

HADAR: Weak link in chain of American alliances

Wishing for friendship with Pakistan doesn't make it so

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Pakistan is lobbying Afghanistan's president against building a long-term strategic partnership with the United States, urging him instead to look to Pakistan and China for help in making a deal with the Taliban and rebuilding his country's economy, according to the most recent press reports. Yet despite this, the growing friction between the United States and Pakistan over the release of a CIA contractor who shot and killed two Pakistanis and the continuing U.S. drone attacks that have resulted in civilian casualties has been described by American officials as one more example of the unavoidable tensions between two "old allies."

Indeed, the George W. Bush administration designated Pakistan as a major non-NATO ally in 2004, with then-Secretary of State Colin L. Powell declaring that the "United States stands with Pakistan" and highlighting Islamabad's commitment to cooperate with Washington in fighting al Qaeda and other terrorist groups in South Asia.

But it doesn't make a lot of sense to refer to a government whose intelligence service assists military efforts by al Qaeda and the Taliban against U.S. troops in Afghanistan as an "ally." Indeed, a report released last year by the London School of Economics concluded it is the "official policy" of Pakistan's [Inter-Services Intelligence] to support the Taliban. That the ISI occasionally helps the U.S. target al Qaeda and Taliban cells in Pakistan doesn't mean the relationship between Washington and Islamabad is one between trusted security partners.

"An alliance is like a chain," and it "is not made stronger by adding weak links to it," wrote political thinker Walter Lippmann, urging Washington to resist the temptation to inflate the number of U.S. allies and alliances. "A great power like the United States gains no advantage and it loses prestige by offering, indeed peddling, its alliances to all and sundry," he stressed.

However, since the end of the Cold War, Washington, under Democratic and Republican administrations, has been "peddling its alliances to all and sundry." NATO's membership was enlarged from 16 in 1990 to 28, and the organization has signed Individual Partnership Action Plans with eight other countries, including Ukraine and Georgia.

The list of non-NATO allies now includes 14 countries, ranging from Japan and South Korea, with which the United States has mutual defense agreements, to the Philippines and Thailand, which have special security relations with Washington, and to Kuwait and Bahrain, U.S. military protectorates in all but name.

Then there are the many other "allies" that join the United States in the "wars" against terrorism and drugs, belong to this or that "coalition of the willing" or happen to be occupied by the U.S. (Iraq) or NATO (Kosovo).

But the way Lippmann and other strategic thinkers saw it, political-military alliances were supposed to reflect the common strategic interests shared by two or more states in deterring an aggressive state outside of the alliance that was perceived to be a threat to all of them. The alliances usually include a commitment to defend the ally if it is attacked by the aggressor.

An attachment to common values may help cement the relationship between allies, like between the United States and Great Britain, but the United States formed close military alliances with the Soviet Union during World War II and fascist Spain, a NATO member, during the Cold War. The decisions to support these and other allies, with military power if necessary, reflected the belief that it would serve to protect core U.S. security interests.

But the process of expanding NATO and making new commitments to non-NATO allies seemed to reflect institutional inertia and ad-hoc considerations. It wasn't based on any realistic assessment of U.S. interests and resources, and it featured hardly any debate.

And while the United States and Pakistan may sleep together in the same bed, the respective rulers and citizens of the two countries don't have the same strategic nightmares. Pakistanis regard India, an important diplomatic and trade partner of the United States, as the core threat to their national interest. Moreover, fully 64 percent of the Pakistani public regard the United States as an enemy, while just 9 percent describe it as a partner, according to the 2010 Pew Global Attitudes Project.

At the same time, Americans view Islamic terrorism, which enjoys the support of important political and religious groups in Pakistan, as a clear and present danger to their own security. Some are aware that Osama bin Laden's plans to attack the United States were hatched in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, which was, at the time, a Pakistani client.

But treating Pakistan as an ally while its leaders continue sabotaging U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and expecting America to subsidize the Pakistani economy in perpetuity makes no sense. If, as Lippmann put it, an alliance is like a chain and it is not made stronger by adding weak links, in the case of Pakistan, the chain has been broken for a long time.

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