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Pakistan Is an Arsonist That Wants You to Think It's a Firefighter

Washington has an endless appetite for Islamabad's con games.

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On Aug. 27, U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham tweeted, “Any sustainable solution in Afghanistan must include Pakistan,” while also expressing his appreciation for the “efforts of the Pakistani government to assist with the evacuation of U.S. citizens, our allies, and other nations.” His comments reflect a familiar play: Pakistan has spent decades setting fires in South Asia—and then expected praise and remuneration for offering to put them out.

It's astonishing that U.S. officials continue to peddle Pakistan's own fictions—alongside such media outlets as the BBC, as I discovered recently when I was cut off in the middle of an interview for speaking about it. But with the Afghanistan debacle on policymakers' minds, it's a good time to think critically about Washington's perpetual vulnerability to Pakistan's rent-seeking ruses. Both political parties have long been responsible for coddling Pakistan in hopes that there is some mystical U.S. policy that could reform its supposed wayward ally. Even though Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan goes back some seven decades, the Washington elite continues to fall for Pakistan's efforts to sell itself as the solution to the very problems it created.

Pakistani officials tell a heart-wrenching story. Pakistan was minding its business when, in 1979, the United States persuaded Pakistan to shoulder the burden of the struggle against communism in Soviet-controlled Afghanistan. Pakistani officials contend that they were a victim of American perfidy when the latter forgot Pakistan existed in the 1990s, leaving Islamabad to contend with the mess—while Washington had the effrontery to impose sanctions on a bamboozled ally because of its well-known efforts to secure a nuclear weapon.

But Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan have deep roots. As Husain Haqqani, Rizwan Hussain, and I have shown, Islamabad inherited the British conception of Afghanistan as a buffer state with Russia. From the point of view of the security managers of a newly minted Pakistan, Pakistan inherited the most turbulent threat frontier with a fraction of the British Raj's resources.

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Afghanistan made early fateful decisions that would lock the country in an unwinnable security competition with Pakistan. Afghanistan initially attempted to block Pakistan's bid to join the United Nations. Beginning in September 1950, Afghanistan began military incursions into Pakistan's tribal agencies and Baluchistan province. Afghanistan's efforts to antagonize its much stronger neighbor continued well into the 1970s.

Pakistan, seeking to influence its obstinate western neighbor, began supporting the growth of the reformist Islamist organization Jamaat-e-Islami in Afghanistan, where it originally had little support. This development was propitious. The majority of the so-called mujahideen groups that would eventually be mobilized by Pakistan were rooted in Jamaat-e-Islami.

After Mohammed Daoud Khan came to power in Afghanistan in 1973 and established a one-party republic that embarked on an aggressive top-down social reform program and purged Islamists and communists alike, Pakistan saw an opportunity. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto took the helm of a vivisected Pakistan, which lost half of its population when Bangladesh gained independence in a 1971 war. Bhutto resolved to lose nothing else.

In August 1973, Bhutto set up the Afghan working group within Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate. Despite a brief interregnum, Gen. Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq continued with this policy after he ousted Bhutto in a July 1977 coup. Fifty or so Afghan resistance groups were consolidated by the ISI into a smaller, more manageable number. The ISI was tasked with deepening the links between Pakistani and Afghan Islamist groups. These

efforts resulted in seven major Sunni Afghan Islamist militant groups, as well as several Shiite groups. By the time the Soviets had crossed the Amu Darya river into Afghanistan, Zia-ul-Haq's army and the ISI had already created the key Islamist groups that would become the cornerstone of the so-called anti-Soviet jihad.

As I wrote recently in Foreign Policy, that involvement continues today. The ISI nurtured, created, and supported the Taliban in their first incarnation; it returned to doing the same after the Taliban regime's fall in late 2001. Pakistan has deployed its spin doctors to claim otherwise—using the same old strategy. Pakistan opines that it is the real victim of terrorism, that it is being unjustly maligned, and that if the West wants to fight terrorism, it needs to give Pakistan more money—and ignore its wrongdoings, which include sponsoring numerous Islamist terrorist groups as well as vertical and horizontal nuclear proliferation.

Ordinary Pakistanis are, indeed, the victims of terrorist monsters—monsters bred and trained by the military-intelligence establishment. As then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told a gathering of Pakistanis in 2011, “You can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbors.” Yet Islamabad continues to do so—and to offer its snake-catching expertise when they escape.

Pakistan's ability to convince Americans of its signal importance might seem baffling—but it represents a sophisticated and strategic diplomatic approach. First and foremost, Pakistan exploits information asymmetries. As Teresita and Howard Schaffer wrote in 2011, the United States is one of the most important portfolios for diplomatic, political, and military officials. They are required to know their briefs and recite them convincingly. Most often their American counterparts lack the most rudimentary knowledge of U.S.-Pakistan relations and tend to be persuaded by the narratives on offer. Even intelligence officials will have little operational familiarity with Pakistan, in part because substantive international contacts and travel pose problems for obtaining clearances. The easiest hires are young graduates with little international experience.

Islamabad understands the value of congressional delegations in shaping policymakers' opinions. Unlike protocol-bound India, Pakistan dispenses with all diplomatic protocol on these occasions. Delegates meet the army chief, the

ISI chief, and the prime minister, and they are often treated to military tourism opportunities.

In addition to having lavish budgets for legal lobbyists, Pakistan also has a history of cultivating shadowy figures who launder Islamabad's dirty laundry and promote its pet projects to American policymakers and opinion-makers. It discourages criticism by denying visas, restricting access, or outright threatening violence to those who dare expose the dark side of Pakistan's deep state. Conversely, Pakistan incentivizes apologists: It offers free trips where beneficiaries are treated to the famous Pakistani hospitality, which includes private meetings with important Pakistanis across the civilian and military spectrums, helicopter rides to places ordinarily forbidden to foreigners, and a cultivated practice of appearing open and affable. Such access is critical for people working in think tanks who eat from the grants they secure, which require such access to Pakistan's corridors of power. The combination of these various measures results in a silenced coterie of critics and a sprawling ecosystem of those who happily promote Pakistan's narratives in exchange for access.

With the U.S. Embassy in Kabul shuttered, the United States is very likely to do what it usually does: go back to the arsonist and sustain the pretense that it is in fact the fire brigade. The United States will likely find itself more dependent on Pakistan as it seeks a foothold to retain intelligence cooperation and likely drone basing for targeting the terrorist refuges in Pakistan, even while Pakistan continues to cultivate the same refuges. As in the past, whether it was the use of Pakistan territory for U-2 flights or for drones, Pakistan and the United States will likely establish yet another pay-to-play scheme. Pakistan will continue to provide the minimal results to justify the expenditures to a U.S. Congress that is always wary of Pakistan but not enough to do anything meaningful to curtail its myriad outrages. In the meantime, Pakistan's militant assets cultivated for action in India will benefit enormously from the terrorist safe havens protected by the Taliban-led house of horrors that is the Afghan government.

Rather than hiking along the treacherous course Washington has been treading with Pakistan since the 1950s, can we imagine a different future for U.S.-Pakistan relations? Yes. But it will take political courage—which seems in short supply in Washington.

To begin with, the United States must exorcise the fear that Pakistan is too dangerous to fail. Pakistan coerces the United States and the rest of the international community by raising the specter of a state collapse in which one or more of Pakistan's varied terrorist groups secure nuclear weapons or fissile material. To fend off such a doomsday scenario, the United States has been loath to sanction Pakistan bilaterally, much less cut off its supply to international financial regimes. Oddly, Pakistan gets its cake and gets to eat it, too. While Pakistan's deep state wants to be seen as competent, it is perfectly happy encouraging this belief, because it is lucrative. Nor does the deep state truly care about the loss of Pakistani life from blowback, particularly if the losses are suffered by poor, non-Punjabi citizens.

However, Pakistan has proved to be a very stable instability. It was never expected to survive as an independent state given the disparity of human and other resources it inherited from the dismembered Raj. British and Indians alike expected Pakistan to collapse back into India. Following the route of Bengali independence, many subsequent commentators have long expected Pakistan to further succumb to ethnic demands. Yet it has not. Pakistan emerged from the 1971 war stronger and more capable of projecting its interests despite the loss of half of its population, precious natural resources, and considerable landmass. Moreover, Pakistan has survived the most grievous of natural disasters without any of the predicted adverse second-order effects. It's time to put to rest the idea that Pakistan will collapse—or fears collapsing.

Equally important is the twinned myth that Pakistan's nuclear weapons will fall into the hands of terrorists. Pakistan's most important assets are its nuclear weapons. These weapons are useful threats only to the extent that Pakistan has credible command and control over the same. While one can never rule out low-probability events, the fact is that Pakistan's interests in securing these weapons, fissile materials, and technology are completely aligned with those of the United States.

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Rather than seeking to retain access to a country by attempting to rent it, the United States must let go of the fiction that there is some mystical combination of U.S. allurements and inducements that will shape Pakistan into a responsible state.

Right now, Washington and its partners must focus on ameliorating the humanitarian disaster that the United States and Pakistan created. The international community must demand that Pakistan provide a safe corridor for those Afghans who do not want to live shackled to the horrors of the Taliban regime. It must provide safe passage even to those Afghans who worked in the legitimate government and who may be viewed as enemies of Pakistan and its Taliban lieges. Pakistan should be compensated for these services via a cost structure that is germane to Pakistan's economy in contradistinction to the lucrative reimbursement terms of the Coalition Support Funds program. There should be harsh punishments for failing to protect Afghans or facilitate their resettlement elsewhere. Islamabad must be persuaded to put pressure on the Taliban to let the planes that are currently stranded in Afghanistan's airports depart.

At the same time, the United States must take steps to punish Pakistan for its ongoing military and other support to the Taliban, the Haqqani network, and other Islamist militants it uses at home and abroad. At the time of writing, the Taliban announced their interim cabinet, which includes declared terrorist Sirajuddin Haqqani, head of a brutal eponymous terrorist network, as the new acting interior minister, as well as numerous others who are on various American and U.N. sanctions lists.

Congress should act to strip Pakistan of its major non-NATO ally status, which then-Secretary of State Colin Powell announced in 2004. While the designation was meant to bolster Pakistani belief in the U.S. commitment to the country as it sought to enlist Pakistan's support in its international counterterrorism campaigns, it was also meant as a means of expeditiously getting Pakistan military platforms and spare parts for the same as well as a host of other perquisites. Past congressional efforts to deprive Pakistan of this status, including one mounted this January, have failed. It's time to end this farce.

Critically, the United States should employ sanctions under the Treasury Department for any Pakistani official for whom there is credible intelligence indicating they have supported the archipelago of terrorist training facilities in

Pakistan and Afghanistan. Such specific sanctions would focus on the worst offenders, without further immiserating the more than 200 million Pakistanis who are also hostages to its deep state.

The United States should also declare Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism—with clearly defined benchmarks according to which this status can be reversed. Currently, the State Department designates Cuba, North Korea, Iran, and Syria as terrorism sponsors. How does Pakistan not meet the criteria?

And, even if Washington lacks the guts to declare Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism, it should at least allow Pakistan to receive the blacklisting it so deserves when it is next evaluated by the Financial Action Task Force, the global body that evaluates corruption, money laundering, and terrorist funding in national financial systems. The United States and the United Kingdom have unofficially preferred that Pakistan remain on the organization's gray list to ensure that it can continue to receive IMF funding. This is absurd.

Pakistan fears the possibility of even the most modest of punishments for its endless outrages—which is why it has launched another diplomatic offensive, simultaneously wooing allies and targeting critics. American leaders need to stop falling for this line—and start making sure Islamabad pays a price for its reckless actions and the cost in Afghan, Indian, and Pakistani lives.

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