

Positive Perceptions to Sustain the US-Pakistan Relationship

RANDALL L. KOEHLMOOS

Pakistan and the United States continue to struggle to find a mutual strategy upon which to build a more positive and productive relationship. While both nations observed positive changes in attitudes during the strategic dialogue held in Washington, D.C. in March 2010, the history of mistrust does not support an enduring relationship. Pakistan's military and intelligence services remain suspicious of the motives and methods of their US counterparts, a wariness mirrored in American attitudes.¹ American humanitarian assistance after the 2005 earthquake in northern Pakistan temporarily improved public opinion of Americans, but Pakistanis still find it difficult to understand how long-term engagement with the United States benefits their nation.² Overcoming suspicions and creating trust in an effort to sustain this relationship, however, is absolutely critical if we are to achieve Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) objectives and deny al Qaeda and other militants sanctuary in Pakistan. This article summarizes the causes of this mutual mistrust and provides interlocutors with recommended actions to build confidence and change mindsets for the purpose of creating positive perceptions and a sustainable relationship.

Pakistani Perceptions of Americans

The basis of mistrust between the two nations is that Pakistan and the United States have very different national interests, and therefore possess different (and often conflicting) expectations of each other. Pakistanis also come from a culture rich in conspiracy theories, often placing the blame for failure on others—first the influence of the British and later the United States.

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Pakistanis believe that US actions in Afghanistan against the Soviets during the 1980s are responsible for burdening Pakistan's society with millions of Afghan refugees, extremists, a proliferation of weapons, and a prevalent narcotics trade. Pakistan believes the United States is at fault for everything that goes wrong in Afghanistan, and extends those faults to blame the United States and India for negative actions and events in Pakistan.³ Misguided religious leaders, antistate actors, and other power brokers within the nation's tribal society all have the ability to influence and convince the population that the United States is an adversary. In fact, 64 percent of the populace regards the United States as an enemy, while only nine percent describe it as a partner.⁴ For example, Jamiat Ulema-e-Fazl chief Fazlur Rehman claims 9,000 employees of Blackwater International (Xe) operate in Pakistan under US control in an effort to steal Pakistan's nuclear weapons and carry out terrorist activities, accusations the United States denies as ludicrous.⁵ Sadly though, the failure of the United States to successfully communicate American policy to Pakistan limits its ability to counter such negative accusations.⁶ These accusations usually follow five main themes:

First, Americans do not warrant trust. Pakistanis perceive a deficit of trust because in their opinion the United States has already betrayed Pakistan three times, with a fourth betrayal in progress.⁷ Also, Pakistanis sense a lack of US respect for their national policies and believe divergent strategic objectives have led to a cycle of failed political marriages of convenience. Many believe the United States is simply trying to advance its own political and military objectives rather than conducting a legitimate foreign policy. Pakistanis believe that GWOT is just another religious crusade against Islam.⁸ President Asif Ali Zardari noted, "The cordial relations between the United States and Pakistan at the government level need to be applied at the people-to-people level to bridge the trust deficit."⁹ Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani told Senator Carl Levin (D-Michigan) of expectations for improved relations through providing unmanned aerial vehicle technology, sharing intelligence, paying overdue financial obligations via Coalition Support Fund (CSF) authority, and removing Pakistan from the list of countries required to implement additional airport screening measures.¹⁰ Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi told US Special Representative to Pakistan and Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke that the United States should take practical steps to gain Pakistan's trust instead of just giving more "lip service."¹¹ While Central Intelligence Agency Director Leon Panetta said more time is needed to overcome the mistrust, Pakistanis question whether US mistrust is a delaying tactic to blackmail Pakistan to attain secret objectives.¹² Pakistan senses the real reason the United States wants a presence in Pakistan is to collect intelligence, rather than the stated reason, which is to build the capacity of security forces.¹³ A number of the populace believes

the United States simply wants to use its territory to extend drone missile strikes into Balochistan to target the Quetta Shura.¹⁴

The United States is at fault for everything that goes wrong in Afghanistan.

Islamabad views the US policy to not take part in bilateral negotiations between Pakistan and India as the basis for South Asia's increased instability. The fact that the United States will not help Pakistan receive the flow of river water established in the Indus Water Treaty and continues to ignore Pakistan's call for Kashmiri's right to freedom creates undue pressure on the relationship.¹⁶ Additionally, the United States' failure to develop Pakistan's civilian nuclear technology and its nuclear power plants, as they did in India, reinforces suspicions that individuals with a pro-Indian bias influence US objectives in the region. US pressure on Pakistan to pursue terrorists, while criticizing it for committing extrajudicial killings, also sends confusing signals. Also, the audit demands that accompany the CSF reimbursements greatly offend Pakistan. Pakistan's citizenry and leadership see the United States spending hundreds of billions of dollars on defense while ignoring its calls for assistance and forgetting that Pakistan has suffered more than 32,500 casualties supporting the GWOT.¹⁷

Third, America does not respect Pakistani sovereignty. Pakistan alleges US aircraft violate its sovereignty when transiting to Afghanistan outside the established air corridor from the Arabian Sea. Until recently Pakistan was on the list of 14 countries required to conduct secondary airport screening even though none of the identified 9/11 conspirators were Pakistani citizens. Many believe this requirement implies the United States views Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism, rather than a trusted ally. Pakistanis also have the perception that the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act (the Kerry-Lugar-Berman legislation of 2009) is a threat to their national sovereignty. The act requires certification that Pakistan is cooperating in stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons, making a sustained commitment to combat terrorist groups, and monitoring its government security forces to ensure they are not subverting the nation's political or judicial processes.¹⁸

Another negative theme is the belief that American foreign policy threatens Pakistan's western border. Though Pakistan looks to the United States and not the Afghans for stability in Afghanistan, there are strong concerns related to the recent initiative by the United States to deal directly with the Afghan Taliban without utilizing Pakistan as an intermediary. Many

Second, America is an unreliable partner. Pakistan remains frustrated that after being a good ally, the United States still permits Israel control of US policy regarding Islamic causes, such as the Palestinian issue.¹⁵

believe that US military operations in Afghanistan have resulted in the Taliban becoming more militarized, forced militants into Pakistan, and may well result in Pashtun tribesmen again calling for the creation of a separate state. Pakistan accuses the United States of trying to push Taliban groups out of Afghanistan and into Pakistan. Another issue of major concern is the allegation that the United States permits commercial trucking to carry Indian weapons and explosives from Afghanistan to arm Baloch insurgents in Pakistan.¹⁹ Islamabad understands that India has become an economic partner with the United States but disapproves of truck convoys supplying Indian-made goods to Coalition forces in Afghanistan via Pakistan.²⁰ A number of the nation's leadership also view the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in the summer of 2011 as undermining any long-term commitment to Pakistan.²¹ A US withdrawal may facilitate an anti-Pashtun and Northern Alliance-dominated Afghan government hostile to Pakistan. If such an alliance ever became a reality, India could influence the resulting government and leave Pakistan with an Indian threat on both borders.²²

Finally, there is the fear that any US-India engagement jeopardizes Pakistan. Pakistan believes the growing US-India relationship further undermines its security. India continues to ask the United States to declare Pakistan a terrorist state and seize its nuclear weapons. Such a request only adds to Pakistan's fear of Indian-inspired agendas within US actions.²³ The Pakistani Ambassador, Husain Haqqani, notes "the United States should understand Pakistan's security concerns, and with better understanding we will be able to evolve a partnership to bring the two countries further closer."²⁴ These security concerns are based on the belief that Pakistan needs to continue to fight India for its existence. These beliefs have only added to the traditional rivalry pitting Hindu India against a Muslim Pakistan. Countering India is Pakistan's basis for its nuclear deterrence, the need to secure its western border, and maintaining the defense budget as such a high priority.²⁵ Pakistan also fears that India has a number of plans with the objective of destroying Pakistan in an effort to reclaim South Asia. India and Bhutan were the first nations to recognize Bangladesh after East Pakistan seceded in 1971. Following wars with Pakistan in 1947, 1965, 1971, and 1999, India is currently waging a proxy war from inside Afghanistan.²⁶ From Pakistan's point of view this proxy war is aided by the use of Indian terrorist training camps in Afghanistan used to train Baloch dissidents.²⁷ Pakistan believes the United States has the leverage to control India, and therefore by default, sees Indian efforts to destabilize Pakistan as condoned by America.

The American Perspective

Just as Pakistan is inclined to distrust America, the reverse is true. Pakistani misrepresentations regarding their nuclear program, support to Lashkar-e-Taiba (LT) militants, and affording the Taliban a safe-haven give rise to the United States' misgivings regarding the nation. Media reports highlight Pakistan's support of religious-based terrorist groups and diversion of US funding designed to battle militants.²⁸ Articles also emphasize Pakistan's offer to provide limited support to the Taliban as a means of securing influence in Afghanistan.²⁹ A large segment of the American populace believes that the Pakistan army and the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate were involved in the attacks in Mumbai, India in November 2008.³⁰ And it continues to believe Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan provided nuclear technology to Iran, Libya, and North Korea. Americans remain cautious when equating Pakistan's arrests of Taliban leadership as a signal of positive change. These suspicions color any formal announcements by Pakistan officials. Americans almost immediately ask "what does it mean?" but "is it true?" and "can they really be trusted?"³¹

A Half-Century of Broken Relationships

For many real and imagined reasons, the relationship between Pakistan and the United States has had more than its share of turmoil and misperceptions. Many inhabitants believe that the primary US objective in the region during the 1950s was forming a strategic relationship with India, Pakistan's arch-enemy. In the past, India chose to follow a policy of non-alignment followed by a friendship with the Soviet Union. Pakistan needed allies against India, and in 1954 entered into a mutual defense agreement with the United States. Pakistan supported US surveillance flights over the Soviet Union and also joined the South East Asia Treaty Organization and Central Treaty Organization.³² The nation perceived betrayal when its request for assistance during the 1965 and 1971 wars against India was outside the United States' and these organizations' policy objectives related to the containment of communism. Pakistan believes it continued to demonstrate friendship by assisting the United States in the normalization of relations with China in 1972. This support for the foreign policy resulted in Pakistan incurring the displeasure of a number of nations in the region.³³

Pakistan's expanding nuclear-weapons program resulted in America imposing sanctions under the Pressler Amendment in 1990. The United States also threatened to declare Pakistan as a state sponsoring terrorism. The Pressler Amendment was quickly followed by additional sanctions through the Missile Technology Control Regime as punishment for

Pakistan's acceptance of Chinese technology.³⁴ These sanctions served to curtail US security and economic assistance from 1991 to 2002 and also denied approximately 1,000 Pakistani military officers the opportunity to experience training and education in America. Individuals in the Pakistan military call this group of officers "the lost generation," though the term "lost opportunities" is far more relevant.³⁵ These sanctions further undermined US credibility in the region and reinforced Pakistan's perception of an India-inspired conspiracy. While the nation's pursuit of a nuclear deterrent triggered the sanctions, Pakistanis perceive a double-standard at work, as the United States did not take similar action against India's nuclear tests in 1974, nor did it protest Indian defense agreements with the Soviet Union.

Pakistan currently views itself as providing a disproportionate share of the support to the war on terrorism while receiving little in return. The Pakistan army has provided four airfields, two-thirds of Pakistan's airspace, and a variety of logistical support to the effort. President Musharraf reshuffled the Pakistan army senior leadership, with every general sympathetic to the Taliban or linked to Islamic groups either retired or reassigned. Even after Kashmiri militants attacked the Indian parliament in December 2001, pushing India and Pakistan to the brink of war, Pakistan kept a substantial quantity of forces deployed in a screening mission on the Afghan border.³⁶ Pakistan also accepted a good deal of strategic risk by attacking militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The nation as a whole is frustrated that the United States continues to chastise Pakistan for not doing more.³⁷ They realize that the eight years of supporting US operations in Afghanistan have paralyzed the Pakistani economy. The gap only continues to grow between Pakistani expectations of rewards for its alignment with the United States and what America is willing to provide in terms of support. Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi stated, "Pakistan has done its bit, the ordinary citizen in Pakistan has paid a price, now America needs to start delivering."³⁸

What Does It All Mean?

The urgency for both nations to find rapprochement has risen exponentially. Pakistan perceives the militant threat as benefiting India, and from the United States' perspective, militants are threatening US interests. There is no question that assisting Pakistan to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda should remain a vital US imperative.³⁹ The United States is at a disadvantage, however, when trying to sustain the relationship. America's desire for Pakistan to take action against organizations that, to date, have not directly threatened its government or sovereignty, such as the Haqqani

network in North Waziristan or the US-designated foreign terrorist organization LT, exceeds Pakistan's political will.⁴⁰ The national perception of an asymmetric relationship only makes it more critical that the United States regain Pakistani trust. Pakistan also realizes the United States probably requires its support more than it needs the United States. The nation's mistrust of the United States combined with the threat from India serve to highlight the need for interlocutors capable of mitigating the risk of "misunderstandings" before they become major confrontations. Adding to this tension is the proclivity for the Pakistani media to mischaracterize US announcements regarding the nation and region. For any chance of a long-term relationship to prevail, Pakistan will insist on evidence that America is truly sensitive to Pakistan's concerns related to India.⁴¹ Pakistanis will also want to see the United States making a more genuine effort in providing support to the government and people of Pakistan. Any renewed relations also should better recognize Pakistan's contribution to the fight against terrorism.⁴²

What Should the United States Do?

Practical steps to alter current mindsets need to compliment long-term US economic and development assistance programs. While 53 percent of Pakistanis see the importance of improved relations, Americans also need to manage their expectations.⁴³ Slow progress, rather than quick miracles, need to be the US objective. Nothing gets done in Pakistan without first establishing some form of a personal relationship. Even after establishing a relationship, the US concessions on key issues may not be sufficient to impact policy regarding Afghanistan or the actions of militants within Pakistan. What is certain is that Pakistan will continue to ensure that nothing will come easily for the United States. This is not recalcitrant but rather a means to guard sovereignty and convey the message that only Pakistanis control Pakistan. In order to harmonize future relations, the United States should consider the following.

Treat Pakistan as an ally and peer. Overcoming the current mistrust means all stakeholders continually need to engage each other for solutions. The United States and Pakistan share a common enemy and goal. It is imperative that leaders and policymakers include Pakistan in the US decision cycle as a legitimate partner rather than an afterthought. The US goal should be to convince Pakistanis that America is honestly trying to assist them and not simply attempting to mold them in some US image. It is critical that Pakistanis understand that America is not pressuring the Pakistan army to make decisions inconsistent with national interests. Candor is of utmost importance, especially as it applies to US-Pakistan strategy in Afghanistan.

The United States needs to develop a coherent process for explaining policy decisions and major issues to Pakistan, understanding how Pakistan might misperceive independent acts. Specific examples of actions to provide transparency and gain trust include sharing actionable intelligence, addressing violations of Pakistani airspace, and discussing US military operations in Afghanistan. Standard procedures to regrade classified documents into Pakistan-releasable products need to be instituted. Admittedly, information sharing and transparency can be risky, but the lack of such actions only serves to fuel the conspiracy theories.

The United States needs to assist in mitigating Pakistan's security issues. Security is of paramount concern to a nation trying to gain and maintain the support of its people. The key to securing areas taken from militants is for Pakistan and the United States to work together to attain a balance between civilian economic aid, political reconstruction, and military support. Without Pakistan's government being successful in maintaining security and reestablishing infrastructure, militants will quickly reclaim any lost territory or influence.⁴⁴ Without security for the people, no amount of assistance will matter, and Pakistan's counterinsurgency strategy will fail. The United States needs to play an active role in encouraging Pakistan-India confidence-building measures, rather than trying to change Pakistan's perception of threats to its sovereignty. For example, the United States should understand that Pakistan needs to protect its genuine interests in Afghanistan. Greater US understanding of Pakistan's requirement to maintain links with the Taliban against the Indian threat could significantly improve a sustainable relationship. Stressing that various economic and military assistance programs and policies are programmed beyond the dates for the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan would also demonstrate long-term support to Pakistan. Pakistan needs to have in-transit visibility of US cargo crossing its territory to Afghanistan. It is important that the United States allow Pakistan to scan containers electronically in an effort to demonstrate that the cargo does not contain weapons, explosives, or Indian-made goods.

America needs to recognize Pakistan's continued support. The United States should utilize every opportunity to thank Pakistan and mitigate the perception that the nation is a rented commodity. America also needs to convey its appreciation for the numerous risks Pakistan is undertaking. Americans do not necessarily need to agree with all of Pakistan's policies, but they do need to understand Pakistan's point of view. Talking points for leaders and policymakers should stress the critical nature of Pakistan's support, especially its contribution to ongoing military operations. It is Pakistanis who will ultimately decide the nation's future. Recognition of that fact may help reinforce the willingness of Pakistani security forces to continue their support. Sharing actionable intelligence, as well as publiciz-

ing that at Pakistan's request the United States removed it from the list of nations requiring additional airport screening are also means to convey genuine appreciation. There is always a certain amount of risk associated with such actions; current media reports alleging that the United States is establishing counterinsurgency training centers in Pakistan already place additional pressure on the nation's leadership.⁴⁵ The Pakistan army also has to maintain a semblance of independence from American influence.

It would be helpful if the United States did a better job of communicating its policies. America has a positive story to tell, and it should not be reluctant to counter adverse allegations with a strong information campaign. Pakistani opposition to the United States is not universal; members of the military who have worked closely with Americans already perceive that US efforts to build their security forces are genuine. America needs to publicize these successes to the rest of Pakistani society. To counter any negative accusations and improve trust, the US strategic communication plan needs to demonstrate that US programs for Pakistan are open, transparent, and designed to function in partnership. The communication strategy should focus on two central themes: America's continued commitment to Pakistan and the region; and US support for Pakistan's efforts in the fight against terrorism. The United States will then be in a better position to explain its policies. Diplomats and policymakers need to anticipate how Pakistan perceives various policy initiatives, in an effort to mitigate possible misperceptions. Efforts to treat Pakistan as an ally and recognize its support to United States' policies will help negate many of the perceptions that America is an unreliable friend. It is imperative that Pakistani military officers continue to experience American culture through training programs in the United States. America needs to be on guard, however, against equating any increase in anti-al Qaeda or anti-militant feelings within Pakistan as an indication of improved relations.

Pakistan faces a growing number of challenges, many having serious implications for America's security and its efforts in Afghanistan and South Asia.⁴⁶ Americans can no longer ignore the damage US foreign policy decisions had on Pakistani perceptions. America needs a concentrated effort to ensure its citizens understand Pakistan's point of view. One recommendation is for the United States to put more emphasis on the selection and implementation of the new Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands (AF/PAK Hands) program. Similar to the existing Foreign Area Officer and Special Operating Forces programs, the goal of AF/PAK Hands is to establish a cohort to serve repeated deployments in an effort to maintain cohesion and continuity and to develop long-term relationships. It is critical that we select the right officers for these programs. Selection should not be based solely on language proficiency or international experience, but on a much

broader set of interpersonal skills.⁴⁷ Selection of the right candidates is of utmost importance; the typical type-A US military officer is exactly the opposite of what Pakistani culture is willing to accept. Allowing for in-country experience is important, because it is the Pakistanis that understand the issues. Of far greater importance for these AF/PAK Hands, Foreign Area Officers, and Special Operating Forces is the ability to function in such a manner as to have a positive influence on the people of Pakistan, and at the same time achieving American policy objectives.

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