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US-Pakistan Relations: What Trust Deficit?

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Pakistan faces a multitude of challenges. Some regard Pakistan as a country in crisis. Whether Pakistan emerges from crisis or sinks deeper into it is of critical importance to the United States. This Policy Brief explores the sources of the "trust deficit" between the United States and Pakistan and recommends steps that the two governments can take to build an enduring partnership that serves their respective and common interests.

With Pakistan caught up in four wars during the past nine years — the Afghanistan war, the War on Terror, the insurgency in the tribal areas, and the wave of terrorism unleashed by the *Tehrik-i-Taliban* (TTP) and the Punjabi Taliban in the rest of the country — it has often been said that the country is facing an existential threat. If this was a cliché before, it is no more so after the catastrophic floods. Pakistan had been living dangerously in the past, but the wars and floods threaten to wash away its future.

Nevertheless, there is reason for hope. When the flood waters subside and Pakistan struggles to get back on its feet, hopefully there will be soul-searching as to what has gone terribly wrong in the country for far too long. Questions will no doubt be raised about who has helped and who has not in this terrible human tragedy whose social and economic consequences will loom large in the nation's life for years to come. And where does the country get the resources to rebuild if these continue to be sacrificed to poor governance for the benefit of the few?

In this debate, some or all of the following issues could be under the spotlight: the marginalization of the poor, regional and class grievances, a fragmented and regressive social structure, the threat of extremism, the quality of leadership, the security paradigm, disordered national priorities, and undoubtedly Pakistan's relationship with the international community, especially the United States.

After all, if a people have survived unending crises throughout their history (many of Pakistan's own making) they must have resilience and faith and thus the potential strength and resolve to rise above mere survival.

Washington has a great opportunity to encourage, or even force, this debate — for Pakistan's sake and for its own. Pakistan can, but will not, change on its own. To be sure, if Pakistan does not want to help itself, nobody can. But the US must try, as no other country has the interest and capacity to give Pakistan the help that matters in these critical times. Nor does any other country have the leverage to stir the country and its people into action. There is no better time than now to earn the gratitude of the Pakistani people and ease their anti-Americanism. The days for business as usual are long gone, for Pakistan and for its friends.

For far too long, Washington has used this ally for its own strategic purposes, taking advantage of and indeed playing into its power imbalances and structural weakness, an expedient for which not only America itself but Pakistan also has paid a horrendous price. The stakes have never been so high for both countries to bring a fundamental shift in the relationship. A good beginning has already been made with the Kerry-Lugar legislation. But that is just a tool, not a framework for a relationship.

The task now is to build a partnership with Pakistan that benefits the population so as to raise their confidence in the relationship with the US. An effective US aid relationship will be vital to Pakistan's recovery and reform, as will be Pakistan's role as the US ally in the end game of the Afghanistan war, and in its own struggle against extremism and terrorism. Pakistanis need to reflect seriously on the fact that these objectives are not in conflict and, with the right policies and perceptions, could in fact be a perfect fit. Indeed, there are compulsions as well as incentives for Pakistan and the



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US to cooperate as they are facing long-term challenges that neither can solve alone.

As Bruce Riedel writes in his book, *The Search for Al Qaeda*, “Pakistan is at the crossroads of many US nightmares.”¹ But the US also has to understand that Pakistanis have their own nightmares and that the US is at the center of them.

This brings us to the question of the “trust deficit.” Contrary to popular perceptions, disclosures from the website “Wikileaks” and Bob Woodward’s book about the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence’s (ISI) links with the Afghan Taliban are no revelation.² The US administration had suspected them from the very beginning of the Afghanistan war and the War on Terror, but had found the suspicions largely unfounded — until early 2008 towards the end of Bush presidency. That is when it was becoming apparent to US allies, NATO and Pakistan included, that the Afghanistan war was faltering and Washington was possibly looking at ways to withdraw or to draw down. Until then, Pakistan had largely bet on a US victory but then began to hedge its bets by reviving its sympathies for the Taliban, especially the Haqqani group.

Whatever the truth, Pakistan got caught up in its own counterinsurgency against the TTP and could not fight the Afghan Taliban even had it wanted to. Fighting both groups would have brought them together. Besides, Pakistan already had a massive military presence in the tribal areas. Augmenting this presence was neither militarily nor politically desirable. In any case, Pakistan did not have such large force levels to spare. The US media often lament that Pakistan’s forces are all deployed along the border with India, but this is not the issue here. The army’s presence on the Indian border fit into the India-Pakistan security paradigms. Countries do not change force configurations overnight even if there is a need for correction. Moreover, such changes are rarely unilateral and often take place in times of peace and stability. There is thus nothing duplicitous about the Pakistan army’s reluctance to enter North Waziristan to fight the Haqqani group.

THE REALITY OF THE “TRUST DEFICIT”

The “trust deficit” between the US and Pakistan is symptomatic of a deeper problem, rather than the problem itself. It masks a complex of issues that impinge on some of the fundamentals of the two countries’ foreign policies not only concerning systemic problems on each side, but also their respective national interests and public policies. Their national interests have often diverged, as have their policies, even when their interests have substantially overlapped. Both have been tempted to clinch short-term objectives at the expense of broader strategic purposes. Yet this is not highly abnormal in a bilateral relationship, even between allies.

Over time, both governments have come to understand that their relationship has essentially been transactional. They have lived with this reality for nearly six decades because, when all is said and done, the relationship has served some vital national interest. Such is the case in the War on Terror in which Pakistan’s help has been indispensable to the United States in considerably degrading al-Qa’ida’s operational capability.

Yet by conducting the bilateral relationship on a transactional or contractual basis, both sides have incurred huge costs. In fact, the US-Pakistan relationship has been a zero-sum for most of its history. During those periods when they have drawn most closely together, the US and Pakistan have been allies on one issue but antagonists on another.

In Afghanistan in the 1980s, and ... now [in] the war on terrorism ..., domestic political dynamics shaped US policy. As a result, the policy itself was driven not by the State Department but by the White House. It had a strong covert dimension and was geared to serve limited short-term objectives.

1 Bruce Riedel, *Search for Al Qaeda* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), p. 12

2 Bob Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

For Pakistan, India has been a “prism of pain” through which it has viewed its relationship with Washington for much of its history. To gain domestic public support, the Pakistani ruling elite oversold the relationship with the US as an alliance against India, which it was not. This contributed to the disappointment when Washington did not come to Pakistan’s aid, and led to cries of betrayal. This disappointment continues. Today, its source is Washington’s perceived lack of even-handedness with respect to its treatment of India and Pakistan.

Like Pakistan, the US played up ties with Pakistan in order to mobilize domestic public support and gain Congressional approval during periods of close alliance. Successive US administrations exaggerated Pakistan’s geopolitical importance and its role as an ally while discounting the negatives. It is no wonder that as soon as compulsions for a closer engagement disappeared, Pakistan’s conduct came under heavy scrutiny across the board in the US media and Congress.

A “BAD” BARGAIN

What has been responsible for the gross misperceptions that have undermined trust between the US and Pakistan? The main problem has been that during each period of close engagement, there has been either a military or military-dominated government in Pakistan, while in Washington the policy direction on Pakistan has largely been set by the White House, Pentagon, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In the case of Washington, this was so because the relationship with Pakistan was focused on a very critical national issue, indeed a very high-priority global issue — the final act of the Cold War played out in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and now the war on terrorism. In both instances, domestic political dynamics shaped US policy. As a result, the policy itself was driven not by the State Department but by the White House. It had a strong covert dimension and was geared to serve limited short-term objectives.

The people of Pakistan, for their part, feel that they have borne the brunt of the cost of this transactional relationship. It is they who have been saddled with poor civilian and military leadership, allied with the United States. In return for advancing US strategic interests, Pakistan’s governing elites were handsomely compensated and managed to maintain a stranglehold over the system and defy reforms. This “bad bargain” is precisely what has been driving a wedge between the Pakistani people and the US-supported governing elite and, by extension, between the US and the Pakistani people.

Much of the anti-Americanism that has gripped Pakistan — and predates the co-operation between the US and Pakistan that began after 9/11 — is fundamentally a protest against this bad bargain. To make it worse four wars have descended on Pakistan since 9/11, which have strained Pakistan’s national integrity, and have come to threaten Pakistan’s stability, aggravating public anxieties and creating a sense of insecurity.

Pakistan’s army, the main ally of the US, has its own grievances — some old and others triggered recently by the Afghanistan war. The army feels that US policy has had the effect of creating in Afghanistan a situation that is inimical to Pakistan’s strategic interests. Clearly, it has raised India’s strategic capacity in the region.

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CHALLENGED FOR BOTH SIDES

The US and Pakistan now face huge challenges. The gravest threats are those posed by al-Qa’ida and extremism in Pakistan, not the Taliban. When the US withdraws or draws down its forces, Afghanistan will continue to be contested by multiple stakeholders. The Taliban will not be able to control Afghanistan and give a free hand to al-Qa’ida, as they had prior to 9/11. Too many powers will resist them.

For the foreseeable future, Pakistan is the only place where the Taliban and al-Qa’ida can coexist. The nexus be-

tween them must be broken — and it can be. In a scenario in which the US is unable or unwilling to stay the course, the only feasible solution for Afghanistan is a reconciliation process that culminates in a power sharing arrangement that includes the Taliban.

The predicament in which the United States finds itself in Afghanistan is largely of its own making. Not only did the military campaign in Afghanistan during the entire Bush presidency, especially early on, lack a political strategy but also in the rush to war there was little effort devoted to comprehending the nature of the threat or the enemy. The lack of strategic context of the war, incoherent war aims, insufficient resources, and poor execution soon undermined the war effort. The shift in US attention and resources to Iraq in 2003 exacerbated the problem.

Now it is not the same Afghanistan war that began in October 2001. The war began by altering the balance of power within Afghanistan and then turned into a resistance that is part insurgency, part religiously-motivated, and part civil war contested by US friends and adversaries alike — the Taliban, Pakistan, Iran, Afghan warlords, and drug kingpins, and wider population on both sides of the border are involved. India too has its presence. Local, regional, and global agendas have merged. And that will remain so for years to come, well beyond any premature American withdrawal. All these issues have to be resolved for Afghanistan to become stable and peaceful.

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There is a good chance that the counterinsurgency strategy may work, especially under the able command of General David Petraeus, but it will take at least a decade. The fact is that the military calendar and political calendar are in conflict, and it will require nation-building, which the American government is not prepared to do. They have neither the time, nor the money, nor the patience.

President Barack Obama seems to have realized this. He apparently understands that, in a larger sense, the war in Afghanistan is unwinnable, at least in the time he has left in office. This realization has led the Administration to focus on Pakistan. At stake is Pakistan's future and that of its nuclear weapons. It is there that al-Qa'ida has its headquarters and that is where it has to be fought.

President Obama chose to deliver a policy speech on Iraq on Monday August 2, 2010 in order to highlight his strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US, he said, was seeking "deeper cooperation with Pakistan to root out terrorists on both sides of the [Afghan] border ... In Pakistan, we've seen the government begin to take the fight to violent extremists within its borders. Major blows have been struck against Al-Qa'ida and its leadership." President Obama continued,

Nobody thinks that Afghanistan is gonna be a model Jeffersonian democracy ... What we're looking to do is difficult, very difficult, but it's a fairly modest goal, which is, don't allow terrorists to operate from this region; don't allow them to create big training camps and to plan attacks against the US homeland with impunity.

This realistic goal, he added, could be accomplished: "We can stabilize Afghanistan sufficiently and we can get enough cooperation from Pakistan that we are not magnifying the threat against the homeland."

But the problem is that Pakistan has become a crisis in its own right, forcing it to fight on several fronts to meet diverse security challenges — some on its own behalf and others on behalf of the US — and to balance competing strategic interests. Given these enormous challenges, Pakistanis would be well advised to shed their emotions and illusions. They must recognize that opposition to some of America's core concerns will have no lasting place in a long-term relationship with the United States. Pakistan should set its own house in order, and if it is incapable of doing so,

should realize that it needs the help of the country most capable and most interested in providing it — the United States.

NEW CHALLENGES; MORE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

Whether and how Pakistan surmounts the challenges that it faces has profound implications for the United States. These challenges have made the US relationship with Pakistan much more complex and difficult to manage than ever before. Pakistan is both an ally against and a target of extremism. As such, dealing with Pakistan requires a fundamentally new US approach, one that views and values Pakistan not as a surrogate but as a partner.

To develop and deepen this partnership, the US has to understand that Pakistan has its own national interests and must contend with its own domestic political constraints. The US therefore can no longer relate only to the Pakistani elite. There was a time when the US could deal with Pakistan as a client with a compliant government and a pliant population. This is no longer the case. The people of Pakistan have a voice now, and they, as well as the government, are becoming more nationalistic and thus defenders of their own national interests.

There is an urgent need for the US and Pakistan to come together. A way has to be found that the US strategic interests, Pakistan's core national interests (which include Pakistan's legitimate security interests), and the army's reasonable concerns, find a common ground. Ultimately, there may have to be a grand bargain in the region, which can only happen with US facilitation and support. The US may have no recourse but to address a whole host of issues, including Pakistan's support for jihadists, *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT), and the Afghan Taliban, India's presence in Afghanistan, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, and some forward movement in the resolution of the Kashmir dispute in line with the wishes of the Kashmiri people and interests of both India and Pakistan.

A reformed Pakistan, headed toward moderation, strongly committed against militancy, and at peace with India, is unlikely to oppose America's core interests. That is the kind of partner that the Pakistani people deserve and that the US needs.