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The Crisis in United States-Pakistan Relations: An Alliance Unstuck?

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*'I gave her cakes,
I gave her wine,
I gave her sugar candy,
But oh, the little naughty girl,
She asked me for some brandy.'*

- Mary Shelley

The United States (US)-Pakistan relations have had a long history of closeness and warmth. For a variety of reasons their traditional understandings now run the risk of becoming unstuck. Each side feels the other is making unreasonable demands. Their alliance must be mended prior to the resolution of the Afghanistan imbroglio. For this to happen, certain initiatives will need to be undertaken. The US is better placed to lead the way. This essay examines the lead-up to the current impasse and makes some recommendations designed to cut the Gordian knot.

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Introduction

Recently the US Embassy in Pakistan, as a part of a cultural offensive staged the Neil Simon's play, 'The Odd Couple'. In many ways the title is an apt description of their current bilateral relationship. Almost since the beginning of the Cold War, the US and Pakistan have been formal allies and close friends. The two have been partners in defence pacts such as CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) and SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization). It was from Pakistani soil that the U-2 US spy aircraft, flown by Gary Powers took off, that was shot down over the Soviet Union causing Nikita Krushchev to threaten Pakistan with possible nuclear strike. Indeed, Pakistan was the conduit that linked the US with China during the Richard Nixon era. Later Pakistan was the key US ally in driving out the Soviets from Afghanistan. Alas, all that now is history and the halcyon days of ardour are over. The treaties that bind them still exist, but may not be worth much more than the paper they are written on. Can it be good for either? This essay will argue that it is clearly not.

The Alliance Now

The current politico-economic situation in the US does convey an impression that any political gains accruing to President Barack Obama was awfully short lived. For starters, the Arab spring had already rendered Osama bin Laden passé, and he was already been seen by those he sought to woo as not having delivered.² But once his hideout was identified by the US inaction would have also had a huge negative political impact. But the manner in which it was carried out, unbeknownst to the Pakistanis, ignited the flames of white hot anger in Pakistan. To be fair to Obama, he may have acted as deemed appropriate at that time, but the fall-outs of such decisions are often unpredictable, though even if he had foreseen it, circumstances would not have allowed him to act any differently.

What could have been different, and at least in Pakistani eyes, preventable, though was the decision to allow Admiral Mike Mullen, an uniformed official, to launch a series of attacks through statements on Pakistan, its all-powerful army, and its intelligence services, the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence). Particularly his statement before the Congressional Committee that the ISI is an arm of the Haqqani network, a 'terrorist organisation that is killing Americans in Afghanistan' was seen in Pakistan as an 'extraordinary declaration of intent to wage war'.³ As things stand now, according to a Pew research centre poll, only 12 per cent of

² Gilles Kepel, 'Bin Laden was dead already', *International Herald Tribune* (9 May 2011).

³ Najam Sethi, 'US-Pak Relations: Roadblocks ahead', *Friday Times* (30 September - 6 October 2011), Vol. xxiii, No.33. <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/beta2/tft/article.php?issue=20110930&page=1>. Accessed on 1 Oct 2011.

Pakistanis have a favourable view of the US, and 69 per cent see that country as an ‘enemy’, a far-cry from the salad days of camaraderie.⁴

The Pakistanis are reacting with a flurry of activity that is almost leading to a consolidation of the Pakistani position against the US. Indeed anti-Americanism seems to be the glue that ties the government, the opposition, the army and swathes of public opinion in an otherwise deeply divided society. The US gripe has been that Pakistan is not acting sufficiently against the Haqqani network sitting in North Waziristan, allowing it to carry out raids against western forces in Afghanistan. Pakistan, which needs the Haqqanis for a post-US withdrawal Afghanistan fights shy of such action, arguing that its forces are far too stretched. Yet Pakistan will not allow US hot pursuit into its territory, and now with public ire so high, is unable to do so. Even the earlier ‘nudge and a wink’ consent to US drone strikes against the extremists in Pakistani territory is likely to be withdrawn, though it might not put an end to it entirely. The great danger is what is now yet unthinkable, the possibility of an open armed conflict between Pakistan and the US.

Already the Pakistan government is engaged in a series of actions designed to marshal local and foreign support. After a recent visit by the Chinese Vice Premier Meng Jianzhu, The Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani (though not Meng) declared that ‘China categorically supports Pakistan’s efforts to uphold its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity’, at the same time severely warning the US against any further cross-border raids.⁵

US-Pakistan Need Each Other

This burgeoning conflict is not heading anywhere that will be to the advantage of either.⁶ The truth is that the US and Pakistan both need each other. The problem is once a trend obtains momentum in international relations and a flow of negative events are allowed to continue, they run the risk of becoming an unstoppable torrent. This is the simple explanation of many an avoidable war in history. Pakistan will perhaps seek to create a crescent of cooperation, that might link three Muslim countries, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey - old allies who despite some contemporary differences (such as Iran being Shia, and Pakistan and Turkey, Sunni) might see greater benefits in forging closer, even in a loose alliance that ties them with China.⁷ It would surely not be in Washington’s interest to leave open such a possibility on the

⁴ *Khaleej Times* (30 September 2011).

⁵ ‘Pakistan-US tensions spiraling into crisis’, *Straits Times* (29 September 2011).

⁶ See, Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury, ‘The US-Pak Relationship : A Complex but Categorical Imperative’, ISAS Brief No. 205, 23 June 2011.

⁷ At this time there is concern in the West with Iran’s nuclear programme. The West is also somewhat wary of Turkey’s assertive policies in the Middle East.

eve of its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Also the US will become focused on the Presidential elections next year which could leave in insufficient time or energy for additional worries in this region.

This is not the time for the US to target Pakistan with punitive legislations, as in that country the relevant pressure and power groups may not be any a position for some time yet to formulate and implement complex policies in a coordinated and calibrated fashion.

Perceived desperate situations could advertently or inadvertently lead to desperate reactions. It is also a country of nearly 700,000 strong conventional army and possibly 105 or so, and counting, nuclear warheads. This would call for extreme circumspection. To the extent possible, Pakistan should not be driven to a situation where it may feel compelled or obliged to react in a destabilising mode. It would be important for the West in general and the US in particular to devise policies addressing the key constituencies within Pakistan, even if necessary, separately. This would require a high degree of skill and sophistication, but one that the world's only superpower should be capable of.

All elements within Pakistan should also realise that a break with the US, or the West in the way it appears to be headed, cannot be to their advantage. Obviously Pakistan would need to put its house in order and will require the West's support to do so. Pakistan needs to rebuild itself from the current state of chaos and will require the billions of dollars that it receives from the US, which China would not be in a position to provide. The intellectual and ideological linkages with the West for the key categories within the Pakistani community is too intricate to be eliminated without tumultuous and destabilising social upheavals.

Pakistan in the 1960s was one of the most rapidly progressing developing countries in the world, and has the potentials to return to that status. That country will need to marshal all its resources, internal and external, to battle the scourge of extremism at present before it can poise itself to achieve other goals. Indeed, its closest friend, China, would also want that. Pakistan would do China no favour by forcing it to make choices between it and the US, for which China may not be ready. Having to make such choices may not be in consonance with its interests as perceived at this point by Beijing.

The relations between President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan and Pakistan has also reached its nadir, particularly following the slaying in Kabul last month of former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, who was to have led the negotiations with the Taliban on behalf of Karzai. Afghan officials pointed fingers at Pakistan, but Islamabad rejected the accusations in the strongest terms, calling them 'baseless'.⁸ Karzai has already cancelled a scheduled

⁸ Alex Roderiguez and Aimal Yaqubi, 'Pakistan rejects claim of ISI role in Afghan's assassination', *Los Angeles Times* (2 October 2011).

trilateral meeting with the US and Pakistan this month, called off any talks with the Taliban, and decided to go on a trip to India, ‘Pakistan’s nemesis’.⁹ It is certain, therefore, there is rough time ahead for all concerned with regard to the future of Afghanistan.

What is to be Done

But right now, however, the priority should be the mending of fences between the US and Pakistan, even before the future of Afghanistan is contemplated. Unless there is progress on the first, none can logically be expected on the second. First and foremost there must be calm between Washington and Islamabad, and all mutual ‘name-calling’ must cease. It is absolutely essential that the temperature be lowered. The US, as the larger and more powerful partner, may need to take the lead in this. Second, a mechanism must immediately be set up to take the initiative in establishing some ‘confidence-building measures’. It might be useful for Washington to designate someone outside the Administration, yet senior enough to wield influence over it, and non-controversial and respected in Pakistan, to initiate a series of contacts. Former President Jimmy Carter could be a possibility.

Conclusion

The age-old US-Pakistan alliance is in tatters. It requires to be mended, for neither protagonist can afford to allow it to become unstuck totally. The resolution of the Afghan imbroglio is dependent on it and also the stability of the broader region. The current bilateral travails between them will not disappear without focused and sustained efforts. As the Talmud says, just because there is a problem does not mean there is a solution. Nor does it imply endeavours should not be made towards that goal either.

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⁹ Dion Nassenbaum and Maria Abi-Habib, ‘Pakistan blamed for envoy’s killing’, *Wall Street Journal* (3 October 2011).