

# Can This Alliance Be Saved? Salvaging the U.S.-Pakistan Relationship

By [C. Christine Fair](#) April 30, 2013

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As the U.S. withdrawal from [Afghanistan](#) looms ever nearer, opponents of “[abandoning](#) Afghanistan” continue to rehearse the ostensible lessons from the U.S. *exeunt* from the region in 1990.

They warn that the U.S. failure to stay the course and [rebuild](#) Afghanistan led inexorably to the rise of the [Taliban](#), and the ready safe-haven that Afghanistan became for global terrorists like al Qaeda and a host of regional Islamist terror organizations with roots in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Despite the rising American tempers and exhaustion with Pakistan’s duplicity, romantics who recall better days caution against sanctioning Pakistan, noting the abject failures of sanctions during the 1990. Having mobilized these well-worn scenarios, they impetuously demand that the United States “stay the course” in Afghanistan and Pakistan, without articulating what that surely treacherous course should be.

This is a pernicious argument in part because the proponents of the longest war narrate a complex fantasy, which must be addressed:

– **First**, there is no counterfactual analysis that can support the claim that had the United States “stayed” the course, Afghanistan would have developed into a functional state rather than a terrorist sanctuary.

– **Second**, concluding that U.S. sanctions applied in 1990 failed and thus all punitive measures are destined to fail is a logical fallacy. The U.S. efforts to retard Pakistan’s nuclear program failed because first the Carter administration chose to let it fail as early as summer of 1979, when it began reversing enrichment-related sanctions first applied to Pakistan in [April of 1979](#).

The Reagan Administration flatly surrendered American efforts to deny Pakistan a nuclear capability to Cold War-centered goals in Afghanistan and elsewhere. With the Soviets’ advance, the United States jettisoned its nonproliferation goals as it reworked its nonproliferation regime to facilitate arming Pakistan under the rubric of defeating the Soviets while also possessing full knowledge that Pakistan was continuing to advance its nuclear weapons program. By 1984, Pakistan had a crude, large nuclear weapon that could be [delivered](#) by C-130 if need be. By the time sanctions came into [force](#) in 1990, Pakistan had already acquired the bomb.

– **Third**, acquiescing to Pakistan’s preferred strategy that the conflict in Afghanistan be waged in the guise of a “jihad” to be waged by rugged, Afghan mujahideen was a mistake.

Many Pakistanis continue to believe that this was an American strategy: it was not.

Pakistan began instrumentalizing Islamist leaders and militants alike first under the [regime](#) of Z.A. Bhutto and later under Zia ul Haq. By the time the Soviets crossed the Amu Darya on Christmas Day 1979, Pakistan had already assembled most of the militant groups that would become the “mujahideen.” It is true that with U.S. and Saudi money, they became much more lethal. But it is also true that lineaments of the “jihad” strategy has already been mapped out and resourced by Pakistan before the first American dime entered the clandestine battlefield.

While the United States was focusing upon Afghanistan, it was losing the prize: a stable Pakistan that is capable of living at peace with itself and with its neighbors. Indeed by the time the United States withdrew from South Asia in 1990, Pakistan’s dangerous contours were in full clarity. It was a nuclear armed state, locked in an intractable security competition with India, and emboldened to employ an array of non-state actors in India and in Afghanistan with impunity under its expanding nuclear umbrella.

Pakistan was beset with sectarian fissures, a bloody legacy of a menacing quartet that included the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the anti-Soviet “jihad,” and Pakistan’s own pursuit of Islamizing Pakistan in the guise of a Sunni state. Equally vexing, Pakistan’s vast state-sponsored nuclear and missile proliferation efforts, which began in the 1970s for acquisition goals, were repurposed for exporting nuclear and missile technology.

### ***Taking Home the Booby Prize?***

As 2014 looms, the United States should recognize that some meager prospects for a peaceful Pakistan may be the prize rather than a functional Afghanistan. If that cannot be secured, then the

United States should at least aim for the “booby prize” of helping to ensure that Pakistan does not become a South Asian North Korea.

Unfortunately, during the last 11 years, Washington and its allies have persistently pursued a policy—howsoever inept and [ill-conceived](#)—that prioritized Afghanistan. Unable to forge a tandem policy to manage the twinned threats inhering in and from Afghanistan and Pakistan, the international community had a semblance of an Afghanistan [strategy](#) while never [formulating](#) a Pakistan strategy at all. A simple perusal of the March 2009 White House paper, titled “[New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan](#),” belies the ruse of a policy for Pakistan.

Despite lacking a clear vision for the country, in the early years of the war Pakistan and the United States had a strong counter-terror and military-to-military [relationship](#) centered upon al Qaeda. Al Qaeda has been hostile to Pakistan and has declared war on that state. Equally important, al Qaeda was never an asset to Pakistan. However, the United States and NATO expanded the goals of the Afghan effort to include “nation building” and “defeating the Taliban.”

This was a vital mistake.

In doing so, the United States locked itself in a proxy war with Pakistan. After all, the Taliban are Pakistan’s cherished proxies for any number of reasons. It has been the Taliban—not al Qaeda—that has killed thousands of Americans and their allies and tens of thousands of Afghans. Oddly, declaring war on the Taliban never served U.S. interests. The disastrous opinion was based upon the fraudulent [conflation](#) of al Qaeda and the Taliban and a failure to recognize that the Taliban itself continues to evolve.

By identifying the Taliban as the foe, the United States required a much larger military presence in Afghanistan.

Driven by the COINista [fantasy](#) of the applicability of [FM-324](#) (the U.S. Army and U.S. Marines *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*), military officials and their Beltway bandit allies pushed for a surge in Afghanistan. This was folly. If you took the farcical FM 3-24 at face value, as many as [500,000](#) troops would be required to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Ironically, this expanded footprint increased the reliance upon Pakistan through which most material passed to supply the war. “Defeating” the Taliban—by any definition of defeat selected—would require putting pressure on Pakistan to close sanctuaries, cease active and passive support, and aggressively kill Taliban and their allies in the tribal areas as well as in the cities of Quetta, Karachi, Peshawar, Islamabad. It would also require a competent partner in Kabul, dedicated to good governance rather than looting the country, and building “safe havens” for the regime and its cronies in Dubai and elsewhere.

### ***US-Pakistan Relations: Making Margaritas Out of Lousy Lemons?***

The United States will leave Afghanistan in 2014, although it is likely that the United States will retain some presence in negotiation with the current Afghan government and that which will emerge after the presumed Afghan presidential elections in 2014.

Many Afghan hands hope — against most odds — that the United States will continue subsidizing the overgrown, rentier state that the United States [helped](#) to build. Indeed, unless the United States keeps footing the bill, the Afghan National Security Forces will likely collapse into a series of militias that will fight for the spoils of a retrograde state.

The Taliban may even return in some measure. But this does not matter. The Taliban are Jurassic savages. But they would not kill Americans if the Americans and their allies were not there occupying the country.

Under no circumstances could the United States ever have defeated the Taliban at a price Americans would be willing to pay.

There was never any way to “kill our way” out of this problem or buy hearts and minds in adequate numbers. The United States, a still relatively law-bound nation, is not willing to engage in the gruesome depopulation that would have been necessary to defeat of the Taliban.

As the United States reoptimizes its profile in Afghanistan, many policy makers, war planners and intelligence analysts alike are questioning what the United States should do with Pakistan.

Americans are furious, exhausted and befuddled at Islamabad.

Over the past decade, the United States has spent poured neatly \$26 billion into Pakistan, per the tabulations of the Congressional Research Service.

Yet Pakistan has undermined U.S. interests at every turn. It has continued to support the Taliban, who have killed the vast majority of Americans and their allies in Afghanistan. It continues to nurture “jihadi” assets such as Lashkar-e-Taiba/Jamaat ud Dawa (LeT/JuD), whose leader, [Hafez Saeed](#), is a frequent media commentator and public personality.

LeT/JuD, which is responsible for the November 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai as well as attacks on U.S. personnel in Afghanistan, openly raises funds and holds rallies in Pakistan and has even enjoyed financial [support](#) from the Punjab province. Despite professions that it has “clamped down” on sectarian militants slaughtering Pakistanis by the tens of thousands, politicians with [ties](#) to such groups are contesting the 2013 election without impediment.

Equally disconcerting for U.S. interests, Pakistan is busily expanding its nuclear arsenal with a renewed focused upon tactical — [battlefield](#) — nuclear weapons. The final straw was the discovery of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, a short distance from Pakistan’s famed Military Academy in Kakul.

Americans rightly recount that neither sums of money, conventional weapons systems such as F-16s, or support to civilian institutions has paid the kind of dividends that U.S. legislators and administration officials wanted. With the U.S. economy in a shambolic state, unemployment high and increasing demands for increased development at home, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to justify engaging Pakistan through the checkbook.

Maybe it's time to try a different approach that is not based upon financial, but political, allurements.

### ***Dusting Off A Crazy Idea***

One thing is certain: the past U.S. approach to Pakistan has failed. It has failed because the United States has tended to be willing to write checks and provide military assistance, but it has always swerved when it came to time employing negative inducements. This has allowed Pakistan to marginally satisfy Washington while generally reaping the benefits while delivering the minimum necessary to sustain the charade.

However, what needs to be said, is that whatever the United States offered Pakistan was never enough to persuade Pakistan to give up the only assets it believes works for it: jihad under a the security of its ever-expanding nuclear umbrella. To influence Pakistan's cost-benefit calculus, Washington will have to rethink how it does business with Islamabad.

Doing so will require Pakistan and the United States to admit and say things that are difficult if not outright gut-churning. For its part, the United States will have to consider putting forward *political* inducements that are meaningful to Pakistan. After all, these inducements will have to be adequately beneficial that the state could even consider—for a moment—giving up its nuclearized jihad.

This is no easy proposition.

After all, sane people many demand that it is outrageous to reward a state for giving up what no responsible state should do in the first place: seek to compel a change in the status quo through terror proxies and nuclear extortion. True.

But this also ignores the simple fact that what the United States and its allies have done is viewed in similar light in other countries. After all, how many countries applauded the U.S. and its coalition of the *billing* to invade Iraq to overthrow a regime that did not actually threaten the United States in any meaningful way? Not many.

Pakistan, for its part, will have to own up to what the world already knows: it continues to sponsor a host of Islamist militants who conduct terror in the region under the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal to get its way in Afghanistan and India. Pakistan's [demurrals](#) on this point are ludicrous. Should Pakistan be willing to give up the only assets it has, the United States should be ready to reward Pakistan handsomely even though doing so may seem odious to many.

### ***Rewarding Nuclear Blackmail?***

This author opposed the 2005 U.S.-India nuclear deal for several reasons.

***First***, I thought it hurt the goal of nuclear nonproliferation to let India into the nuclear club while elsewhere trying to tighten the noose to keep Iran out.

***Second***, while I support strong U.S.-India ties, I was not persuaded that the deal would open the door to deeper U.S. and Indian strategic cooperation and American weapons sales to India as promised.

***Third***, I was annoyed at the misrepresentations made by its proponents during numerous congressional hearings on the subject.

***Fourth***, I understood that it would give Pakistan wiggle room regarding its nuclear aspirations.

***Finally***, I anticipated that should Pakistan fail to secure such a deal, it would likely work to sabotage everything the United States was trying to do in Afghanistan. After all, Pakistan sees itself as paying a heavy price for supporting the U.S., while India reaps rewards without such cost.

If the United States wants one last chance of salvaging a relationship with Pakistan, it should put on the table a conditions-based, civilian-nuclear deal. Whereas the deal with India was motivated by a desire to work with India, in the region and beyond, to manage China's rise, this deal with Pakistan would be aimed to slowly wean it from its jihad addiction and work with Pakistan to secure the command and control and ultimate safety of its expanding nuclear weapons. It should be recalled that the India-U.S. nuclear deal remains a work in progress, even though the deal was announced in 2005—some eight years ago.

Pakistan's leaders note, in private, that they really do not need the United States because they have China. That claim is hollow. China only provides loans and engages Pakistan on extractive terms to service its own goals. Its weapons systems are of uneven quality and generally are no match for American systems. Worse yet, China cannot confer legitimacy to Pakistan's nuclear program, as the United States can as it did for India.

Putting this on the negotiating table with Pakistan should have a clarifying effect. If Pakistan is unwilling to give up its jihadi assets for this enormous offer, the United States will understand that there is literally nothing in its tool box that can help coax Pakistan off the trajectory of a rogue state that terrorizes its citizens at home and others abroad.

### ***“Scrotal Fortitude”***

To increase the likelihood that Pakistan would take such a deal, Pakistan should also be made to understand that while the United States is willing to reward Pakistan, it is also prepared to come down upon Pakistan with the full intent of containing the threats it poses. This list of negative inducements should be specific and targeted. There is little doubt that policymakers in Congress and the Executive Branch alike will have to garner the requisite scrotal fortitude to make good on these threats. Alas, the U.S. [track record](#) on this front is abysmal.

These negative inducements should include declaring American support to render the Line of Control cutting through those portions of Kashmir administered by Pakistan and India as the [international border](#). This will not be easy and will require action at the United Nations.



The United States should also be prepared to let Pakistan fail.

Pakistan has been able to monetize its insecurity by extorting funds from the international community based upon the argument that it “is too dangerous to fail.” Thus Pakistan follows a familiar routine. It negotiates a deal with the [International Monetary Fund](#), accepts several tranches of payments while failing to follow through on [commitments](#) to expand the tax net among others.

It then withdraws from the commitment altogether until it must again go back to the IMF. The IMF, under U.S. pressure, relents and issues forth a new deal and new tranches of funds. The United States should be unwilling to continue subsidizing Pakistan with monies paid by global tax-paying citizens while Pakistan’s elites abscond. The IMF should not cut Pakistan another check until Islamabad makes good on old promises it has failed *repeatedly* to keep.

The United States should also move against individuals and organizations that sponsor terrorism.

Pakistan military, intelligence and civilian personnel have long been implicated in helping Pakistan’s terrorist denizens do their work at home and abroad. Those individuals should be brought to justice. The United States, working with the international community, should work to deprive these individuals ability to move internationally, to seize their funds, and even try them in courts of law, *in absentia* if need be.

While the United States has few means to stop terrorists associated with Lashkar-e-Taiba from leaving Pakistan, the organization has a growing presence in Europe and Asia. Military, intelligence and law enforcement personnel should aggressively target this organization’s infrastructure as well as that of related organizations beyond Pakistan’s borders.

Finally, the United States must make it very clear that Pakistan will be held accountable for any Pakistani fissile material, nuclear weapons or technology that falls into the hands of non-state actors. Pakistani officials continually opine that it is a responsible nuclear weapons state. The United States and its partners should treat it as such.

### ***A Hard Pill to Swallow***

There is no doubt that these suggestions may seem unpalatable.

However, what is clear is that Pakistan is on a seemingly irreversible course that will only make it more dangerous to itself, to its neighbors and the world at large. The U.S. traditional approach of “muddling through” its management of Pakistan will not yield positive dividends forever. It is time for a “big idea” for Pakistan.

This will take political will. It will require intelligence resources to monitor progress — or lack thereof — made by Pakistan in rolling back its nuclearized jihad . It will require a consensus inside the U.S. government that it makes more sense to reward Pakistan for giving up those very tools of statecraft that responsible states are loathe to develop in the first instance.

Inside Pakistan, such a profound policy shift will require its strategic elites to imagine a different future for their nation. Pakistanis are wary and distrustful of the Americans. Giving up nuclear-backed jihadi assets is a big “ask.” Consensus to do so may be slow in the coming, and may never come at all.

But Americans should not presume that all Pakistanis want this dystopic future. Washington should find and reach out to those Pakistanis who understand the growing cost of past and current policies. Those folks, alas, are Pakistan’s lone hope and prospects for change.

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