“America should be concerned about the deeper causes of Pakistan’s malaise, lest the country become the kind of nuclear-armed monster state that its critics already think it is.”

America and Pakistan: Is the Worst Case Avoidable?

STEPHEN PHILIP COHEN

The attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center in 2001 transformed the US-Pakistan relationship. The country whose leader presidential candidate George W. Bush could not name the year before immediately became a vital strategic partner of the United States with the decision to remove Al Qaeda and its Taliban sponsors from power in Afghanistan. Three and a half years later, Pakistan remains situated at the crossroads of many American concerns. These include terrorism, nuclear proliferation, democratization, and relations with the Islamic world and other important Asian states.

But the most important and difficult policy issue is whether Washington should address Pakistan’s deeper problems and prepare for the possibility that Pakistan may become a failed or rogue state. In the past, short-term gains always have had priority for the United States over long-term concerns when it came to Pakistan. Today, ignoring the long term could have grave consequences.

THE URGENT AND THE IMPORTANT

Over the years, America’s relationship with Pakistan has been one of alternating engagement and withdrawal. At one time Pakistan was “the most allied” of American allies. Washington turned to Pakistan in the early 1950s when India chose nonalignment, and Pakistan, desperate for outside support, eagerly reciprocated. Islam was assumed to confer a natural immunity to communism; Pakistan was at once both explicitly Muslim and near the world’s two great communist powers. By joining the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), it acquired military power that allowed it to maintain balance with India. As a democratic ally, Pakistan was often held up by the United States as a “model” for the Islamic world, although no other Muslim state regarded it as such.

In the early 1960s, the US-Pakistan alliance frayed when Pakistan turned to China for assistance while America backed India in its war with China. After a failed American effort to mediate the Kashmir dispute, the alliance became dormant, only to be revived briefly in 1970–1971 when Washington wanted to show its gratitude to Islamabad for facilitating the US opening to Beijing. Afterward, the two countries went their separate ways, and the alliance quickly gave way to indifference, bolstered only by very small economic and military training programs.

With the development of a Pakistani nuclear program, the Carter administration introduced sanctions, terminating US economic and military aid in 1979. Two years after General Zia ul-Haq had seized power in a 1977 coup, relations reached their lowest imaginable point when mobs burned the US embassy and several information centers while the Pakistan government stood by. Pakistan’s image as a friend of the United States and a staunch anticommunist member of the “free world” lay in shreds. However, American policy did a complete about-face when Islamabad in the early 1980s provided essential support for the anti-Soviet operations in Afghanistan. Aid was revived, and a second US-Pakistan alliance took shape.

At this time, American ambassadors in Islamabad liked to check off the many important interests they were attempting to advance, such as supporting the Afghan mujahideen, containing the Pakistani nuclear program, edging Pakistan toward a more democratic political order, averting an India-Pakistan crisis, and

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slowing the flow of narcotics. But when difficult decisions had to be made, the first interest—sustaining Pakistan's cooperation in the war against the Soviet Union—trumped all others. Washington was mild in its language regarding democratization, underestimated the risks of an India-Pakistan war, and averted its eyes from the Pakistani nuclear program. About the only successful policy (other than containing the Soviets) was curbing the drug trade.

Unfortunately, a second checklist can be drawn up. This would include the trends that were ignored by the Reagan administration and some of its successors, such as Pakistan's uneven economic development, its crumbling educational system, and the growth of Islamic radicalism. Only the nuclear program received sustained high-level American attention until the linkage between Pakistan and the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda became evident in 1996.

These lists show not only that the urgent often drives out the important, but also that the choice of what is "important" is often highly subjective. The Reagan administration was uninterested in the consequences of supporting radical Islamists because they were thought to be the best anti-Soviet fighters, and their religious fervor appealed to some American officials and politicians. A few years later, the Clinton administration was tightly focused on nuclear issues and the Taliban–bin Laden nexus in Afghanistan—two urgent problems. No US administration thought it important to ask why Pakistan's educational system was collapsing and why Islamic schools were taking its place. The latter were considered "soft" issues, but are now correctly seen as critical.

A truly failed Pakistan could be a terrorist production factory.

HOT, COLD, INDIFFERENT

In 1988 Americans were guardedly hopeful about Pakistan's future. The country appeared to be entering an era of democracy, was free of major conflicts with its neighbors, and was well situated to take advantage of changes in the global economy since it had begun to liberalize its economy well before India. Except for the nuclear issue, American policy toward Pakistan (and India, for that matter) was one of disinterest, diverted by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and (in 1991) the first war with Iraq.

During a decade of democracy, Pakistan's institutions continued to deteriorate. A huge debt accumulated and official cultivation of radical Islamic groups continued. Nevertheless, the nuclear issue continued to shape US judgments. During the last two years of Clinton's final term and in the first year of the new Bush administration, Pakistan was more or less ignored in favor of the emerging India, and the prevailing American view of Pakistan, when that country was considered at all, was that it was an irritation.

The 9-11 attacks led to a third US-Pakistan alliance as the Bush administration replayed President Jimmy Carter's policy of lifting sanctions and providing aid in exchange for Pakistani cooperation in a war in Afghanistan. Pakistan again served as a support base for fighting in Afghanistan, and then as a partner in tracking down Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders who fled to Pakistan. By mid-2003 economic and military aid was flowing in large quantities; Washington wrote off $1 billion of Pakistani debt in 2001–2002 and offered a $3.2 billion, five-year economic and military aid package in June 2003, to begin in 2004.

This history illustrates two important features of the US-Pakistan relationship. First, it has been episodic and discontinuous, driven on the American side entirely by larger strategic calculations during the cold war and later by the need for military allies in the war against terrorism. On the Pakistani side, of course, the purpose of the alliances was to acquire resources and political support for Pakistan's contest with India.

Second, although US aid strengthened the hand of the Pakistani army, the on-again, off-again quality of the relationship made the army itself wary of America. The military training programs familiarized Pakistan army officers with America and American strategic policies and fostered a better understanding of American society, but they did not create a cadre of pro-American generals. Meanwhile, anti-Americanism grew among Pakistani civilians, who saw the US alliances as perpetuating the army's role.

The economic consequences of the US relationship were equally ambiguous. While Pakistan did receive large amounts of aid and most of its economic growth took place during the periods of highest aid flows, the new assistance was to be conditioned on economic and social reform.

WASHINGTON'S WORRIES

With this history in mind, what Pakistan-related concerns are important for the United States today? Terrorism has certainly zoomed to the top of the

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American agenda, although it has different sources: notably Al Qaeda and to a lesser degree the Taliban; Pakistan's homegrown terrorists; and non-Pakistani terrorists residing in its territory. "Terrorism" as an issue has a short-term alliance-like quality about it, but also a long-term preventive quality. Washington must work with Islamabad over the next few years to round up or neutralize Al Qaeda operatives, but it must also view Pakistan itself as a potential problem. Twice Pakistan almost made it to the US list of "terrorist-sponsoring" states, and a truly failed Pakistan could be a terrorist production factory.

Islamabad's nuclear program is another leading concern, one of longstanding but continued importance, especially in view of recent revelations about the transfer of nuclear and missile technology to and from Pakistan. While Pakistan may (or may not) successfully manage its nuclear arms race with India, leakage of its nuclear expertise is a potentially destabilizing factor in other regions, notably northeast Asia (through ties to North Korea), the Persian Gulf area (through Saudi Arabia and Iran), and even the Middle East (through Libya and perhaps other countries).

The democratization of Pakistan also remains an American interest, although in a different way from in the 1980s. Then, democratization was seen as a threat to the military regime led by President Zia ul-Haq, who was only lightly pressed to civilianize his government. Today, the government of General Pervez Musharraf and its American supporters argue that democratization could bring incompetent politicians or radical Islamists to power. In the long term, a democratic Pakistan is desirable, but getting there might disrupt the state in the short term, with worse consequences than the continuation of a military-led establishment.

Pakistan's hostile relationship with India is also on the list of concerns because it impinges on both short- and long-term American interests. Besides having a desire to prevent another India-Pakistan war, Washington wants to maintain its excellent relations with India and has high hopes for wider strategic cooperation and stronger economic ties. The Bush administration skillfully preserved these ties even as it restored close relations with Islamabad. For the first time in decades, America has good relations with both South Asian states, but can this continue indefinitely? In other regions, the United States has had good relations with rivals (for example, Greece and Turkey), but usually when they were each part of a larger alliance framework, did not have nuclear weapons, and had not fought a war with each other for many decades. There is no overarching strategic framework for South Asia—and being against "terrorism" does not provide one.

Yet another concern is that Pakistan's identity as a moderate Muslim state is being challenged by Pakistan's own Islamists. They are stronger than ever after 10 years of foreign support from Saudi Arabia, Al Qaeda, and other Islamist groups and after 30 years of patronage by Pakistan's intelligence services. The Islamists oppose President Musharraf's cooperation with the United States and the US presence in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This has led some radical Muslims, notably the Al Qaeda leadership, to call for Musharraf's assassination and an Islamic revolution in Pakistan. How long can Pakistan remain a "moderate" state under Islamist attack amid domestic political disorder, and will these forces eventually sever the present relationship with Washington?

A long-term concern is that Pakistan might become a rogue state, a supporter of terrorism that already possesses weapons of mass destruction. To the degree that they subscribe to their own rhetoric, American policy makers must look beyond Al Qaeda to troubling developments within Pakistan and consider the possibility that Pakistan, an ally, might become a major threat to a number of American interests. The multi-billion-dollar 2003 US aid package nominally addresses domestic stability, but it is not large enough or structured in such a way as to demonstrate a long-term American commitment to a stable and progressive Pakistan. Policy makers in Islamabad, let alone many members of the establishment, are wary that their country might become America's next target when the current partnership ends.

GETTING PAKISTAN RIGHT

With America again assuming the role of Pakistan's chief external supporter, there is an opportunity to correct old mistakes. Getting the new relationship right might just bring Pakistan into the category of stable and relatively free states. Getting Pakistan wrong could accelerate movement toward authoritarianism, radical Islam, regional separatism, renewed war with India, or state failure. The ideal, of course, would be some low-cost, easy-to-implement strategy that would turn Pakistan into a reasonably democratic state enjoying good relations with its neighbors. However, there is no magic policy bullet, and the United States must balance competing interests, take account of the long and the short run, and recognize the dif-

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ficulty of fostering change in another country's fundamental institutions, all the while preparing for worst-case futures.

Pakistan's possible failure along one or more dimensions is a prospect that should sharpen American interest and focus efforts on prevention. This would mean moving beyond the headline issues of capturing Osama bin Laden, rounding up the remnants of Al Qaeda, and chastising Pakistan for its nuclear leakage and the growth of the madrassas (Islamic fundamentalist schools). These are urgent concerns, but the long-term problem is the domestic time-bomb ticking away in Pakistan society. Achieving short-term objectives, though important, will mean little if Pakistan were to evolve into a truly dangerous state or come apart, spewing nuclear technology and terrorists in every direction.

What possible policy alternatives can ensure that these long- and short-term interests will be maximized? Right now the United States is not inclined to pursue a broad policy of alliance, such as that followed from 1954 to 1962 and during the 1980s. Such a policy implies a tight linkage between the two countries, with Pakistan offering itself as a strategic asset for a larger American policy and, in turn, finding itself the recipient of significant economic and military aid.

The current relationship is best described as a partnership of uncertain duration, implying a joint objective, presumably the roundup of Al Qaeda and Taliban cadres, without the legal and strategic implications of an alliance. If the partnership remains limited, the exchange will be simple and straightforward: Pakistani cooperation in intelligence and military operations against terrorists would bring a quantity of economic and perhaps military assistance.

A broader partnership would be similar to what the British journalist Anatol Lieven terms a "management" strategy, in which Washington works with and through Pakistani governments in whatever form they take, seeking to shape their domestic as well as their foreign policies. Lieven argues that the United States cannot contemplate using force against Pakistan, nor can it escape the fact that Islamabad is central to the war against terrorism, so it must work with whatever Pakistani government comes to power.

PROBLEM OR PROJECT?

Most Pakistanis and some Americans believe that the present policy of partnership and engagement will give way to the historic default option: ignoring Pakistan. For part of the 1960s, much of the 1970s, and the first half of the 1990s, Washington had no Pakistan policy to speak of, either ignoring the country or focusing on a single issue, nuclear proliferation.

One could also foresee a policy of opposing Pakistan, to the point of forcing a regime change by diplomatic and economic pressure or even invasion. Although, as Lieven and others have noted, a nuclear-armed Pakistan would be a dangerous country to take action against, there might be circumstances—such as a civil war, or the existence of loose nuclear weapons—in which active opposition was the lesser danger.

Some policies can be ruled out in the short run. Currently, a sanction-oriented policy, in which economic and military aid was terminated and sanctions were imposed on Pakistan to punish it for its nuclear program, or for its ambivalent policies regarding terrorism, would be counterproductive to the extent that it would strengthen radical forces in the country. But such policies might make sense in the future, perhaps as contingencies should Pakistan's behavior threaten to damage vital American interests.

The "default" policy of ignoring Pakistan also seems unwise at this moment. One of Pakistan's greatest bargaining chips is the threat that it might just become a rogue state if its friends do not help it. This strategy—the suicide gambit—exaggerates both the vulnerability of Pakistan's moderate leadership and the danger of growing Islamic radicalism. But it underscores that American policy, the policies of other important states, and the policies of Pakistan itself need to regard the development of Pakistan as a long-term project, not merely a short-term problem.

DANGER SIGNS

Today, the two earlier alliances seem to be in rerun: according to "pragmatic" and "realistic" assessments of Pakistan, the man in power is America's best bet. Experts in the West, such as the journalist Robert Kaplan and former officials such as General Anthony C. Zinni, agree that Musharraf's importance lies not so much in his personal qualities but in the belief that "what would come after him would be a disaster." On the contrary, the potential for a radical leadership in the next four or five years, Islamic or otherwise, is low. Pakistan has a grace period of several years, perhaps more.

What is undeniable is that radical forces, especially among the Islamists, are growing, that social chaos and demographic pressures are mounting, and

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that many of Pakistan's liberals (or "mainstream" thinkers) are frustrated and may turn to radical Islam, since Marxism is no longer an option. Any change in the army's cohesion—unlikely, but not impossible—could bring forth a radical Pakistan.

Therefore, an optimal American policy would be to support the present regime, whether or not Musharraf heads it, but press Pakistan very hard for political, economic, and even ideological changes, including a new approach to India. During this period the United States should watch for several danger signs. If they appear, then it should start reconsidering the policy of helping Pakistan through a difficult time and look at other, more drastic options, such as allying with India and other states to contain a Pakistan that seems to be unable or unwilling to reform itself.

Over the next few years, some of these danger signs would include a failure to adopt a political timetable. In early 2004, President Musharraf claimed he would give up his army position by the end of the year. But he did not give it up, and has given no date as to when he might, saying that he will stay on as president for his full five-year term. There remains a danger that Musharraf will, like Ayub Khan and Zia ul-Haq, slip into personalized rule and not know when or how to give up power. He is not a truly exceptional person, and the best service he could do for his country would be to allow a system of constitutional checks and balances to emerge and to give up his official positions to qualified successors. Otherwise, Washington will be in the position of supporting an individual, when what Pakistan needs is to build institutional capabilities. One such capability is accountability for the significant amounts of aid now in the pipeline and planned for the future.

Washington, many Pakistanis say, likes to use their country like a condom, throwing it away when no longer needed.

Political repression and a new spell of martial law would represent another danger sign. Blocking secular, provincial, and ethnic channels of expression by a fresh ban on political activities would pry open the door for radical Islamists, who are adept at using the mosques and madrassas for recruitment and mobilization. Indeed, a lack of significant progress in educational reform would also be a negative sign. Without a transformed school system, the madrassas will continue to expand, spreading hatred of India, Israel, and the United States and miseducating their students.

An inability to confront domestic sectarian terrorist groups would give cause for concern. This is in Pakistan's vital interest and is a goal often proclaimed by the Pakistani leadership. If Islamabad is incapable of bringing violent Sunni and Shiite radicals under control, this is a particularly grim indicator that the ruling establishment is losing ground.

Other danger signs would include popular anger at Musharraf and the United States. The continuation of anti-Americanism in Pakistan for a few more years would be a sign that aid and the new political relationship with Pakistan are not working. The next generation of military officers, frustrated with Musharraf's secularism, somewhat more Islamized, and even more adamantly opposed to the United States, could produce an army chief who would play Islamic and anti-American cards.

Another major conflict with India could strengthen the hand of radical forces in Pakistan and might further weaken the army's now challenged reputation. It would also, of course, compel a fresh round of American intervention to prevent escalation to the nuclear level.

Finally, a lack of progress in Afghanistan would signal danger. The war in Afghanistan was a major reason for the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal's recent political success in Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). Elements of this multi-party Islamist coalition have ties with the Taliban and other extremist groups in these two provinces that border Afghanistan. A continuing US presence without tangible positive results for the Afghan people, or a civil war, will further intensify Pakistani grievances and fuel discontent with Washington and any government that supported it. Of special concern would be an alignment of Pashtun nationalism with radical Islamism. The Pashtuns are dominant in the NWFP and are Afghanistan's largest tribal group; an Islamist Pashtun movement might challenge the integrity of both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

For the United States, Pakistan is part problem and part solution. Washington has no option but to work with Pakistan in the short run, cajoling Islamabad to adopt policies that go beyond its short-term cooperation in the war against terrorism. However, America should be concerned about the deeper causes of Pakistan's malaise, lest the country

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become the kind of nuclear-armed monster state that its critics already think it is.

American policy needs to go beyond cooperation and encompass a strong dose of prevention. The cost of such a policy would be minimal but would have to do more than supply limited amounts of military equipment and an aid package that does not address Pakistan's underlying weaknesses. Debt relief is important but only buys time before the reckoning. An effective policy will require sustained attention, include assistance to Pakistan's weakened civilian institutions, especially education, and revive technical and other assistance schemes that helped Pakistan become a candidate for middle-income status 15 years ago. A policy of prevention will involve working closely with other states and would be welcomed by those Indians who also see a reasonably liberal, moderate Pakistan to be in India's interests.

This policy would also mean engagement with the idea of Pakistan. Washington has, once again, come to view Pakistan as a "moderate Muslim state" and a role model for other Muslim states. But the idea of a "moderate Muslim state" must have content. If the end goal is a liberal modern state, functioning in the global system, at peace with its neighbors, then there is a very long road ahead, with no assurance that either the Pakistani state or the Pakistani nation is willing and able to travel it.

Pakistani perspectives

For any policy to succeed, the US government will also have to understand Pakistani views toward America. These include a belief that America is a fickle and unreliable state. Washington, many Pakistanis say, likes to use their country like a condom, throwing it away when no longer needed. They also fear that Washington will choose New Delhi over Islamabad. Pakistan's establishment is confident that it can play on short American memories and a relative lack of knowledge about South Asia, keeping Washington thinking that "we are your best chance" for stability and strategic cooperation. Islamabad now raises the bogey of Islamic radicalism, just as it once talked about the international communist threat or the danger of expansionist Hindu India.

Pakistanis are expert at deciphering American interests and appealing to short-term American fears in the hope of establishing a relationship of mutual dependency in which Pakistani obligations are minimal while American ones are substantial. In the words of a young Pakistani woman, "Pakistani officials, like Pakistani beggars, become alert when they see Americans approaching." In dealing with Pakistan, the United States must also recognize that Islamabad may complain about being constrained by public opinion, but the government is what shaped that opinion over the years.

American officials must also remember that the elite public in Pakistan is deeply skeptical of the United States. Some of its Islamists are ideologically opposed to America, the left complains that the United States supports the establishment, and the establishment itself has long ceased to trust Washington. Post–9-11 harassment of and assaults on Pakistanis in the United States are widely publicized and discussed in Pakistan, and the Islamists cite them as incontrovertible evidence of American hostility. Almost all Pakistanis are deeply troubled by what they see as an American tilt toward Israel in the Middle East (which they compare with America's perceived tilt toward India against Pakistan), and regard the US invasion of Iraq as an anti-Muslim act, and potentially a model for an American attack on Pakistan itself.

As for knowledge about the United States, there are no functioning American information centers in Pakistan. With travel warnings to Pakistan having been in effect for years and terrorists having singled out Americans over the past decade, actual exposure to Americans is minimal.

Americans must remember that, although Pakistan will pursue its own vital interests as it sees them, an opportunity may exist to incrementally help shape Pakistan's future in a direction that is compatible with important US (and Pakistani) interests. Pakistan has demonstrated an ability to resist America in the case of its nuclear program, its provocative policy in Kashmir, its tolerance of domestic extremists, and its support for the Taliban. In each case Washington was unable to persuade Pakistan that these policies threatened vital Pakistani interests, as well as American ones. Before writing Pakistan off as the hopelessly failed state that its critics believe it to be, Washington may have one last opportunity to ensure that this troubled state will not become America's biggest foreign policy problem in the last half of this decade. ■

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