Taliban, all operating against Pakistan's major ally, the United States. Some see this as one of the most compelling reasons for Pakistan's refusal to respond to the American request to undertake a broad offensive operation in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the mountainous buffer zone between Pakistan and Afghanistan and host to many terrorists.¹⁷

The Pakistani regime is thus caught between the need to maintain an internal support base among the Pakistani public, which is experiencing a process of religious radicalization that leads to identification with terrorist organizations and repugnance towards the Western presence in the region (a sentiment that has of late trickled down to some senior security officers),

and the desire to retain American support, which is imperative given India's growing economic and military power and given the risk to the viability of Pakistan's state institutions.

Relations with the US

US-Pakistan relations date back to the establishment of Pakistan and have known ups and downs. The first significant bond between the two nations was in the context of the 1955 Baghdad Pact, which allied the Muslim nations bordering the USSR and was supposed to serve as a buffer against Soviet expansion into Asia. During the India-Pakistan War of 1965, America's refusal to send weapons to Pakistan led to a sense of betrayal and distrust on the part of many Pakistanis towards the US. This sentiment grew stronger when the US cut military aid in 1979 after the Pakistani nuclear program came to light. Relations improved later that year when the USSR invaded Afghanistan and the US Congress authorized the resumption of security assistance, despite Pakistan's nuclear program. The nuclear test Pakistan conducted in 1998, in response to a nuclear test by India, again derailed relations with Washington. The 9/11 attacks against the US in 2001 served as a catalyst for a renewed closeness of relations, largely due to the understanding by General Musharraf, who headed Pakistan at the time, that Pakistan had better join the angry United States after the attacks rather than be identified as an opponent and risk a direct confrontation, as was the case with Iraq and Afghanistan. For the US, helping Pakistan become a more stable and democratic nation fighting radical Islamic terror elements became a central goal in the post-9/11 era.

Once US-led NATO forces took control of Afghanistan, the al-Qaeda and Afghani Taliban leaders fled to the tribal region inside Pakistan. Since then the area has become a veritable terrorism paradise for a number of reasons: relative independence and only partial subordination to the central government, closeness to the Afghani border, and in particular, relative protection against the Americans. The freedom of action enjoyed by terrorists in FATA also extends outside of Pakistan, especially in the major battleground in the area, Afghanistan. Indeed, 2010 was the deadliest year for NATO forces in Afghanistan as a result of the movement of terrorists across the mountainous Af-Pak border. Therefore, when the US understood that Afghanistan's "terrorism central" had moved into Pakistan – a sovereign nation that offered a very limited scope of action

compared to Afghanistan – it adopted the new method of attack, namely drones. This method earned silent approval from the Pakistani government and has had some successes, most recently the killing of Ilyas Kashmiri, a senior al-Qaeda operative, in early June 2011.¹⁸ The scope of these attacks has significantly increased since they began, from about 35 in 2008, to 53 in 2009, to 117 in 2010, primarily against Taliban and Haqqani network operatives.

At the same time, the increase in the number of aerial attacks by the US has caused a higher number of Pakistani civilian deaths and added to the frustration of the Pakistani public, which views these attacks as an American infringement of Pakistani sovereignty. Moreover, the need for precise intelligence to assist American drone attacks has translated into more CIA personnel on the ground and, consequently, friction with the locals: in January 2011, a CIA contractor named Raymond Davis shot two Pakistani intelligence personnel to death in Lahore, suspecting they were about to rob him. Davis was arrested immediately after the incident, despite his diplomatic immunity, and many Pakistanis demanded that he be tried for first degree murder, a capital offense. After a month of discussions, Davis was smuggled out of Pakistan following a compromise that involved the US paying blood money to the families of the dead men. The Davis incident generated a public debate about the scope of clandestine activity by American intelligence personnel in Pakistan and became a cause célèbre for local politicians opposed to American activity in the country. The negative feelings in the Pakistani street, as expressed in this public debate, range from fear of an American takeover and confiscation of the nuclear installations – a source of Pakistani national pride – to an extreme scenario in which the US topples the government and conquers Pakistan, similar to events in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁹

Another source of friction between the US and Pakistan is the Pakistani interest in Afghanistan. The Pakistani regime supported the Afghani Taliban upon its inception, assisted the military coup that brought it to power in 1995, and was one of only three nations (along with Saudi Arabia and the UAE) that recognized its rule. Even today, with Pakistan defined as a major non-NATO ally, a status that brings it extensive military and economic assistance from the US, there are contacts between its intelligence services and the Afghani Taliban, which are obviously contrary to American interests.

Hostile Pakistani public opinion and concerns about Pakistan playing both sides have damaged the willingness of several US lawmakers to continue to budget either civilian or military aid to Pakistan. Rep. Steve Chabot (R-OH) conveyed this sentiment when he remarked, "We spent all this money and they still hate us."²⁰ Moreover, the identification of Osama Bin Laden's complex in the city of Abbottabad near the capital of Islamabad and the presence of other al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan (such as the Quetta Shura, including the Afghani Taliban's senior leadership headed by Mullah Muhammed Omar, who fled Afghanistan when the Americans invaded) strengthen the claim that terrorist leaders are in fact assisted by Pakistan's security services. In addition, Pakistan has time and again failed to maintain its military achievements in the war on terrorism or translate them into successes in the civilian realm; areas that were cleared of terrorists are reclaimed by terrorists in the absence of a stable local government (in some areas, the military has engaged in a third round of cleansing in the last two years). Therefore, it is not inconceivable that the next stage in the war on terrorism in Pakistan may go beyond the FATA borders and entail expanding American drone attacks into the Balochistan region.

And so, while the tension between the US and Pakistan continues to grow because of hostile public opinion; a terrorist attack on the embassy in Kabul – which according to Admiral Mullen took place with the full foreknowledge of Pakistan's intelligence community; and the extensive presence of terrorist operatives in FATA, the Americans continue to try to enlist the support of the government in Islamabad for the decisive battle against the terrorist organizations by means of a joint attack by both countries. However, this desire conflicts with an obvious interest of Pakistan, which is trying to maintain good relations with elements that support groups active against India in Kashmir.

Still, despite the angry reverberations from declarations by senior American government and military personnel, a closer examination of Pakistan's war on terrorism demonstrates that America's copious criticism is both overstated and imprecise in several ways. First, of all the nations fighting terrorism, including the United States, Pakistani security forces have suffered the greatest number of casualties, with close to 4,000 dead. Second, Pakistani security forces have succeeded in catching senior al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, such as Khaled Sheikh Muhammad, the brains

behind 9/11. Third, the Pakistani army and border patrol have long been fighting the terrorist organizations in FATA, and have paid for this with serious retaliations on the internal arena following the establishment of the Pakistani Taliban, which carries out many attacks targeting both urban centers and the security services. Fourth, the fact that Pakistan permitted the stationing of CIA agents on its soil and agreed to American drone attacks was another important contribution to the war on terrorism, coming at the cost of damaging the legitimacy of the regime in large segments of the Pakistani population and arousing a great deal of opposition.

Therefore, some of the criticism should be addressed to the US, given that the vast majority of the economic aid it awards Pakistan goes towards military ends rather than to strengthening its democratic nature by means of reforms or investments in civilian infrastructures. The Kerry-Lugar-Berman 2009 Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act was an attempt to deal with this problem. It made clear that security assistance to Pakistan was conditional on State Department authorization that Pakistan was not a state sponsoring terrorism (especially the Taliban and the Haqqani network) and is working to root it out.²¹ Other conditions for military aid were: gaining access to Pakistan's nuclear installations and nuclear knowledge distribution network; confronting Pakistan legislatively over money laundering; and receiving a commitment that the Pakistani military is not undermining the political echelon and that its power is limited. In response to these requirements, Secretary of State Clinton submitted an affidavit in this spirit in mid-March 2011, when the preparations for killing Osama Bin Laden were in high gear. Even then there were Congressmen who called for a reexamination of US-Pakistan relations and a freeze on economic assistance until receiving clarifications from the Pakistani government about its commitment to the war on terrorism. In response, Kerry and Lugar published statements about the need to continue to support Pakistan in order to allow control of nuclear proliferation and pursue the war on terrorism.²²

Past events have shown that the US can greatly influence Pakistan: when then-President Musharraf dismissed the president of Pakistan's Supreme Court, suspended the constitution, and instituted emergency rule, he was forced by then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to give up one of the functions he was fulfilling – president and commander of the army. In a different instance, in 2010, when floods brought Pakistan

to the verge of collapse and there was a real concern that the army would try to wrest control of the country, it was again the US that intervened and ensured the survival of civilian rule. It appears that the current crisis in US-Pakistan relations indicates a greater Pakistani willingness to push the envelope, reflected, for example, in statements by Prime Minister Gillani and threats made in the Pakistani parliament to attack American supply convoys to Afghanistan traveling through Pakistan unless the drone attacks are suspended and the American military presence is curtailed. For its part, the US policy combines high level diplomacy and economic assistance, plus encouragement of the Pakistani army to act against terrorism networks, together with the attempt to limit the political influence of the security forces.

Some of the current tensions between the US and Pakistan may be attributed to the sudden death of America's special envoy to the region, Richard Holbrooke, who enjoyed a special status there, was an expert in all regional matters, and was a proponent of a policy that placed greater emphasis on the civilian aspect than on the military,²³ and to the fact that he was replaced by American security personnel. The latter tend to lend greater significance to military parameters in every examination of Pakistan's efforts in the war on terrorism, thereby strengthening claims by Pakistani regime officials that the US is fairly indifferent to Pakistan's own national security needs in the region and is conducting itself arrogantly in its repeated infringements of Pakistani sovereignty.

China as an Alternative to the US

Pakistan's second significant ally after the US is China, which shares a border with northern Pakistan and in the context of a longstanding alliance – strengthened after the 1962 Sino-Indian War when Pakistan was viewed as a balance to India – provides Pakistan with extensive economic and military aid. Chinese assistance includes various components in the Pakistani nuclear program, key platforms such as fighter jets, and even a 2001 initiative for a joint Sino-Pakistani project for planning and manufacturing a battle tank called the MBT 2000. In exchange Pakistan has shared technological intelligence about American weapons with China, including selling China one unexploded Tomahawk cruise missile from the 1998 failed attempt to kill Bin Laden when President Clinton was still in office and sharing F-16 fighter technology on the basis of the plane's

service in the Pakistani air force. Recently the Chinese asked Pakistan for the fragments of an American helicopter that was grounded and then bombed during the raid in Abbottabad during Operation Geronimo to kill Bin Laden and which may have been equipped with advanced stealth technology.

However an examination of past confrontations between Pakistan and India (1947, 1965, 1971, and 1999) shows that China did not help Pakistan in any significant way in any of them, and even sided openly with India in 1999 in the Kargil conflict. Moreover, as a member of the UN Security Council, China has voted for defining the Jamaat-ud-Dawa as a terrorist organization, in clear contrast to the Pakistani position. An examination of Chinese aid to Pakistan shows that the major portion is military, with only a small allotment to civilian needs. For example, after the destructive floods in 2010, China offered Pakistan the relatively modest sum of only \$100 million, as opposed to the \$500 million given by the US.

China's clear interest lies in maintaining the tension between India and Pakistan in order to impede India's growth and keep it from vying with China for regional hegemony. Therefore China might be expected to continue providing Pakistan with military aid, thereby preventing a disruption of the balance of power favoring India and an armed conflict between India and Pakistan. By contrast, leaders of the Pakistani regime are using the strategic alliance with China as a tool in negotiations with the US. About a week after the successful attack on Bin Laden, Prime Minister Gillani left for a visit to China and even declared in Pakistan's parliament that China is "an all-weather partner" – a dig clearly directly at Washington.²⁴

Conclusion

The alliance between the US and Pakistan, despite its complexity and vagaries, is quite firm and founded on mutual interests. The sense among Pakistan's political leaders is that the US abandoned Pakistan when the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan came to its end in the late 1980s, and has since then preferred India, and that it was only the events of September 2001 that led to a renewal of close relations. Not only do the Pakistanis enjoy economic and military assistance, but the close relations that the US has with India are used by Pakistan as leverage, and Pakistan has rejected American requests to embark on an offensive in FATA on the spurious

claim that most of Pakistan's ORBAT is needed for routine security on the Indian border. The Pakistanis are thereby trying to make the US persuade India to reduce its military presence on its western border.

For their part, the Americans see Pakistan as a critical partner in stabilizing Afghanistan and an important element in the war on terrorism inside Pakistan. The geostrategic considerations of the US, which views Pakistan as a nuclear state with a key role in maintaining regional stability, together with Pakistani signals about its intentions to forge closer relations with China as a possible alternative to its current pro-Western orientation, are encouraging the American administration to avoid taking extreme steps against Islamabad.

In recent months both the US and Pakistan have expressed their displeasure with one another and taken actual steps to convey this displeasure, and so, in addition to the declarations by Obama and Clinton, American security officials have openly begun to criticize Pakistani conduct. CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell went furthest: in a closed conversation he gave a low grade to Pakistan's security services. The US has also taken a relatively extreme measure by freezing \$800 million in military aid, out of the \$2.7 billion package planned for 2011. For their part, twice in the last six months the Pakistanis revealed the names of two CIA station chiefs in Islamabad (thereby forcing their replacement) and arrested locals who helped the CIA target Bin Laden, as part of a propaganda campaign aimed at highlighting America's infringement of Pakistan's sovereignty. In addition, Pakistan has severely cut back its joint routine security activity with the US, and has made it increasingly difficult for American military and CIA personnel to obtain entrance visas.

Nevertheless, the two countries have avoided crossing the line and causing irreversible damage to relations. Both nations have a vested interest in maintaining correct relations: thanks to its pro-Western stance, Pakistan, with its difficult economic situation, has enjoyed generous American aid, both economic and security-military, for a total of \$20 billion since 2002. The end or reduction of this assistance could have severe ramifications for the local economy, paralyze state institutions, and worst of all, push Pakistan into China's waiting arms. Pakistan is also confronting a complex internal security challenge and finds itself in an ongoing conflict with India, which it sees as a constant threat. Pakistanis are well aware of the cost of a potential rift in relations with the US, which could play into India's hands,

and this serves to spur Pakistan into maintaining its special relations with the US and accepting the US presence as a balancing element in the region. In addition, despite the negative aspects in Pakistani policy and popular hatred of the US, Pakistan is seen as holding the leading cards in the war on terrorism, earned through extensive military action that cost many Pakistani lives, military and civilian alike. Pakistan is a problematic ally but it cannot be presented as an entity that collaborates with the enemies of the West and tricks the US solely out of pecuniary motives, as it is sometimes described by Western analysts. Its achievements are particularly striking in light of the nation's internal instability, the struggle between secular, liberal trends and Islamic religious radicalization, and the unresolved conflict with India, which translates into a primal fear and a celebration of the military.

In light of Pakistan's centrality in the war on terrorism, the US drive to stabilize Afghanistan, and the host of thorns in US-Pakistan relations, the American administration is now facing two major alternatives. One alternative is to cut off aid to Pakistan and abandon it and its democratic regime, which in practice would allow radical Islamic elements to take control of the nation and further destabilize the situation on the Indian and Afghani borders. The second alternative is to take advantage of the crisis to strengthen relations by nurturing Pakistan's security services, improving its commitment to the war on terrorism, and strengthening the nation's democratic political institutions, while understanding that from time to time Pakistan will continue to play both sides. The latter alternative would allow the US to maintain a critical hold in this key region of central Asia, which has become a locus of activity against radical Islamic terrorism challenging the Western way of life.

Despite conflicts of interest in certain realms, one may expect that America's ambitions in the region will encourage the US to opt for the second alternative. It is almost certain that contradictory statements, secret military cooperation, and much mutual and open criticism will continue to characterize the conduct of both nations. However, despite the many ups and downs in the complex US-Pakistan relations, it seems that the nations' profound shared interests and the desire of both to survive serve the two nations more deeply and extensively than would a dismantling of the alliance between them.

Notes

- 1 The Haqqani network was part of the mujahideen who fought the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. The founder of the network was Jajaluddin Haqqani who served as a minister in the Taliban government. Today the network is considered the most dangerous armed element facing Western forces in eastern Afghanistan. In addition to its terrorist activities against Western forces, including NATO and US forces, the network has extensive links with armed militias such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and it provides those organizations with safe haven. Jason Ukman, "The Haqqani Network: Al-Qaeda's Dangerous Patron," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/al-qaeda-dangerous-haqqani-patron-in-pakistan/2011/07/18/gIQAAtWmcLI_blog.html.
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