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America and Pakistan: Partners With Diverging Interests

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Over the last week, widespread suspicion of Pakistan's complicity with al Qaeda has shined a harsh light on Washington's relationship with Islamabad. The outrage on Capitol Hill is understandable, but it's also a bit strange. After all, except for Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and other tribally based militant groups, [for years it's been an open secret](#) that elements within the Pakistani government do not perceive the original Afghan Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Haqqani Network, and other specific proxy groups as enemies, but as assets to Pakistani policy.

Consider comments made by Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha, the head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Only two years ago [he defended](#) the Taliban and its leader, Mullah Omar, to the German publication *Der Spiegel*:

"Shouldn't they be allowed to think and say what they please? They believe that jihad is their obligation. Isn't that freedom of opinion?"

Of course, Mullah Omar's "freedom of opinion" exhorts militants to pour over the border into neighboring Afghanistan and kill infidel American troops. Pasha's insistence that such views are defensible encapsulates [America's enduring security challenge with Pakistan](#).

Since 9/11, the Pakistani government has claimed that its military is too ill-equipped and poorly-trained to effectively combat its internal guerrilla insurgency. That may be true, but it's also clear that the militancy plaguing the region is partly a byproduct of the Pakistani military's self-defeating ambition [to extend its geopolitical reach](#) into Afghanistan and throughout the region. For this reason, until elements within the Pakistani state make a fundamental shift in their strategic priorities, U.S. and NATO attempts to stabilize Afghanistan remain futile. Moreover, despite what U.S. officials would like to believe, no amount of pressure or persuasion will make Pakistan modify its policies, especially when it comes to reigning in extremists it's been nurturing for more than 30 years.

The core reality of the region is that after 9/11, rather than restructure, Pakistan rebalanced: President and Army General Pervez Musharraf and his army corps commanders decided to ally openly with the United States in the "War on Terror" *and* preserve their proxy assets as a hedge against Indian influence. As a result, Pakistan is feeling the heat on both sides, with American officials blasting Islamabad for refusing to cooperate fully, while Islamist extremists from inside Pakistan have turned against the government for throwing its support behind the United States.

Under such circumstances, the bilateral relationship has been punctuated by a number of melodramatic sideshows. Remember the recent diplomatic imbroglio over Raymond Davis, the CIA contractor detained in January for shooting and killing two Pakistani citizens? Or when last year Pakistan [halted the flow of supply convoys](#) for the NATO mission in Afghanistan? Or when right after President Obama took office U.S. officials began [going into convulsions](#) after learning that the Pakistani Taliban was [only 60 miles from Islamabad](#)?

Despite all the feel-good talk about partnership and cooperation, the reality is that America and Pakistan have competing strategic interests. Clearly, the two governments are pursuing very different and fundamentally antagonistic definitions of "joint cooperation."

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