

Richard Holbrooke battled for Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

No American has tried to ease the fears, apprehensions, doubts, conspiracy theories, ill informed views and truths of Pakistanis towards the US and its policies than Richard Holbrooke. His death is a tragedy for American diplomacy, but much more so for Pakistan, because whether you liked him or disliked him, there is no denying that in the last two years, he constantly battled for Pakistan. "My job is to improve relations and make friends with Pakistan and Pakistanis," he had said repeatedly, when he was reminded of Pakistan's support for the Taliban or its refusal to wipe out terrorists from North Waziristan.

The image of Holbrooke wading through floodwater, distributing relief goods to flood victims - not once but repeatedly at the ripe old age of 68 - is an indelible image and one that our own much younger leaders barely ever replicated. He pushed for US helicopters to be deployed in Pakistan for the flood victims, he pushed for more aid money for Pakistan from a reluctant US Congress, he helped start the strategic dialogue on a dozen different issue which will be his lasting legacy and he also pushed Pakistan and especially the army to change its ways and mindset so that his job in the Congress and within the administration cabinet could be easier.

Under the proverbial cover of national interest, we never made life easier for him or for ourselves by accepting the new realities of terrorism, a collapsing economy and lack of political leadership that we were confronted with. He made it clear that he was representing US national interests, but was convinced there could be much greater convergence on two parallel mindsets rather than confrontation.

At times, Holbrooke may have been aggressive and pushy, loud and boisterous, too ultra-American, too New York, someone who did not understand our culture and its nuances, but he bought for the first time after the preferred ignorance of the Bush administration and its lackadaisical love affair with General (r) Musharraf, a strategic vision to the US-Pakistan relationship.

He thought Pakistan was important for its own sake, not because US troops wanted to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan or exit from that country or that Pakistan should make peace with India so that India could become the gendarme of the region. He recognised the deep feelings of mistrust and ambivalence that existed in Pakistan towards the US and wanted to make up for past mistakes of the US, which both he and Hillary Clinton constantly recognised and openly spoke about. He knew better than anyone in the US administration that diplomacy makes a difference when diplomats deal with the realities on the ground and not a preconceived image of what should be.

We should remember that all this time, Holbrooke battled the odds back in Washington. The Obama administration was and is heavily divided between the Obama-controlled White House, the Hillary Clinton-controlled State Department in which he was her key adviser on global issues and the all-powerful Pentagon that really dictated policy on Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Not to speak of a Congress that even when it was Democratic-controlled kept asking awkward questions about more money or arms for Pakistan and kept urging for conditioned aid that Holbrooke opposed.

Holbrooke was a pain in the arse for many of these power centres who did not like his attempts to bridge the vast differences in US policy and decision-making. At times, he was ignored by the White House or the Pentagon. At other times, he was castigated by the Congress for spending too much money in Pakistan without guarantees that Pakistan would change its policies. The Pakistani establishment knew these weaknesses and divisions within the American power structure and played them up to its own advantage. Unfortunately, at times, they ceased taking Holbrooke seriously - even though he was the only figure batting for Pakistan.

Holbrooke served in Vietnam the most imperial of imperial wars the US fought in the 20th century, but ultimately he was a peacemaker, first in the former Yugoslavia and then he hoped to make peace in Afghanistan. It is a tragedy that he died before he could achieve that. And Pakistanis should remember that they have lost a friend and whoever replaces him will never quite measure up.

The writer is a veteran journalist.