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The Broken US-Pakistan Relationship

SHASHANK JOSHI

General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, Pakistan’s military ruler from 1978 to 1988, was often anxious that his covert US-backed war against the Soviet Union might tempt Moscow to hit back. After all, over a hundred thousand Soviet troops were perched on the other side of a long and porous border with Afghanistan. Soviet special forces would frequently cross the Durand Line into Pakistani territory in hot pursuit—much as American forces controversially do today and local fighters had done for centuries. Zia had his own theory on how best to mitigate the risk. He would tell the US Central Intelligence Agency, which would come under pressure from Congress to turn up the heat, that “the water in Afghanistan must boil at the right temperature.”

Nearly three decades on, Pakistan is fighting two wars: one with, and one against, the United States. And after a decade of rising temperatures in Afghanistan, it looks as though Pakistan has allowed the water to boil over—with grievous consequences for the relationship between Washington and Islamabad.

Indeed, as American forces begin to trickle out of Afghanistan, and as Pakistan continues to be seized by domestic political convulsions, the prospects for prolonged cooperation dim by the day. Pakistani leverage over the United States is shrinking as fast as Washington’s patience, and America is now traveling down a path toward containment of Pakistan. Understanding the contours and risks of a containment strategy will be one of the most important tasks for observers of South Asia in the years ahead.

THE ERODING TABOO

The British journalist Jason Burke, in his recent book *The 9/11 Wars*, observed that “for many

years, one subject had been taboo among Western diplomats, soldiers, and politicians: the support offered by Pakistani intelligence services to the Taliban.” Grasping why this taboo emerged, and why it is now eroding, is important to understanding the broader disillusionment with Pakistan that has taken place in Western capitals.

One factor behind the taboo was America’s overwhelming focus on counterterrorism. In the years after the attacks on the United States in 2001, cooperation against Al Qaeda was regarded as too important to jeopardize by confronting Pakistan’s military-intelligence establishment over lesser evils like the Taliban. With the death last year of Osama bin Laden, the counterterrorism concern both diminished and changed.

It diminished in part because Al Qaeda’s presence in Asia was seen as increasingly exhausted. In the summer of 2011, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta stated that the terrorist group had fewer than two dozen key leaders remaining, and that Washington was “within reach” of “strategically defeating” the rump organization. Meanwhile, as the terrorism expert Will McCants has noted, Islamist groups’ peaceful and highly successful participation in Arab Spring–inspired elections in countries like Tunisia and Egypt means that “Al Qaeda is no longer the vanguard of the Islamist movement in the Arab world” (if it ever was).

At the same time that Pakistan became less relevant in the fight against Al Qaeda, it also became more suspect. Bin Laden’s presence in a garrison town, and evidence tying his compound to the establishment-backed terrorist group Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, raised fresh concerns over whether Pakistan’s military was either penetrated by jihadists or unacceptably indulgent toward the support structures of Al Qaeda within Pakistan.

In addition to the counterterrorism focus, a second compulsion behind America’s reluctance to confront the Pakistanis over their support for

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the Taliban emerged in 2008 and 2009 as security in Afghanistan deteriorated. Washington hoped that Pakistan's behavior might be transformed if its leaders were offered the right inducements in the right spirit.

After President Barack Obama took office, a major review of the war strategy in Afghanistan culminated in a temporary surge of 30,000 troops. In the short term, the fresh infusion of US troops would provide the hammer against Pakistan's anvil, squeezing the Taliban with a classic counterinsurgency strategy of the sort that had successfully dampened Iraq's raging civil war the previous year.

The new administration feared the collapse of nuclear-armed Pakistan under the weight of domestic insurgency and institutional decay. But it also held out hopes for Pakistan as a full-fledged partner in the Afghan war. The United States therefore sought to address the twin Pakistani concerns of abandonment and marginalization.

These concerns were historically rooted in a perception, shared at both popular and elite levels, that the United States had instrumentally used Pakistan in the 1980s and then myopically discarded it in the 1990s. In this view, Washington had allowed Afghanistan to fester after the Soviets were expelled, had cut aid to Pakistan in the name of nuclear nonproliferation, and had undertaken a gradual but obvious tilt toward a rising India.

Now, Pakistani officials argued, this dynamic was repeating itself. They believed that their country's enormous sacrifices in the war on terror had been ignored, and that Washington's decision to start withdrawing troops from Afghanistan in 2011 would leave Pakistan vulnerable to growing Indian influence in Kabul. Therefore they would be bound to look after their own interests—code for backing the Taliban.

In response to these fears—some real, some contrived—Washington offered aid, dialogue, and a long-term vision. The Kerry-Lugar-Berman aid bill of 2009 was designed to provide Pakistan with \$7.5 billion over five years. The official name of the legislation encapsulates what the Obama administration was trying to achieve: "The Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act."

The intention was to move from a transactional relationship, one in which each party sought to extract maximum concessions from the other at

minimal cost to itself, to a deeper form of cooperation in which the United States would commit to Pakistan's security and development long after the last American soldier returned home from Afghanistan.

The administration's vision entailed a transformation of Pakistan. According to the Congressional Research Service, between 2002 and 2008 the United States sent \$15 billion in overt foreign aid to Pakistan. Less than a third of that was intended for nonmilitary programs, exemplifying Washington's preference for dealing with those who could get things done in Pakistan. The new aid bill not only lessened that imbalance but also conditioned the funds on civilian control of Pakistan's military, provoking considerable anger in the Pakistan army.

In part, this US vision was to fade and darken for reasons internal to Afghanistan. Hamid Karzai was reelected as Afghanistan's president in 2009 only after electoral fraud. It became apparent that he was unwilling or unable to curb the massive corruption that had come to characterize the Afghan state, nor was he capable of providing reliable governance in areas from which the Taliban had fled.

The discourse on Karzai began to resemble that surrounding earlier generations of feckless American clients, like Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam or Chiang Kai-shek of the Chinese Nationalists. Frustrated Western diplomats began to whisper that Karzai was a paranoid, impulsive heroin addict secretly taking Iranian money.

Meanwhile, Western public opposition to the Afghan war reached record levels. A CNN poll in September 2009 recorded 57 percent of Americans in opposition to the mission, up 11 percentage points in just five months. Nearly three-quarters of Democrats were opposed, and midterm elections loomed over the administration. These difficulties overlapped with and reinforced the broader disillusionment with Pakistan.

AIDING THE ENEMY

Long before the US raid at Abbottabad killed bin Laden, Pakistan had become a divisive issue within Western governments. Burke quotes a CIA official as conceding that "we couldn't really be picky" because the Pakistani intelligence service "was the only girl at the dance." But Burke also observes that

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“a gap opened up between those [Western] operatives working in Pakistan on the hunt for senior Al Qaeda figures—who tended to maintain that only retired or lower- and middle-ranking serving Pakistani intelligence officers, possibly ‘rogues’ acting with no authorization, were involved with the Taliban—and those in Kabul, whose job consisted of fighting Afghan insurgents, who were much more critical” of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency, or ISI. According to Burke, “junior NATO officers were explicit in their accusation that the ISI was aiding their enemy.”

In January 2008 Mike McConnell, then the United States’ director of national intelligence, told the White House that “the Pakistani government regularly gives weapons and support [to insurgents] to go into Afghanistan and attack Afghan and coalition forces.” McConnell had telephone intercepts of General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, Pakistan’s army chief, describing Jalaluddin Haqqani—head of the Haqqani network, one of Afghanistan’s most potent insurgent groups—as a “strategic asset.” The Haqqani network is distinct from but allied to the Afghan Taliban.

In June of that year, the CIA’s then-deputy director Stephen Kappes visited Pakistani counter-

parts to complain about one typical incident in which a CIA airstrike against a Haqqani camp was subverted. According to the historian Matthew M. Aid, writing in *Intel Wars: The Secret History of the Fight Against Terror*, the ISI had “worked feverishly to delay the drone attack until they could get their clients out of the way.”

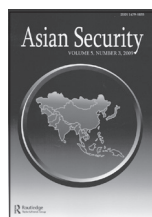
These tensions peaked in 2011. Admiral Mike Mullen, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who was widely regarded as sympathetic to Pakistan, told a Senate hearing that Pakistan had effectively committed an act of war against the United States in connection with a September bombing of the US embassy in Kabul. It was the first time in history that a country designated a “major non-NATO ally” had participated in an assault on an American embassy. Mullen called the Haqqani network a “veritable arm” of the ISI. He testified that “with ISI support, Haqqani operatives planned and conducted” the embassy attack.

The Haqqani-ISI nexus was problematic anyway because the Haqqanis represent the Taliban’s most effective instrument for projecting power inside Kabul by way of complex, spectacular suicide attacks. In 2011, cross-border operations by the Haqqanis into Afghanistan increased more than

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fivefold, and roadside bomb attacks rose by a fifth. For months before Mullen's appearance, the Senate had been demanding that the group be placed on a list of "foreign terrorist organizations." The State Department had resisted, hoping that parts of the Haqqani network might be persuaded to reconcile with the Afghan government.

Yet it is clear that the group is among the most irreconcilable elements of the broader insurgency, not only because of support from the ISI but also because it would be virtually impossible to verify that the Haqqanis had severed links to international jihadists. A recent authoritative report from the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point argues that "throughout the 1990s, the relationship between Al Qaeda and the Haqqani network only deepened. Today, this context endures as the Haqqani network remains the primary local partner for Al Qaeda . . . and other global militants."

Mullen's testimony was only the latest death spasm of the bilateral relationship. Earlier in the year an American contractor for the CIA, Raymond Davis (alleged by some sources to be the acting head of the CIA station in Islamabad), was imprisoned for weeks after shooting dead two Pakistanis in Lahore. In May 2011, US officials were disturbed to see Pakistanis' virulent, defiant reaction to the raid against bin Laden's hideout.

And two years after Obama's war review had set out the need for rebalancing civil-military relations in Pakistan, it was clear that the military had no intention of holding itself accountable to the civilians who had come to power in 2008. When a Pakistani journalist, Saleem Shahzad, investigated an Al Qaeda attack at a Pakistani naval base shortly after the bin Laden raid, he was tortured and killed. His death was widely attributed to the ISI, and Admiral Mullen publicly declared that "it was sanctioned by the [Pakistani] government."

DISILLUSIONMENT

More generally, a profound sense of disillusionment has fallen over a generation of American officials, diplomats, and spies, many of whom have invested considerable personal and professional effort in eliciting cooperation from one of the most difficult allies in recent memory.

Bruce Riedel, a career CIA analyst who chaired Obama's war review in 2009, exemplifies the sea change in attitudes. In 2008, Riedel told *Der Spiegel* that "getting the Pakistanis' cooperation is critical to victory." The next year at a White House briefing, he insisted that "we're going to work very,

very intensively with our Pakistani partners." He stressed that "we need to work with the Pakistanis and not box ourselves in or box them in."

By the end of 2011, Riedel was writing that "it is time to move to a policy of containment" of Pakistan with "no delusion that we are allies," starting with a decision to "cut deeply" all military aid. He urged that any hostile ISI officers be sanctioned and placed on international watch lists. Most remarkably, Riedel concluded that if one of them "is dangerous enough, track him down"—an implicit call to capture or kill officers of a liaison intelligence service in which the CIA had placed its confidence for a decade.

ON TO CONTAINMENT

The United States has announced its intention to withdraw the bulk of its combat forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. It has also declared that US forces in that country will transition from combat to training missions in 2013, sooner than was previously thought. It is important to understand why Riedel's strategy of containment will come to dominate American policy over this period. Indeed, it is already taking shape.

The complex interdependence at the core of the US-Pakistan relationship is well understood: Each side can both inflict pain on, and further the objectives of, the other. What has not received sufficient attention is that the nature of this interdependence is changing. This is not just because American ambitions are shrinking in the face of Pakistani recalcitrance. It is also because Pakistani leverage over the United States is lessening, and American opportunities are thereby expanding.

Burke notes that in 2001, "the CIA and counterparts elsewhere in the West, with the possible exception of the French [intelligence service], had a very limited number of Arabists, and almost no one who spoke the languages of Afghanistan or Pakistan with any proficiency." Incredibly, the British intelligence agency MI6 "did not have a single Pashto-speaker on its staff." Pakistan allowed unprecedented numbers of foreign intelligence officers to operate on its soil, but its own intelligence—particularly in the hostile tribal areas—was deemed crucial in cueing drone strikes and raids and foiling plots directed at the West.

Of course, only Pakistan's intelligence services are likely to have the connections and presence to operate truly effectively in cities like Karachi and the jihadist heartlands of Punjab. Nevertheless, in the decade since 9/11, the United States and its

allies have developed linguistic expertise, regional familiarity, and, most importantly, extensive human intelligence networks both within Pakistan and in the Persian Gulf.

Shuja Nawaz, an expert on the Pakistani army, has noted that “at least half (and probably more) of all families in FATA [the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, along Pakistan’s border with Afghanistan] sent at least one member to the Gulf” after the oil boom of the 1970s. FATA is not, as is commonly assumed, an “ungoverned space” sealed off from the outside world. Its transnational connections likely have offered numerous opportunities to information-hungry intelligence services keen to diversify beyond the Pakistani government.

American drone strikes—which have increased fivefold under President Obama—are the most prominent dimension of American counterterrorism efforts, and were publicly acknowledged by Obama for the first time in January 2012. They are privately sanctioned by the Pakistani military and civilian authorities, though publicly criticized.

Since the drones target members of the Pakistani Taliban, currently waging an insurgency against the government, the authorities are unlikely to meaningfully demand that drone operations cease. But if this does occur, it is plausible that Washington would choose to press ahead unilaterally. It is doubtful whether Pakistan would risk the consequences of engaging an American drone in combat, unless Pakistani public opinion were especially enraged.

More likely to cause friction is an expansion of raids by Afghan and American special forces. Several dozen operatives with the US Joint Special Operations Command reportedly have died in Pakistan in recent years. Separately, Afghan militias backed by the CIA have carried out many clandestine missions in Pakistan’s tribal areas.

These militias, known as counterterrorism pursuit teams, have mostly collected intelligence. But *The New York Times* reported that “on at least one occasion, the Afghans went on the offensive and destroyed a militant weapons cache.” On another raid, they sought (and failed) to capture a Taliban commander. Six such covert groups reportedly are operating under American direction. They were established as early as 2001, and are estimated to be 3,000-fighters-strong in total. They are likely to grow in importance as US forces wind up their

combat role in 2013 and Afghans take on greater responsibility for border security.

Moreover, ground-to-ground rockets fired from Pakistan into Afghanistan have deeply angered Afghans and Americans. They strongly suspect insurgents are abetted—for instance, with covering fire to aid infiltration—by Pakistani army outposts. This will encourage independent Afghan initiatives to hit back, with NATO’s quiet support.

SHRINKING LEVERAGE

Cross-border incursions anger Pakistanis and can easily escalate. However, the United States is able to accept these risks because Pakistani leverage is declining. In December 2011, a joint US-Afghan raid took fire from inside Pakistan. When the Americans called in air support, a series of errors resulted in the death of 24 Pakistani soldiers. The incident was characteristic of the relationship: wary cooperation punctuated by periodic crises of increasing frequency.

But it was more important because of the way in which it revealed something of the bargaining positions of each side. Pakistan shut down the border in protest, as it had done several times in the past, on the assumption that this would block NATO supplies into Afghanistan and force an American apology.

Only a few years ago, this would have represented a severe challenge to NATO, as 75 to 90 percent of supplies were entering Afghanistan through Pakistan. However, by April 2011 General Duncan McNabb, then US transportation commander, could tell the US Senate that only “about 30 percent of our stuff comes in through the port of Karachi and up through . . . Pakistan,” whereas “about 35 percent we’re bringing over the Northern Distribution Network” or NDN.

The NDN is a collection of land routes cutting through over half a dozen European and Asian states, including Turkey and Iraq. It carries about 90 percent of all nonmilitary items for operations in Afghanistan, and more than 60 percent of fuel. Last year, two additional routes were added through the Baltic states and Central Asia. McNabb said the remaining 35 percent, including “everything that is high value, everything that is lethal, everything that is special, we bring in by air now.” He went on to suggest that “air is kind of our ultimate ace in the hole.”

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Stars and Stripes, a newspaper covering the US armed forces, reported last year that Pakistani routes are 10 times cheaper than airlift, and half the cost of the northern routes. Competition among routes is driving the NDN cost down, but it will likely remain more expensive than the Pakistani option. Moreover, the United States remains limited by the throughput capacity of Afghan airfields, and faces political difficulties in working with major human rights violators like Uzbekistan.

Nevertheless, the trend is clear. Pakistan's leverage over American decision makers is declining with every passing month. Alternative supply lines are strengthened and, more important, the number of US troops in Afghanistan is falling. Meanwhile, embryonic peace talks with the insurgency are being placed as far out of Pakistan's grasp as possible, the most recent case being the historic opening of a Taliban office in Doha, Qatar.

RISING VULNERABILITY

Nor is Pakistan well equipped to resist containment in other ways. Economically, it is not as robust as, say, Iran in its ability to withstand American pressure. In 2008, Pakistan's government was forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund for a bailout after its foreign reserves fell 75 percent to a paltry \$3.45 billion and its currency weakened. In December 2010, the IMF extended its loan period, but next year the country faces several repayments. The United States wields substantial influence within the IMF, and is no longer as well disposed to helping Islamabad secure favorable terms.

Pakistan's other allies are either unwilling or unable to fill the gap. China, long seen by Pakistan as an all-weather friend, is increasingly sensitive regarding its relationship with Washington—observe its remarkable caution over Iran, slowing investment and looking for alternative oil suppliers. Saudi Arabia is embroiled in its own regional problems, ranging from Yemen to Bahrain. It is possible that a rapid advance in the Iranian nuclear program would increase Riyadh's reliance on Islamabad, from which the Saudis might hope to procure their own nuclear technology, having poured money into the Pakistani weapons project. Yet any such act of proliferation would bring international condemnation and further isolation for Pakistan.

The trajectory of American policy is in line with what C. Christine Fair of Georgetown University recommended in 2010. Fair said then that “securing Pakistan . . . will require the United States to diminish its reliance upon Pakistan to fight the war in Afghanistan. Without doing so, Washington will be unlikely to muster the political will to apply negative inducements.” That reliance is diminishing, and the will to apply negative inducements is correspondingly rising.

BACK TO THE 90S?

There is little prospect of internal Pakistani transformation changing this course. The military is unlikely to lose its grip on national security policy, and intra-army dynamics are unpromising. A generation of officers who came of age during General Zia's Islamization programs in the 1980s is now reaching the senior echelons of the institution. Despite the unprecedented humiliations suffered by the army in 2011 (greater even than the military defeat by India in 1971, because of the increase in press freedom), the army retains

enduring structural advantages in defending its dominance of the Pakistani state.

Even after the embarrassment of last year's bin Laden raid, the army's favorability rating,

according to a 2011 Pew poll, dipped only from 83 percent to a still buoyant 79 percent. This remained higher than the ratings for the media, religious leaders, the courts, police, the national government, or the prime minister.

General Kayani himself enjoys a 52 percent favorability rating, far above the prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gilani (37 percent), and the president, Asif Ali Zardari (a feeble 11 percent). This public approval is not entirely artificial, but it is preserved through the trappings of a police state. According to Fair, “Pakistani journalists have readily conceded . . . that perhaps as many as one in three journalists are on the payroll of the ISI.” The intelligence service keeps a particularly tight grip on the mass-market Urdu-language press.

In late 2011, Pakistan's internal political balance was thrown into flux by the so-called “Memogate” scandal. This concerned a message purportedly sent to the United States by Pakistan's civilian government in the wake of the bin Laden raid, requesting urgent American help in avert-

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ing a feared coup. The controversy prompted a spike in civil-military tension. The government was accused of treason. The army ostentatiously replaced the commander of its 111 Brigade, famous for playing a key role in past coups, and leaked news of a “dry run” to overthrow the government. The prime minister complained that the army “cannot be a state within a state,” and labeled the army’s successful efforts to drag the Supreme Court into the scandal “unconstitutional and illegal.”

In some ways, the episode has highlighted the obstacles to a coup—an unfavorable international environment, the perceived need for legal cover from a newly activist Supreme Court, and the expansion of broadcast media. Cyril Almeida, a columnist for Pakistan’s *Dawn* newspaper, concluded that “democracy may be structurally stronger than it ever has been.” This is superficially correct, but it underestimates the prospect of a return to the pseudo-democratic politics of the post-Zia era.

Many are hoping that if Pakistan’s present government can become the first to complete a full term in parliament, this would solidify democratic norms and squeeze the army out of politics. Yet the parliamentary opposition has undertaken risky moves to destabilize the elected government.

Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the opposition PML-N party, who was himself deposed as prime minister in a 1999 coup, has exploited Memogate in the hope of forcing early elections. Cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan has been gathering strength over the past year by deploying a populist anti-Western narrative, with widely alleged support from the security establishment. There is a risk that the ISI would choose to manipulate or rig Pakistan’s elections so as to ensure a fragmented political landscape and a pliant government, much as it did throughout the 1990s, leaving it with

the latitude to pursue foreign and security policy without interference.

In short, civilian government is not the same thing as civilian control. The present leadership has done well to survive this long, but it knows its limits. It has not dismissed the military high command because it recognizes that any such order would be ignored, subverted by the military establishment, or countermanded by the courts. There is little reason to think that the hobbled and tightly constrained civilian leadership will have any sway over the foreign policies that have contributed to the deterioration in US-Pakistan relations.

RAPID BOIL

For too long, observers of the United States and Pakistan have assumed that the two sides are locked into an abusive but indispensable relationship. Indeed, good reasons remain for each country to preserve a working relationship. Washington desires a dignified exit from Afghanistan, and Pakistan probably retains a veto over any durable peace process.

Pakistan, in turn, has incentives to limit the emerging Western strategy of containment. Further US raids that kill Pakistani soldiers will generate intense pressure to retaliate. Pakistan’s military, still heavily dependent on US aid, does not want to create conditions in which it would be forced to act against its own interests.

Yet despite this ongoing interdependence, it is critical to note that each side’s leverage over the other is changing. For 65 years, Pakistan has taken on India in covert wars stretching from Punjab, to Kashmir, to Afghanistan. It has performed generally well in this effort, even if the cost to its internal security and political health has been enormous. Taking on the United States, even with its declining strength, is a different matter altogether. The water is no longer boiling at the right temperature. ■