

The National Interest

The U.S.-Pakistan Catastrophe

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The United States and Pakistan have reached an agreement to reopen the U.S. military's supply line into Afghanistan. The lengthy standoff, which began after the accidental U.S. killing of a twenty-four Pakistani military personnel last fall, was finally resolved by an expression of regret.

Despite this official breakthrough, Washington is hated more than ever by the Pakistani people. And it is not clear that Islamabad can forever ignore popular sentiments in working with the U.S. government.

America's relationship with Pakistan long has been based on crass realpolitik. During the Cold War, Washington worked with Islamic dictators in Pakistan to counterbalance democratic India, which was friendly with the Soviet Union. Even during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, the Nixon administration tilted toward Pakistan despite Islamabad's atrocities against its own people in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

Washington later viewed as a friend general-turned-president Mohammad Zia ul-Haq. He did more than anyone else to radicalize Afghan militants—U.S. aid to the mujahideen was funneled through his government to radicals like Osama Bin Laden. He also promoted intolerant Islamic fundamentalism within Pakistan to strengthen his position. Today we are living with the consequences of ul-Haq's misrule.

Another military ruler, Pervez Musharraf, played the Bush administration after 9/11, mixing concessions to Washington with support for the Afghan Taliban. Musharraf simultaneously aided and impeded U.S. operations. We will never know how many American and Western military personnel died as a result of Islamabad's double-dealing.

The problem continues. On a recent trip to Kabul, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta opined that Washington was "reaching the limits" of its patience with the Pakistan government's failure to stop attacks on U.S. military personnel from Pakistan by the so-called Haqqani network. Last month, Obama administration officials admitted that they were so frustrated that they were considering launching secret raids into Pakistan by U.S. and Afghan forces.

Yet Pakistan has grievances against the United States. Washington refuses to acknowledge, let alone respect, Islamabad's perceived interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan's geopolitical focus is India, against which it has fought three wars and by which it was dismembered after its most disastrous defeat forty years ago. For Islamabad, Afghanistan is but another proxy battleground with its large neighbor. Washington might not like that, but the Pakistani government will act as it believes it must, not as the United States wishes.

The American drone campaign also is generating popular anger. Indeed, the Obama administration has increased the use of drones greatly, expanding the target list to opponents of the Islamabad government as well as terrorists focused on America. The number of civilians killed is a matter of dispute, but the Obama administration essentially counts anyone in the vicinity of a terrorist as a terrorist. It's inconceivable that the United States is not killing innocent civilians simply living in areas where terrorists have found sanctuary. Moreover, even perfect accuracy would not eliminate the perceived affront to Pakistani sovereignty. The American people would never accept another nation engaging in similar actions on U.S. territory.

Unpopular America

Pakistani attitudes are sobering. According to the latest Pew Research Center poll, released in late June, the United States continues to fall in the estimation of the Pakistani people. President Obama is viewed no more favorably than President George W. Bush. Fewer Pakistanis believe it is important to improve the bilateral relationship. There is even less approval of U.S. humanitarian assistance.

America's favorability rating is abysmal: This year, 80 percent of Pakistanis view America negatively, up from 68 percent in 2009. Only 12 percent have a favorable opinion. An astounding 74 percent of Pakistanis consider the United States to be more of an enemy, up from 64 percent three years ago. Just 8 percent see Washington more as a partner. The share believing that improving relations is important has fallen from 53 percent in 2009 to 45 percent today. At least that's still more than the 35 percent who don't believe improving relations matters, up from 29 percent over the same period. A solid majority, 65 percent, opines that Washington acts unilaterally without considering Pakistan's interest, up from 53 percent three years ago.

Just 7 percent have confidence in President Obama, down from 13 percent in 2009. In contrast, over the same period those having no confidence rose from 51 percent to 60 percent.

As for the impact of American "foreign aid," 40 and 38 percent believe that military and economic support, respectively, have mostly negative impact. Only 8 and 12 percent, respectively, thought the effect was mostly positive.

The Pakistani people also increasingly reject American assistance even if targeted against terrorists and offered in cooperation with the Islamabad authorities. Just 50 percent, down from 72 percent in 2009, want financial and humanitarian support in areas with militants. The share of the population desiring intelligence and logistical support for the Pakistani government has fallen from 63 percent to 37 percent over the same period. Only 17 percent back drone strikes, down from 23 percent in 2010 (when the question was first asked).

Notably, there is little support for extremist groups, which concern 58 percent of Pakistanis. Just 13 percent of Pakistanis have a favorable view of Al Qaeda and of the Taliban. Backing for the Tehrik-i-Taliban (or Pakistani Taliban) is only 17 percent. Nevertheless, the Pakistani people have turned against use of the Pakistan army against extremists. Today 32 percent support such activity, down from 53 percent in 2009.

Of the fifteen nations surveyed, only one exceeded and two came close to the negative views of Pakistanis. An incredible 86 percent of Jordanians considered America to be an enemy, followed by 79 percent of Egyptians and 72 percent of Turks.

A Tough Road for Diplomacy

Unfortunately, Washington cannot hope for much help from Pakistan's civilian leadership, which also is unpopular. President Ali Zardari enjoys a 14 percent approval rating. Recently ousted Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani came in at 36 percent. Former president Pervez Musharraf rated 39 percent.

Much higher is former prime minister Nawaz Sharif at 62 percent, but he is far friendlier with Islamic fundamentalists. Highest is former cricket star turned politician Imran Khan, who has criticized the United States and embraced Islamic values. Indeed, noted Pew, "Those who identify with Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf party are especially likely to oppose American involvement in the battle against extremist groups in Pakistan, including American aid to areas where extremists operate and intelligence and logistical support to the Pakistani army."

The situation verges on catastrophic. No Pakistani civilian or military leader is likely to abandon Islamabad's perceived security interests in Afghanistan, irrespective of U.S. inducements and threats. Resistance to American demands will grow as popular Pakistani hostility to Washington rises toward unanimity.

Yet there is little that U.S. policy makers can do to reverse these trends. More aid won't buy affection. Better PR won't sell a flawed product. Taking Pakistan's interests into account would help, but that won't be easy when Islamabad and Washington have fundamentally different objectives. Staggering along as "frenemies" might seem to be the least bad option, but that satisfies neither nation. Moreover, at some point it might not be feasible for any Pakistani government. Then America will risk having a real, nuclear-armed enemy next door to Afghanistan.

Washington should attempt to reduce that risk by reducing points of potential conflict. First, the Obama administration should limit drone strikes to militants who pose a clear and serious threat to Americans. No involvement in Pakistani political strife and no sacrifice of U.S. credibility on peripheral figures posing minimal threats.

Second, Washington should affirm that it recognizes Pakistani concerns in Afghanistan and intends to involve Islamabad in any settlement. Squaring the circle won't be easy. The United States must make clear to officials in Kabul that America will not support an Afghan government at odds with Pakistan. The Karzai or a replacement government allying with India against Pakistan would terminate any American obligation to Kabul.

Third, the United States needs to get out of Afghanistan. There is much that destabilizes Pakistan. The war next door, with the aggressive involvement of the United States, is one of the most important factors.

If Washington weren't actively undermining Pakistani interests—seen from Islamabad's perspective—there would be far less bilateral tension. If Washington weren't involved in a shooting war over the border, there would be no intentional border violations and inadvertent killings. If Washington didn't have such a high and hostile profile, there would be less popular antagonism and fewer militant attacks against the United States. That, in turn, would reduce pressure for drone strikes in Pakistan.

U.S. policy makers hate to acknowledge that it matters what other nations and peoples think of American policies. But it does. As in Pakistan, where increasingly virulent hostility toward Washington risks destroying the two governments' already fragile relationship.

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