

POLICY BRIEF

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ENGAGING PAKISTAN

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Pakistan is a critical player in international efforts to counter global and regional terrorist groups and stabilise the situation in Afghanistan. But the West's increasingly difficult relationship with Pakistan is damaging its ability to work effectively with Islamabad to achieve critical objectives in Afghanistan and in the fight against terrorism more broadly.

One element in this problematic relationship has been a growing mutual suspicion and animosity. In particular, many members of the Pakistani elite believe that the West has unrealistic expectations of what Pakistan can do vis-à-vis Afghanistan and in the fight against terrorism, and that the West does not take Pakistani views or interests into account. Such perceptions will intensify in the aftermath of the November Mumbai terrorist attack making counter-terrorism cooperation with Pakistan even more difficult.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

The West needs to build a new, broader and more sustainable engagement with Pakistan. One key element would be to expand the bases for the West's engagement with Pakistan beyond its historical focus on senior figures in Pakistan's military and intelligence services.

A small but useful step in this process would be for Australia to launch a second-track dialogue engaging more diverse elements in Pakistani society, including civilian political representatives, academics, businesspeople, civil society and the media.

Such exchanges would complement and feed into the existing official contacts and assist the development of policy in areas critical to Australia, Pakistan and the international community. It would also contribute to the broader effort that is needed to break down mutual suspicion and misunderstanding between Pakistan and the West.



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The late November terror attacks in Mumbai have once again thrown the spotlight onto Pakistan. The country had already been struggling with growing international pressure over the safe haven and support that the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan and international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda were obtaining in Pakistan's troubled Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and North West Frontier Province. Claims that the Mumbai attacks were carried out by Pakistani nationals, perhaps linked to the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), will place even more pressure on Islamabad.

The West's options for forcing nuclear-armed Pakistan to be more responsive to international demands on these issues, however, are limited. The West will rightly demand a greater effort by Pakistan to eradicate groups like the LeT as well as to weed out those elements within its intelligence services that lend support to them. Yet it will also need to protect a civilian government that is still in its infancy and is faced with multiple crises, from terrorism to a rapidly failing economy.

Against this background the goal of this policy brief is not to suggest any silver bullet solution to this challenge, but rather to make a more modest suggestion about a small contribution Australia could make toward building a more durable and productive relationship with Pakistan. Attacks like those in Mumbai will necessarily focus attention on Pakistan's military and intelligence elite. But as this policy brief will argue, once the dust settles, a broader engagement with Pakistani society will also be needed.

For too long the West's relationship with Pakistan has been defined by a focus on Pakistan's strongest state institution – the army – largely to the exclusion of other sections of society. But the kinds of actions that Pakistani authorities need to undertake to fight terrorism and extremism over the longer term require broad support from Pakistani society, more so since the election of a civilian government in 2008. Today, many segments of Pakistani opinion – including ones normally well disposed to the West – believe that the West has unrealistic expectations of what Pakistan can do vis-à-vis Afghanistan and in the fight against terrorism and that it does not take Pakistani views or interests into account. In the wake of the Mumbai attacks it will be doubly important to ensure that these segments of Pakistani opinion do not feel even more isolated from and resentful toward the outside world.

The Australian Government has been looking at ways to enhance bilateral ties with Pakistan, an aim, driven for the most part by counter-terrorism and Afghanistan. Unsurprisingly, the focus has largely been on increasing military and intelligence connections and support. While focusing on counter-terrorism measures may help Pakistan deal with Islamic extremists and insurgents in the short term, it will, nevertheless, be essential for Australia to broaden its engagement with the Pakistani elite and non-officials if it wishes to develop a more fruitful and sustainable relationship in the long term. Put differently, unless Pakistani perspectives and concerns are heard and understood, bilateral relations will remain weak and shallow. In broadening its engagement with Pakistan, Australia might also help improve the West's stumbling relations with this critical country.

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Pakistan – why it matters

With some 165 million people, Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world. By 2050 it is estimated that it will have over 300 million inhabitants, making it the biggest Muslim nation (ahead of Indonesia) and the fourth most populous country in the world after India, China and the United States.¹

So in size alone Pakistan is a country whose voice needs to be heard. But there are four geopolitical reasons why Pakistan is critically important to the world.

First, and most obviously, Pakistan has a pivotal role to play in the ‘War on Terror’. Today al-Qaeda operatives continue to reside in western Pakistan’s tribal areas. While Pakistan has captured several high-value al-Qaeda operatives in the last seven years, many are still on the loose, including Osama Bin Laden and his deputy, Ayyman al-Zawahiri. Pakistan also remains a major training ground for terrorists conducting operations overseas. The majority of the terrorists involved in the London bombing of 7 July 2005 and the attempted attack two weeks later had been trained in Pakistan.

Second, Pakistan’s location next to Afghanistan and historical involvement in that country make it a critical player in efforts to stabilise the country and to ensure that it does not return to being an operating base for extremists. In particular, the Taliban’s safe havens in Pakistan’s tribal areas have made it possible for these armed groups to sustain their insurgency against US and NATO-led forces. Until these safe havens are eradicated

permanently, Coalition forces will be hard-pressed to stabilise Afghanistan.²

But even without the ‘War on Terror’ and the war in Afghanistan, Pakistan would be important given its strategic location and its possession of nuclear weapons. Pakistan is strategically located at the crossroads of South Asia, the Middle East and Central Asia, making it a pivotal player in a region with significant economic potential, particularly in the exploitation and transportation of oil and gas from central Asia and Iran to India and beyond. Unfortunately, it is also located in a region which has two unresolved conflicts – Kashmir and Afghanistan – and has a direct stake in the outcome of both. In the case of Kashmir – which has been a fraught issue between India and Pakistan for over 60 years – Pakistan is directly involved, having gone to war with India over this Muslim-majority disputed territory in 1948, 1965 and 1999. And while there have been bilateral discussions since 2002, no one expects an early breakthrough.

Third, Pakistan, like India, has been a member of the nuclear club since 1998, when they both detonated nuclear devices. Neither Pakistan nor India is signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), nor is there any indication that they will join. Compounding the nuclearisation of South Asia is the development by both Pakistan and India of missiles able to deliver nuclear warheads over a distance of well over 1,000 kilometres. China and North Korea heavily assisted Pakistan in the development of some of its missiles. In return, Dr A.Q. Khan, ‘father of Pakistan’s nuclear bomb’, passed on nuclear weapons know-how to Pyongyang. While Dr

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A. Q. Khan has acknowledged that through his network he also shared Pakistan's knowledge of nuclear-weapons with Iran and Libya, the full extent of his proliferation activities remains unclear.

Pakistan's difficult relations with the West

Since independence in 1947, relations between Pakistan and the West have never been warm. Probably the single most important factor has been the fact that Pakistan and the West, principally the United States, entered into the bilateral relationship for different reasons: Pakistan joined US-led alliances –the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) - as an insurance policy in its confrontation with India. Meanwhile, the United States saw Pakistan as yet another sentry post in its Cold War containment of the Soviet Union. Not surprisingly, therefore, these differing motivations often begat mutual disappointment.

During the brief 1962 Indo-Chinese border war, the US administration provided weapons to India without first consulting Pakistan, as it had previously agreed. Similarly, during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War, the US stopped all shipments of military aid to both countries. This hurt Pakistan much more than India, as the former was wholly dependent on the United States for weapons supplies. In 1971, when India and Pakistan once again fought, this time mainly in East Pakistan, the United States did send an aircraft carrier into the Bay of Bengal. But this was in reaction to India's decision to sign a Friendship Treaty with the USSR. In any case, it did not deter India from dismembering Pakistan, leading to the creation of Bangladesh. For the next few years, relations with the West

went into a freeze, especially under the left-leaning government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

However, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, Pakistan became a critical player in Washington's global game. Ignoring the fact that yet again another general (Zia-ul-Haq) had taken over the reins of power and had executed the elected prime minister (Bhutto) on dubious charges, the US decided that Pakistan had an important 'frontline' role to play in helping the West counter the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and stopping them from potentially obtaining a warm-water port on the Indian ocean. Billions of dollars worth of military and economic aid poured in, and Afghan and Muslim *mujahideen* were armed and supported by the West and the Arab Gulf states. But when the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, Pakistan was once again forgotten, with relations hitting rock bottom following Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998.

Relations were more or less revived in the wake of al-Qaeda's 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. Pakistan once again became a 'frontline' state, with Washington providing Pakistan with over US\$10 billion worth of economic and military aid and granting it major non-NATO ally status. And yet, instead of being a bulwark against jihadists, Pakistan has become the soft underbelly of the West's fight against terrorism. On the one hand the Pakistan state, led until recently by former Army Chief of Staff General Musharraf, has been assisting the US-led coalition fight the terrorists, including losing over 1000 military personnel in the process. On the other hand, elements of its powerful Inter-Services Intelligence have been providing back-

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channel support to the Taliban and other Afghan groups hiding in Pakistan.³

This tension between Pakistan and the West is compounded by the reality that Islamabad's regional interests do not sit comfortably with those of the West. The cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy has been how it can most effectively counter New Delhi's power, and since 2001 Afghanistan has increased in importance in this 60-year old confrontation. Pakistan has always seen Afghanistan as providing it with the vital 'strategic depth' it needs in this confrontation. But with India's substantial involvement in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, Islamabad is increasingly feeling encircled by its arch-enemy.

Given Islamabad's regional interests, Washington's decision to upgrade its relationship with India, including signing a US-India nuclear deal in 2006, compounded an already difficult Pakistani relationship with the United States. The Bush administration has also publicly declared that it wants to help India become a 'world power'.⁴ Having officially ended its support for the Taliban after 9/11 and joined the 'War on Terror' at great political cost at home, Pakistan feels (once again) betrayed by Washington. Its perception is that the United States sides with Pakistan only when it suits it; otherwise it supports New Delhi.

Australian engagement

The instrumentalist and ad hoc nature of the West's relations with Pakistan has made Pakistanis wary of the West's intentions towards them and suspicious of the sincerity of its long-term commitment to that country's

stability and development. This apprehension has in turn made it difficult to tackle some of the most pressing problems of vital interest to the West, notably the war in Afghanistan and terrorism. There are no shortcuts to building a more durable relationship, but one initial, useful and relatively low-cost step would be an effort to engage broadly with key elements of Pakistani society through a second-track dialogue – and it is here that Australia could play a role.

Currently, the Australian Government is keen to expand bilateral relations with Pakistan, largely as a function of security concerns already mentioned. Australia's total aid to Pakistan for 2008-09 will be slightly over A\$30 million, an increase of 20 per cent on the previous year. Australia has also offered to provide counter-insurgency training: in a recent trip to Pakistan, the Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, invited Pakistan to observe counter-insurgency training run by the Australian Special Command.

This increased Australian Government investment should be complemented by broader non-official engagement with sections of Pakistani society beyond the West's traditional interlocutors. Indeed, given that Australia comes to the Pakistan relationship with relatively little political baggage or perceived agenda, it may be better placed than others to seek a greater engagement with Pakistan. Conducted under the Chatham House rule, an annual one or two-day meeting would provide an opportunity to have a frank discussion of common concerns. More importantly, such a dialogue would be a useful vehicle for gaining insights into a much broader range of Pakistani opinion.

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Participants from the Pakistani side would include representatives of think tanks, academic institutions, media, business and other civil society representatives. Topics would include both key strategic issues, such as Afghanistan and counter-terrorism, but also other areas upon which bilateral cooperation might be expanded, including education, the environment (water management, agriculture), governance and economic development. Indeed, given the substantially increased aid funding, a broader engagement with civil society to discuss those areas that might be best targeted for assistance seems even more warranted.

A bilateral dialogue would also provide an important mechanism to feed fresh ideas into policy-making circles in both countries. While government representatives would be, by definition, excluded from a second-track dialogue (other than perhaps in a personal capacity), there would need to be some mechanism to communicate ideas and outcomes to officials. This could be done either through an outcomes report or attendance by government representatives as observers. Eventually such a second track process could conceivably become a one and a half-track process - that is, one in which government officials speaking in their private capacity would be included in the meeting.

Annual meetings should alternate between Australia and Pakistan. This would also provide visiting delegation members with an opportunity to meet parliamentarians, government officials and academics and conduct media interviews. In addition to ensuring that participants remained in close contact with one another between sessions, delegation members would be encouraged to

draft and circulate discussion papers in preparation for the next meeting; to follow up recommendations made at the previous meeting; to publish the papers delivered at the previous meeting; and to interact frequently with the media, including publishing articles and giving interviews, to ensure good coverage of issues of bilateral interest.

With a new president and an elected civilian government in Pakistan, an opportunity exists for the Australian Government to expand and deepen its bilateral relationship, as it has indicated it wishes to do. And as a member of the 'Friends of Pakistan' – a grouping of major donors, Australia has a genuine interest in further engaging with Pakistan. The establishment of this second-track dialogue would be an important building block in broadening this relationship, assisting in shaping government policy, but also contributing to a broader Western effort to put its engagement with Pakistan on a sounder footing.

NOTES

¹ *The World in 2009*, The Economist Newspaper Limited, 2009, p 16.

² According to a recent study, only approximately 40% of insurrections have been won by the government when the guerrilla group is able to regroup, train and recruit across the border. Seth G Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, CA 2008, p 22.

³ Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, 'Pakistanis Aided Attack in Kabul', U.S. Officials Say, *The New York Times*, 1 August 2008, p 5.

⁴ Gopal Ratnam, US Vows to Make India 'World Power', *Defense News*, 4 April 2005, p 5.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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