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Why Pakistan Plays a Double Game

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Laden's death, Americans have shifted their attention to two key questions: *What's up with our "ally" Pakistan?* and *Why are we still in Afghanistan, anyway?* This questioning is understandable, perhaps even necessary, but it's also precisely why Pakistan continues to play its dangerous double game.

Malou Innocent has [convincingly reiterated](#) how Pakistan has a different set of geopolitical interests, leading it to fund and equip some of the very people we consider our worst enemies. Innocent even goes [so far as to say](#) that Pakistan's behavior underscores the futility of our continued presence in Afghanistan. Unintentionally, I'm sure, she makes the very point that lies at the heart of Pakistan's calculus: that the U.S. has no permanent interests in the region, and will eventually go home. When, not if, that happens, Islamabad believes it will still need arrows in its quiver to ward off enemies and protect its interests -- especially vis-à-vis India.

It's well worth reading journalist Dexter Filkins' [lengthy investigation of this problem](#) in 2008. (It helped [win the Times a Pulitzer](#).) Whatever the rhetoric, many Pakistani leaders see counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S. as part of a larger strategic game -- one whose purpose is to ensure the survival of the Pakistani state. In assuring the U.S. of their seriousness, while at the same time tolerating and even assisting Islamic militants within their midst, Islamabad has successfully landed billions in aid while retaining a key asset. Meanwhile, what otherwise might have been a short military operation to kill bin Laden and rout al Qaeda has yielded ten years of investment, training and relevance. Pakistan may not have been shielding bin Laden, but the jihadi threat was essential to keeping the aid flowing, keeping the economy afloat, and -- ironically -- to keeping the U.S.-Pakistan relationship alive.

It would be reprehensible to excuse the duplicity, given the thousands that died here at bin Laden's hands. And I'm not. But it should also be acknowledged that if you review our history, the calculus appears essentially right. Thirty years ago, we imposed harsh sanctions over Pakistan's nuclear program and human rights record -- then almost immediately reversed ourselves so we could funnel arms to the mujahedeen fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. Twenty years ago the Soviets fall, and within a year we discover nonproliferation and human rights again. Back come the sanctions. Ten years ago, we lift sanctions and again turn on billions in aid to buy support in pinning down al Qaeda.

Today, we've nailed bin Laden, we're questioning Pakistan's worth and we're looking over the horizon to a strategic partnership with India. Leaders in Islamabad can perhaps be forgiven for thinking that the U.S.-Pakistan relationship is less like a "bad marriage" than an illicit affair: we both keep coming back for something we want, but there's no real faith in a future.

Congressional outrage and calls for the U.S. to "reframe its partnerships" sound reasonable, but also seem to validate Pakistan's calculation that the friendship and support of the U.S. is (at best) transactional. But wait, aren't all foreign relations transactional?

No. To illustrate the point, let's look briefly at another bilateral relationship (one that really is like a marriage). Sixty years ago, Pakistan and China began a mutually-supportive strategic relationship, a relationship that has now endured several cycles of U.S. engagement and disengagement. Pakistan granted the PRC much-needed diplomatic recognition, mirrored Chinese positions on Taiwan, Hong Kong and Tibet, and later served as a trusted intermediary in brokering an opening with Washington. In return, China provided economic, military, and technological assistance, including the technology Pakistan most coveted -- that needed to build a nuclear weapon. True, China cannot today match the level of aid or technology offered by the U.S. (hence its allure), but it also makes no demands on Pakistan in return. And unlike the U.S., it will always be right there across the border; there is no "going home."

This is not to say that we should be more like the Chinese; there were, after all, good reasons behind each strategic turn. But the on-again, off-again interest in Pakistan and the Af/Pak region would leave almost anyone cynical about U.S. intentions -- as indeed most people in Pakistan are. If we really want to produce a change in Pakistan's behavior, our only choice may be to give up the idea of leaving entirely -- and to do that, we would have to do some serious soul-searching as a nation about who we are and what we're trying to accomplish in the world.

For Pakistan it remains a dangerous double game, to be sure. By continuing to tolerate groups like the Haqqanis and the Taliban, Islamabad is gambling that they can keep the country together without starting a war with India (or within Pakistan itself). They may prove to be wrong about that. But in fairness, it wouldn't be the first time a country has risked catastrophic blowback in order to cultivate a proxy force against a strategic enemy. Thirty years ago, in Pakistan, that nation was us.