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Correcting America's Image Problem in Pakistan

Summary

- Despite receiving over \$15 billion in U.S. aid since 9/11, perceptions of America in Pakistan remain acutely negative.
- If Pakistanis continue to be opposed to U.S. policies, the Pakistani government will not be able to deliver on its promises, and U.S. initiatives in Pakistan will not produce desired outcomes.
- American and Pakistani governments have forged a rather opaque relationship which has not helped to cultivate popular support for policies across Pakistan. Instead, it has fostered an anti-U.S. sentiment in Pakistan that increasingly puts pressure on the government in Islamabad.
- U.S. policy must be fundamentally changed to turn around the anti-American outlook among Pakistanis. In order to do so, the official relationship needs to be more transparent; frequency of visits by U.S. officials ought to be reconsidered; 'image correcting aid' should be provided in addition to the long-term assistance; Pakistani citizens should be engaged through constant dialogue and debate on U.S.-Pakistan relations; and American and Pakistani officials should remain sensitive about the internal impact of their public statements and actions.

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Negative Perceptions of America in Pakistan

Pakistan is a critical ally in America's war effort in Afghanistan. Recognizing this importance, the United States has pumped more than \$15 billion in military and economic aid into Pakistan since September 11, 2001.¹ When it comes to popular perception, however, Pakistan continues to seethe with anti-U.S. sentiment. Polls consistently show that it is one of the most anti-American countries in the world; this outlook permeates all strata of society. A recent survey conducted by Pakistan's *Herald* news magazine finds tremendous antipathy toward U.S. policy in the region, even among Pakistan's youth.²

The outlook of Pakistanis toward the U.S. ought to be a matter of grave concern for American policymakers. With such outright rejection of a U.S. role in the region, it is virtually impossible to have sustained engagement over the long run. If this anti-American sentiment persists, the Pakistani government will not be able to deliver on its promises to the U.S. government, and U.S. initiatives in Pakistan will not produce desired outcomes. U.S. Ambassador in Pakistan Anne Patterson raised this issue in an interview with the *Herald*: "We don't want anti-Americanism to block our ability to get things done here.... to achieve our joint goals here, we need a certain level of political acceptance, that's just a fact."³

A Gross Miscalculation

Many within the American policy community argue that the anti-U.S. sentiment in Pakistan is grossly exaggerated. This may be true, but perceptions matter as much, if not more, than reality in such relationships. Interestingly, Pakistani and American policies in the past nine years have allowed these perceptions to go unchallenged. In fact, certain actions by both sides have further entrenched the mindset.

Since 9/11, bilateral relations have been opaque to a large extent. The understanding between the administrations of then-U.S. President George W. Bush and former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf was entirely different than what was conveyed to the people in both countries. The relationship was characterized by non-transparent arrangements for the transfer of Coalition Support Funds, while Pakistan provided the equally non-transparent transfer of detainees captured by Pakistani forces, and permitted the use of drones and Pakistani air bases, among other undeclared concessions. Because these arrangements were never debated in the public domain, they lacked popular buy-in. The Pakistani government's argument was that bringing this understanding out in the open was politically untenable. In effect, the message portrayed to the Pakistani people was that the U.S. was forcing Pakistan's hand. Meanwhile, the U.S. government's own policy at home was no different. It was unwilling to defend Pakistan and its policies whenever American media criticized Islamabad's role in the War on Terror or the dangers associated with this country.

The opaque relationship was based on the belief that as long as the two governments continued to cooperate as agreed, they could achieve their objectives irrespective of the negative public opinion. In retrospect, this was a gross miscalculation. Instead, it has pushed public sentiment in Pakistan to a point where official policy is increasingly constrained.

In 2009, the Obama administration came in to office having understood the need to change the arrangement. A major emphasis was placed on strategic communication and public relations in Pakistan and a number of initiatives were put in place. Yet, the fundamental problems pointed out here—the opacity of official dealings and many of the non-transparent arrangements—remain intact. While the present Pakistani government may not be explicitly denouncing U.S. policies, it still shies away from revealing its policy commitments to the U.S. Instead, its approach is denying a number of facts that it perceives as controversial. For example, the presence of private U.S. security companies had been denied for months and the substantial increase in U.S. diplomatic and non-diplomatic presence in Pakistan was shrouded in mystery. However, these facts are steadily uncovered by the Pakistani media, causing tremendous embarrassment for the administrations of Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and U.S. President Barack Obama.

Reversing the Tide

Policymakers in Washington must realize that maintaining a relationship with the Pakistani government and military without public acceptance is an unsustainable approach. Policy commitments agreed upon by the two governments must be publicly acknowledged. Granted, the inevitable political backlash on some of them will make the Pakistani authorities uneasy. If the Pakistani authorities can begin to explain the rationale for their policies and the benefits they bring to Pakistan, a gradual change in the public sentiment can be expected. A concerted effort can build support on issues such as the presence of U.S. personnel engaged in aid disbursement, the use of drones and air bases (if their success can be proven and compared to the alternatives), and Special Forces engaged in training Pakistanis. If these actions either violate commitments made by Pakistan or are fundamentally unacceptable to Pakistanis—or, for that matter, Americans—they need to be discontinued and alternatives devised.

The frequency of visits by American officials to Pakistan has caused much concern across Pakistani society for years. The media regularly flash news of high-ranking U.S. officials meeting various government and opposition officials on a regular basis. In an environment that lends itself to conspiracy theories, these high profile visits lead to much speculation and rumor. The most common conclusion is that American officials dictate actions to their Pakistani counterparts who in turn act as surrogates to their senior partners in the deal. Two actions are urgently needed. First, both governments need to reassess the utility of these meetings and rationalize them. It may well be that the objectives of the relationship can still be achieved without meeting physically on such a frequent basis. Second, both U.S. and Pakistani authorities need to explain clearly the reasons for these visits and be prepared to answer queries and concerns. Unexplained, the meetings convey a sense of secrecy and raise suspicions in the minds of Pakistanis.

In addition, a more nuanced view of U.S. economic assistance and its possible dividends is required. There ought to be a distinction between aid aimed at improving Pakistan's long-term socioeconomic wellbeing and short term assistance which has an immediate impact on America's image in Pakistan. Big ticket, high visibility initiatives like dams and major infrastructure projects are crucial for Pakistan but have little to do with image correction now. My recent discussions with a broad cross section of urban Pakistanis suggest that people in Pakistan are more likely to appreciate uninterrupted electricity supply than investment in dams, they would prefer a US signature in relief and rehabilitation in conflict stricken areas over policies that seek sustainable development and trade options in the coming years, and direct education scholarships will excite the poor more than the elusive quest for education reform. The point here is not to discourage assistance which would reap dividends over the long run—these are obviously crucial. Rather, it is to highlight that these cannot be conceived as image correcting measures; such measures inevitably have to be ones that produce tangible gains for people immediately, even if the gains are relatively small and have little value beyond the short term. Consider that the only time anti-Americanism experienced a steep decline in the past decade was when American Chinook helicopters facilitated the 2005 post-earthquake relief efforts in northern Pakistan.

For now, the U.S. ought to consider putting its signature on measures such as providing education scholarships in substantial numbers, undertaking visible relief and rehabilitation efforts in the conflict stricken areas, providing special work visas to a substantial proportion of the employable workforce in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and investing in projects such as mid-sized barge-mounted power plants to feed Karachi's industrial activity, among many other assistance measures aimed specifically at image correction.

The recent, catastrophic floods in Pakistan also provide an obvious opportunity for the U.S. to reach out to the people of Pakistan and demonstrate the benefits of a strong bilateral relationship. The initial response by the U.S.—which, as of August 17, has included upwards of 20 helicopters for various relief activities and providing nearly \$100 million in aid—is heartening but needs to be enhanced substantially if the effort is to stand out.

Generally, in terms of long-term aid provisions, Washington needs to accept the limits of its ability to monitor aid disbursement and ensure its efficient spending in Pakistan. Any failure will inevitably lead to a popular backlash, and the U.S. would again be blamed for providing aid that does not positively affect Pakistanis.

It may therefore be more prudent to invert the model. The onus of responsibility needs to be transferred to the Pakistani government. The U.S. could publically announce that aid is being directly transferred to the Pakistani authorities who will decide on its disbursement and that any success or failure would be the home government's responsibility. Of course, such an approach would require convincing the U.S. Congress to accept the inevitable corruption, inefficiencies,

pilferage and such as a *fait accompli*. It would also require removing any American presence that could suggest the U.S. is dictating aid disbursement decisions to Pakistan. Without the option to shift the blame to the U.S., it could very well bring out the best in Pakistani institutions.

Irrespective of the acutely negative Pakistani perception of the U.S., the public relations strategy should be one of constant engagement. The U.S. mission in Islamabad operates under a tremendous handicap in that its mobility is all but neutralized due to security considerations. Its interaction is therefore limited to an extremely small cross section of society, largely Pakistani elite who can hardly claim to represent the mainstream Pakistani view. As major Pakistani cities have fallen prey to terrorist violence since 2007, the outreach has been further curtailed. Simultaneously, as anti-Americanism has escalated, interaction has become increasingly unpleasant and at times outright hostile. The natural tendency in such circumstances is to pull back and try and influence events indirectly—without having to engage hostile segments of society. The requirement more than ever is precisely the opposite.

The contours of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship need to be unpacked in intellectual discourses through seminars and meetings. Besides the Pakistani opinion-makers, the country's youth in universities and schools and the media are the most important actors and need to be lured into constant dialogue. The value-added from such an exercise is well established. After all, one of the most successful visits—judged by the tone of the press coverage and the general sense on the Pakistani street—by an American official was Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's October 2009 trip. The principal reason was her decision to engage segments of Pakistani society otherwise believed to be pathologically opposed to virtually all U.S. actions.

Granted, the recommended strategy will be highly unpleasant for those who implement it. Further, on the face of it, the initial phases will seem counterproductive as these engagements end in heated exchanges and negative press coverage. Yet, over time, if genuine dialogue and debate can become a regular feature, a more nuanced view of the relationship will start to develop.

Finally, U.S. and Pakistani officials have to remain extremely sensitive what they say about the other, and how they say it. Furthermore, the constant negative publicity about Pakistan in the U.S. press—when left unchallenged by U.S. officials—antagonizes Pakistanis. Meanwhile, Pakistan's reluctance to defend their partnership with the U.S. propagates misinformed and exaggerated stories about U.S. objectives and activities. Here, the responsibility lies with Islamabad. Washington must nudge its partners in Islamabad to rid itself of the tendency to deflect criticism for unpopular policies toward the U.S. Meanwhile, Islamabad's argument that doing so is necessary to retain credibility—and by extension, strengthen the civilian government—is hardly tenable. As sincere partners, the authorities must make an effort to rebut misinformation about the American role in Pakistan by owning up to their own policy choices and presenting hard facts where possible to neutralize any baseless allegations or exaggerations about American presence.

A Final Word

Some of the recommendations put forth here may come across as radical in light of present policies, and may seem virtually impossible to implement. This only points to the difficulty of the task ahead if the Pak-U.S. relationship is to be sustained. Shying away from adopting a more transparent course may seem easier and allow government-to-government relations to remain intact for now, but it directly undermines the long-term sustainability of the relationship. The latter requires public acceptance of policies; its absence will sooner or later constrain the governments to a point that the relationship will be rendered meaningless. We are already heading in that direction.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This report draws upon the author's discussions with a large cross section of Pakistani opinion-makers during his four visits to the country in 2010. The report is also informed by USIP's experience in the field in Pakistan. The Institute's Pakistan program has initiated an event series whereby seminars and roundtables on issues of interest to the U.S.-Pakistan bilateral relationship are periodically held throughout Pakistani cities. Apart from generating a better understanding of Pakistani opinion, these activities further USIP's goal to facilitate sustained dialogue with various segments of the Pakistani population.

Endnotes

1. Katie Paul. "About Those Billions." *Newsweek*, October 21, 2009 (Accessible at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/218932>).
2. "Youth Speak." *Herald*, January 2010.
3. Umer Farooq and Madiha Sattar. "We Don't Need to be Loved." *Herald*, October 2009.



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