

Mapping U.S.-Pakistan Relations: Past, Present, and Future

By C. Christine Fair

Thursday, October 6, 2011 - 6:06 PM

Officials and voters in the United States often cite a ["trust deficit"](#) to explain the perennially tumultuous, frequently tortured, and always tenuous relationship between the United States and Pakistan over the last ten years. Many are [wont to point](#) out how the United States "failed Pakistan" throughout its history beginning in 1962 when it armed Pakistan's nemesis India during the latter's war with China. This narrative of Washington routinely disappointing Pakistan moves through its failure to support Pakistan in its wars with India in 1965 and 1971, and crescendos with the final straw of perceived perfidy: the American decision to invoke the [Pressler Amendment](#) sanctions in 1990 as a result of Pakistani efforts to develop nuclear weapons. This move notoriously deprived Pakistan of a fleet of F-16s for which they had already paid. However, this [history](#) is at best misleading, often wrong, and does little to forge a better understanding of Pakistan and the limits of engaging the country's political and military leadership.



Farif Ali/AFP/Getty Images

While it is true that the United States supported India in 1962 and did little to support Pakistan in its 1965 or 1971 wars with India despite being allied to Pakistan through the [Central Treaty Organization](#) and the [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization](#), Pakistan began both wars. Do treaty partners have an obligation to assist a member state which commences hostilities? Second, despite being a treaty partner of the United States, Pakistan did not go to Vietnam or Korea. In fact, the Pakistanis demurred from declaring China to be an aggressor in the former conflict. And with respect to the F-16 canard, [Pakistan helped forge the Pressler Amendment](#), because this instrument allowed the United States to arm Pakistan during the anti-Soviet *jihad* while Pakistan continued developing nuclear weapons.

Few U.S. policymakers or analysts seem remotely aware that Washington first sanctioned Pakistan in [April of 1979](#), under the Symington amendments to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, or that Pakistan viewed the passage of the Pressler Amendment as an [important victory for Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), because the legislation provided a simple way to manage two competing interests: Pakistan's desire to continue developing nuclear weapons on the one hand, and American requirements to provide security assistance to a known proliferator in contravention of U.S. law on the other. From April of 1979 until the 1985 passage of Pressler, military assistance to Pakistan was enabled by a presidential waiver by which the American president attested that providing security assistance to Pakistan is in U.S. national interest *even though* Pakistan remained noncompliant with U.S. requirements for such assistance. The [Pressler Amendment](#) essentially moved the red lines of sanctionable nuclear proliferation under the Foreign Assistance Act to a simple certification by the U.S. president that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear bomb.

In the end, Pakistan made a strategic calculation, and chose nuclear capabilities over F-16s. Pakistan knew full well that the time would come when Pakistan would no longer remain indispensable to U.S. interests and that the president would refuse to certify Pakistan as nuclear weapons-free, and thus bring into force the sanctions that resembled the sanctions that were imposed more than decade before in 1979.

Thus, what bedevils U.S.-Pakistan relations is not a pervasive distrust of the other; rather, the two states want fundamentally different things for South Asia, and their strategic interests have only minor -- and quickly vanishing -- overlap. The [two countries' intelligence agencies operate against each other](#) as much if not more than they cooperate with each other. Pakistan fights its Islamist militant foes while helping those that target U.S. troops even while America redoubles its resolve to kill Islamabad's proxies. All of this activity plays out [across a backdrop of some \\$20 billion dollars](#), paid overtly to Pakistan, ostensibly to support the war on terrorism rather than undermine the same.

Pakistan's strategic elite are right to opine that the Americans were astonishingly ignorant of the region and have a simplistic view of Pakistan's security perceptions vis-à-vis Afghanistan and India. In quick succession, Washington broke three critical promises made to President Pervez Musharraf in September 2001, and likely did not understand the importance of these early missteps.

First, Washington promised that the Northern Alliance would not take Kabul. By December 2001 the Northern Alliance did precisely that. Washington failed to understand that the [Northern Alliance had been nurtured and aided by India](#). From Rawalpindi's perspective, the

United States had handed the keys of Kabul to the Indians. To compound matters, the interim Afghan government was dominated by the Northern Alliance. [It took the 2005 elections to alter this significantly](#) -- but not completely.

Second, the [United States assured President Musharraf](#) that it would take a more active role in resolving the conflict over the disputed province of Kashmir. While such promises were likely absurd in the first instance, the United States quickly drew back from that commitment as well. Over the years, the United States has taken little public interest in India's [continued mishandling of Kashmiri Muslims' grievances](#) or of the [vast challenges its Muslim populations face](#).

Third, the United States assured Pakistan that its "strategic assets" (its nuclear program) would remain intact. While technically this pledge was honored, it was eviscerated by [the 2005 U.S.-India civilian nuclear deal](#) and concomitant guarantee that the [United States would help India become a global power](#). The nuclear deal was all the more problematic because-despite its name-it was [designed to assist India's development of nuclear weapons directly and indirectly](#) as a part of U.S. grand strategy to manage China's regional influence with a growing Indian counterweight. American declarations of such support to India no doubt rankled Pakistan. By 2005, Pakistan's [substantial facilitation of the U.S. war in Afghanistan](#) had galvanized [a sanguineous insurgency that spread from the tribal areas throughout Pakistan](#). Admittedly, though, this insurgency was fueled by [erstwhile proxies](#) who turned their guns against the state, exposing the fragility of [Pakistan's continued reliance on militants as part of its strategy to secure its interests in India as well as Afghanistan](#).

While Pakistan was doing a U-turn on its U-turn against the Taliban and while the Afghan Taliban were gearing up for a reinvigorated insurgent campaign, the United States and NATO blithely assumed that major combat operations were complete in Afghanistan. [Historians will decide](#), however, if Pakistan had ever made a genuine change with regards to the Taliban in the first instance, and whether that ostensible shift was intended to be permanent.

The United States, meanwhile, remained insouciant about the developments in Pakistan. Even as it became increasingly clear that Pakistan continued supporting the Afghan Taliban and the notorious Haqqani network, the United States depended ever more upon Pakistan for its logistical support through ground and air lines of communication to supply the war. Moreover, Washington needed Pakistan to help it [continue to capture al-Qaeda operatives](#). Washington simply did not want to badger Pakistan about the Taliban. And Washington did not admonish Pakistan for supporting groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), [which were killing Americans in Afghanistan since 2004](#). It took the 2008 Mumbai carnage to convince Washington that such groups are not simply "India's problem."

As the Americans grasped the problem of the Taliban, it shifted its focus from al-Qaeda -- long vanquished from Afghanistan -- and made the Afghan Taliban its enemy to defeat in Afghanistan. However, [despite efforts to bolster a northern distribution route through Central Asia](#), the surge that the United States inserted into Afghanistan in 2009 [only increased Washington's dependence upon Pakistan](#) even while Pakistan was becoming ever more acutely the *source* of the Taliban's strength.

As this farce unfolded, Pakistan concluded that the current situation in Afghanistan was deeply dystopian. For one thing, not only had the Americans embraced Pakistan's enemy as its key South Asian ally, India had taken advantage of the American security umbrella to re-establish its presence in Afghanistan, to Pakistan's deepest vexation. While Pakistan had concluded that America's allies were its enemies (e.g. India), America's enemies were increasingly becoming those very groups that Pakistan embraced as its own allies -- the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and savage terrorist groups like LeT.

Washington was slow to understand the changing currents. [President Bush remained enamored of President Musharraf](#) and his purported commitment to turning back the tide of Islamist extremism, even while his government was busy forging peace deals with a variety of murderous militants in Pakistan's tribal areas and reinvigorating ties with the Afghan Taliban. The United States remained committed to the belief that through military and financial allurements Pakistan's fundamental strategic calculus could be changed: that it could become a partner for peace in Afghanistan and that it could reconcile its vast differences with India and accept India's obvious and inevitable hegemony over the region. The United States and its officials simply could not grasp that to do so would be tantamount to defeat for Pakistan generally and the army in particular, which above all else seeks to retard India's rise and its presumed desire to render Pakistan little more than a nuclear-armed Bangladesh. Worse, by patronizing Pakistan's military, Pakistan's citizenry and political systems became ever more disempowered.

After a full decade of the global war on terror, the [United States has finally concluded what the Pakistanis had long known: our interests and allies are incompatible](#). As the American endgame in Afghanistan looms, the American government and polity alike are increasingly unwilling to tolerate Pakistan's support of the very organizations killing American troops and attacking its embassy.

Pakistan, for its part, is tired of participating in a war effort with the United States -- albeit on highly selective terms -- that is fomenting increased domestic tension, while the United States seems deaf or indifferent to its security concerns including those centered on India's defense modernization and the U.S. role facilitating it; the impact of the U.S.-India civilian nuclear deal for Pakistan's own nuclear program; the nature of India's presence in Afghanistan and Pakistani

beliefs that India is supporting subversive elements in Pakistan from Afghanistan, among other related issues

The next decade of U.S.-Pakistan relations

While Pakistan's leaders issue statements full of bravado that it no longer needs the United States because China will [step into the breach](#), astute Pakistanis know that this is manna pedaled to appease a wary population burdened with economic hardship, an uncertain future, and ceaseless violence -- all of which are deferred or ignored by an indifferent political class. China never helped Pakistan during any war with India (1947, 1965, 1971, 1999) and shares international concerns about terrorist groups [operating from or on Pakistani soil](#). In contrast to American grant-based aid, China's assistance is generally loan-based. Moreover, while Pakistan has correctly assessed that it does not need American aid, it is loathe to concede that it still needs [America's support at the International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#), which is perennially allowing Pakistan to abscond from its own commitments to fiscal reform-including expanding its tax net. Pakistan has correctly concluded that the world sees Pakistan as too dangerous to fail and will not encourage the IMF or other multilateral institutions to cut off Pakistan's economic life support. However, these policies have miserably failed Pakistanis, the vast majority of whom are hard-working, [reject violence](#), and deserve a better future. [Pakistan's recent brinkmanship with the IMF](#) will no doubt be leveraged for even greater concessions, because of Pakistan's confidence that the world will not let Pakistan fail. Apparently limping along in a financially comatose state satisfies Pakistan's leaders, who are insulated from the fiscal woes of ordinary Pakistan.

But Washington also still needs Pakistan. While in principle Pakistan could offer opportunities as partner for peace and stability in the region, such naive optimism cannot be justified amidst the accumulating evidence to the contrary. However, the most pressing U.S. national security interests are resident in Pakistan -- not Afghanistan or in Iran: nuclear weapons, a raft of terrorist and insurgent groups with varying degrees of official support, the specter of terrorists acquiring nuclear weapons, and evolving fears about Islamist militants [infiltrating the ranks and officer corps of Pakistan's armed forces](#).

The United States and Pakistan need to forge a more sustainable relationship based upon a cold assessment of reality. Washington's khaki addiction has undermined U.S. interests, and has [undermined prospects for Pakistani ownership of its own war on terror, as the army is seen as a collaborator with the United States -- if not a rental army](#). This perception has no doubt arisen in part because of the way in which the army handled its internal operations. [President Musharraf was famous in the early years of the war for saying that Pakistan was fighting America's war on America's behest](#). The only way forward is to think smaller, and focus on outcomes of democratization and human development rather than strategic shifts. A lower

profile is critical, as the United States could hardly be more despised in Pakistan. The Soviet Union may offer a model of engagement: contain the threat, invest in opportunities for change, while preparing for the worst at home and abroad.

The worst outcome is a Pakistan that has no investment in the West and consequently nothing to lose. Such a Pakistan -- backed into a corner -- may be much more dangerous than it is now. The United States must work with its allies and Pakistan's allies to ensure that Pakistan does not become a North Korea that is increasingly dangerous, unpredictable and opaque to all. This will require fortitude in Washington. The U.S. Congress will have to resist its strongest impulse to simply [cut off Pakistan](#). There is simply too much to lose by choosing any path other than engagement, however difficult and maddening such a path may be.

*C. Christine Fair is an assistant professor at Georgetown University's Security Studies Program in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. She is the author *The Madrassah Challenge in Pakistan* (2008), co-editor of *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh* (2010) and *Treading on Hallowed Ground: Counterinsurgency Operations in Sacred Spaces*.*

NEXT: Derek Reveron, [Afghanistan and the Future of U.S. Foreign Policy](#)