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Pakistan's Boldness Reveals America's Weakness

| [More](#) ^[1]

| April 29, 2011

| [Malou Innocent](#) ^[2]

On Wednesday, the *Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) ^[3] that Pakistan has urged Afghanistan to reject a long-term strategic partnership with the United States. This revelation, following a string of other troubling [developments](#) ^[4] in the decade-long war, makes it abundantly clear that Pakistan's growing assertiveness is linked directly to the [widespread perception](#) ^[5] in Pakistan ^[6] of [American weakness in Afghanistan](#) ^[7].

The story claims that at an April 16th meeting in Kabul, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani told Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai to rebuff America's "Strategic Partnership Declaration," a formal agreement that would [allow](#) ^[8] American military bases in Afghanistan beyond 2014 for the purpose of training Afghan troops (Apparently, preventing terrorist bases for al Qaeda requires [permanent bases for America](#) ^[9]). As if that disclosure was not enough to raise the hackles of Washington's foreign policy elite, Gilani also told Karzai that America's policy of trying to weaken the Taliban's momentum while at the same time bringing them the negotiating table made no sense, and that their countries must take "ownership" of the peace process.

Of course, rather than use this opportunity to reexamine the efficacy of a prolonged U.S. presence in the region, the question Beltway insiders are asking is why—*oh why!*—would leaders in Kabul and Islamabad collude against Washington?

The answer is simple: America's ostensible clients—Afghanistan and Pakistan—lack confidence in their patron and seek more viable—and geographically contiguous—alternatives for security. Why wouldn't they? Our presence [has increased the level of anti-American radicalism](#) ^[10] that provides [passive support](#) ^[11] for Islamist terrorism; in turn, insurgents have responded to what they perceive as [a hostile occupation](#) ^[12] by reasserting their authority with more violence and bloodshed. This [vicious cycle](#) ^[13] has led to a [noticeable deterioration of security](#) ^[14] in both Afghanistan *and* Pakistan. So, put into perspective, *Why would any Afghan*

or Pakistani leader willingly put the future of Central Asia into Washington's hands?

First and foremost, let us keep in mind America's abysmal reputation in Pakistan. As one retired Pakistani general in Karachi told me, the perception in Pakistan is that America uses their country "like a condom." Let us also remember that last November, after a sharp rise [15] in the number of night raids and Afghan civilian casualties [16], President Karzai told [17] the *Washington Post*, "The time has come to reduce military operations...to reduce the intrusiveness into the daily Afghan life."

Regardless of whether Pakistan gets its way, its impudence in pushing Afghanistan to abandon America exposes the real balance of power in the region. It is Pakistan, not the United States, that wields significant influence over Afghanistan's major stakeholders. This includes old guard mujahideen commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Haqqani network and its connected affiliates, Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, and other militant heavyweights. This clash of strategic interests, not just between the United States and Pakistan but also among other competing regional powers [18], shows why Washington's periodic troop surges, increased development aid, and Predator drone strikes have failed to translate into anything more than "fragile" and "reversible" gains on the ground [19]. Such inhospitable conditions underscore the absurdity of the U.S.-led coalition's Sisyphean nation-building project.

Rather than becoming a viable nation-state, Afghanistan will remain a bottomless pit for American credibility and resources. For this reason, U.S. leaders should not fall into the trap of refusing to withdraw from Afghanistan out of fear that the United States will appear weak. Prolonging our presence in Afghanistan is more likely to weaken the United States [20] militarily and economically than would withdrawal.

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- [12] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hevgDG5aQpk>
- [13] <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65159/steven-simon/can-the-right-war-be-won?page=show>
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- [15] <http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCATRE71N15U20110224?sp=true>
- [16] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/27/world/asia/27afghanistan.html>
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- [18] <http://www.cato.org/pubs/articles/fsjournal201009.pdf#page=38>

4/29/2011

Pakistan's Boldness Reveals America's ...

[19] <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0311/51331.html>

[20] <http://www.cato.org/pubs/articles/innocent-cq-afghan-exit-strategy.pdf>