

Malou Innocent: Time to let Pakistan go

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Americans celebrated the death of Osama bin Laden as some closure for the horrific losses of 9/11. However, the circumstances surrounding his death, coupled with widespread suspicion of Pakistan's complicity with al-Qaida, will create additional fissures in an already strained relationship between Islamabad and Washington.

Yet the dangerous illusion persists within Washington that America needs Pakistan more than Pakistan needs America. It is past time to let this illusion go and face reality.

Washington's single-minded pursuit of sticking it out in Afghanistan has forced policymakers to rationalize Pakistan's contribution to the region's security challenges. If anything, Pakistan's behavior underscores the futility of our continued presence in Afghanistan. Even in the more-limited realm of counterterrorism, the U.S. cannot trust Pakistan completely.



For years, individuals either within or with ties to Pakistan's spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), have collaborated with insurgents that frequently attack U.S. and coalition troops in Afghanistan. Many experts, such as venerated foreign policy expert Michael O'Hanlon, explain away this disquieting reality by arguing in a circle: They insist America needs Pakistan for its operations in Afghanistan by assuming that America's presence in Afghanistan is critical to America's security. Mr. O'Hanlon recently justified the necessity of maintaining ties with Pakistan, equating bilateral relations to a bad marriage both parties can't get out of.

There seems to be more and more evidence, however, that it is time for America to file for divorce.

Take, for instance, the recent raid against bin Laden. Allegedly, American officials didn't notify Pakistan about the operation, and for good reason. In 2005, and then again in 2008, the ISI thwarted attempts by the CIA to capture militant leader Sirajuddin Haqqani, warning him in advance about the raids.

Additionally, evidence suggests that retired army officers with links to the ISI meet regularly with insurgents attacking U.S. forces in Afghanistan. A report last year by the

London School of Economics found that elements of the ISI not only fund the Taliban, but are also represented on the militant movement's leadership council.

When compared to its tumultuous partnership with the U.S., Pakistan appears to have better working relations with militants who attack America. According to leaked documents from Guantanamo Bay obtained by Wikileaks, prison detainees associated with the ISI may have provided support to al-Qaida. The September 2007 document titled "Matrix of Threat Indicators for Enemy Combatants," lists the ISI as one of 65 "terrorist and terrorist support entities." Elements within the Pakistani government may have also played a direct role in the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, and the bombings of the Indian embassy in Kabul in July 2008 and October 2009.

Pakistan wants to have its cake and eat it, too, much like a cheating spouse. And U.S. myopia allows this to happen. Afghanistan is not a vital security interest to the U.S., yet trotting out an endless array of justifications for remaining in Afghanistan increases Pakistan's leverage by allowing it to take advantage of America's dependence. Only by extricating itself from Afghanistan can the U.S. decrease its reliance on Pakistan. In fact, Washington and Islamabad are more likely to ameliorate their unrelenting hostility if the U.S. expedited its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Policymakers must develop a strategy which accepts the reality that it is not within their power to alter the interests of competing powers in the region. Even the raid against bin Laden relied on a crucial break from Pakistan. Thus, limiting our goals to capturing and killing terrorists through counterterrorism would be sufficient.

It is time for the U.S. to reframe its partnerships to better reflect its true strategic interests.