

## The U.S.-Pakistan Relationship in the Year Ahead

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In the past six months, a series of major incidents between the United States and Pakistan has brought their relationship to a new low. Even Pakistan's longstanding allies and European aid donors are increasingly at odds with Islamabad's current foreign policy. These tensions have Pakistani civilians feeling as if their country is at war with the world.

Although all of Pakistan's international relationships are important, it is the one with the United States that is most critical to its future stability as well as the maintenance of peace in South Asia. The 60-year alliance between the United States and Pakistan is deteriorating rapidly.[1] A key question for the year 2012 will be whether the United States and Pakistan can rebuild a much abused relationship.

This article will review the key incidents that led to the worsening of relations in 2011, identify some U.S. missteps, warn of a number of flashpoints that could occur in 2012, and finally offer critical suggestions for how the U.S.-Pakistan relationship can be resuscitated in the months ahead.

### The Year 2011 in Review: The Fracturing U.S.-Pakistan Alliance

The May 2011 killing of al-Qa`ida leader Usama bin Ladin by U.S. Special Operations Forces in Abbottabad, close to a Pakistani military base, humiliated the Pakistan Army. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has avoided the question of whether it was complicit in hiding Bin Ladin, or merely incompetent in not discovering the al-Qa`ida chief earlier. Instead, it has beat the drum of protecting the country's sovereignty on account of repeated U.S. "aggression." By November 26, 2011, when 24 Pakistani soldiers were killed by U.S. helicopters and fighters jets in Pakistani territory at a checkpoint on the Afghan border, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship had deteriorated dramatically.[2] The United States had failed to convince the Pakistan Army to rein in the Taliban's Haqqani network, and Pakistan now felt it was being targeted by the United States deliberately in retaliation.

At home, the Pakistan Army's image was dented by the killing of Bin Ladin in Abbottabad and the Pakistani Taliban attack on the Karachi naval base. Both incidents highlighted the military's failure to provide security—in the first instance, a U.S. military force violated Pakistan's sovereignty undetected; in the second, a band of Pakistani Taliban fighters breached one of the country's most secure military facilities.

Due to these two embarrassments, Pakistan's military went on a domestic offensive by allowing and encouraging a wave of anti-Americanism to sweep the country and by depicting itself as a victim of U.S. machinations. Pakistan's military manipulated the local media, allowed banned Islamic extremist parties to hold rallies in the streets, and persuaded parliament to defend the army's position. As each crisis point with the United States played out, the military ensured that Pakistan's elected, civilian government was sitting under a cloud of uncertainty and paralysis regarding its tenure and longevity. Yet it is also true that on the street and among the army rank-and-file, anti-Americanism is rampant to the point that younger army officers are demanding that General Ashfaq Parvez Kiyani, the Pakistan Army chief, break relations with the United States entirely.

Today, anti-Americanism has become the passport to political legitimacy and patriotism in Pakistan. Sustaining the *ghairat*, or honor of the country, has come to dominate the collective mindset at the cost of rational dialogue or other critical issues such as the country's ongoing economic crisis. Defending national sovereignty, even at the price of allowing anti-American, Islamist extremist groups to operate on its soil, is considered acceptable by many. Army chief Kiyani has mobilized additional forces and a range of anti-aircraft weaponry on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and ordered his troops to shoot down any future American intruders, without

answering the key question of what would happen should that outcome occur.

An already weak and paranoid civilian government has virtually given up on governance, and has been beset with scandals. It is cowed by the military one day, terrified by an angry public the next. Other days it is defiant and threatens the army, while at the same time is in danger of being thrown out of office by the Supreme Court. The latest crisis is the “memogate” scandal in which Hussain Haqqani, Pakistan’s former ambassador to Washington, is alleged to have asked an intermediary to send a memo to the Obama administration asking for American help to defang the military’s all powerful ISI. This has already led to questions on whether President Asif Ali Zardari, who is ill but defiant, will survive politically or whether he will be linked to “memogate” and be forced to resign.

In the wider world and the global marketplace, there is naturally enormous international concern when a nuclear weapon state places honor before discourse and negotiations. While most of the more than \$2 billion in U.S. aid to Pakistan for 2011-2012 has been canceled, suspended or slowed down, even European diplomats who provide major donor aid to Pakistan are angry that the country refuses to carry out desperately needed economic reforms.

The economy is crashing, while inflation and joblessness are reaching intolerable levels. As of early 2012, Pakistan’s civilian government has failed to provide gas, can only keep the electricity running for a few hours a day, and has been unable to alleviate constant fuel shortages. The country’s infrastructure—railways, the national airline, the supply of gas, electricity and fuel—are all in poor condition.

Contributing to the tensions is the country’s failure to provide security to its citizens. Even as the Afghan Taliban continue to enjoy safe sanctuaries in Pakistan, the army is fighting the Pakistani Taliban in the northwest who are determined to overthrow the government. Since 2004, thousands of soldiers and civilians have died in Pakistani Taliban suicide attacks. Pakistan also suffers from the separatist insurgency in Baluchistan, which is becoming bloodier by the day.

As a result of this violence, large tracts of the country are no longer controlled by the government, while other regions have been denuded of their population through insurgency, sectarian warfare, ethnic conflict and multiple natural disasters including two consecutive years of devastating floods in Sindh Province. There are millions of internally displaced persons as a result of conflicts in two provinces and floods in another two, although there is no definitive knowledge of the true figure or where many of the displaced citizens have taken refuge.

## **U.S. Missteps**

There is little doubt, however, that Pakistan’s series of crises have been exacerbated by a mismanaged U.S. strategy for Pakistan. For eight years, former President George W. Bush largely preferred not to recognize that there were Taliban on Pakistani soil because former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf was considered a close ally. Between 2001 and 2010, Pakistan received approximately \$20 billion in U.S. funds, with the majority of the money going to the military, while the economy and civil society were largely ignored.[3] Still, the army resented that it was never taken on board as a partner to discuss the Bush administration’s Afghanistan strategy. That resentment has only deepened under President Barack Obama, who promised a tougher but more realistic U.S. strategy with aid geared toward Pakistan’s civilian sector. Yet the Obama administration has also remained unwilling to share with the Pakistan Army its plans for Afghanistan, and it has intensified drone attacks in Pakistani territory, periodically crossed the Pakistan border without permission, and deployed spies across the country.

The Obama administration surged troop levels in Afghanistan even while announcing their withdrawal. It pledged to build a regional alliance to support Afghanistan, yet this has not come to fruition. Talks with the Afghan Taliban were repeatedly delayed due to reported opposition from the Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency.

From the perspective of Pakistan’s military, these factors suggest that there is not a credible U.S. plan to transition security in Afghanistan to local forces post-2014. Washington’s so-called transition is perceived in Pakistan as a hasty exit strategy, similar to what just recently occurred in Iraq, which is already creating a political crisis in that Middle East state. The U.S. withdrawal will likely leave behind a deeply polarized Afghanistan, acute ethnic rivalries, a weak economy and the prospect of civil war. Moreover, Pakistan is alarmed by what it views as greater U.S. reliance on India for its post-2014 Afghanistan plans, which to Pakistan

is completely unacceptable since the two states are rivals. As a result, whether out of anger or strategy, Pakistan's ISI has retained its most significant card—the Afghan Taliban leaders who have sought refuge on its soil.

### **Further Risks to the U.S.-Pakistan Relationship in 2012**

Due to the series of incidents between the U.S. and Pakistani militaries in 2011, the Pakistan Army has broken nearly all links with the United States regarding its support for the U.S. war in Afghanistan: U.S. and NATO supplies through Pakistan for Afghanistan have been stopped; an airbase used by the U.S. drone campaign has been evacuated; military and intelligence sharing are at a halt; and all written agreements with the United States are being reviewed by Islamabad. Pakistan is demanding an end to drone flights and fewer CIA agents on the ground. To prevent worsening the crisis, the U.S. halted all drone strikes over Pakistan in late November and December 2011.[4] Certainly, military-to-military relations will improve in 2012, but Pakistan will not give the United States the kind of *carte blanche* it had in the past.

In 2012, however, there is a real danger that another bloody incident between the two militaries could occur and worsen the crisis. There are several triggers for underlying tensions to explode. First, between 10,000 and 20,000 U.S. Marines are expected to redeploy from Helmand and Kandahar in southern Afghanistan to the provinces of eastern Afghanistan to tackle the virulent Taliban network of Jalaluddin Haqqani in the spring of 2012.[5] This will raise tensions with Pakistan, and could risk another dangerous incident and even increase the chances of direct U.S.-Pakistan clashes or the downing of aircraft.

Second, there are accusations that Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security, which is tired of the ISI's long-running support to the Afghan Taliban, is allegedly providing sanctuary in mountainous Kunar Province to Maulana Qazi Fazlullah and his fighters. Fazlullah leads a faction of the Pakistani Taliban who fled the Swat Valley after being ousted by the Pakistan Army in 2009. They escaped into Afghanistan and are now attacking Pakistani positions along the border before retreating back to Kunar—just as the Afghan Taliban retreat into Pakistan after launching attacks. Fazlullah is also linked to Hakimullah Mehsud, the virulent leader of the Pakistani Taliban.[6] If Fazlullah is not stopped by the spring, the Pakistanis could intervene, ratcheting up border tensions even more.

Third, Pakistan says it will respond with force to any new U.S.-NATO intrusion—even if by mistake—into its territory. This is a threat that any one of the 147,000 soldiers on the eastern border could undertake with or without orders.

### **Hope for an Improving Relationship?**

Can the United States and Pakistan emerge from this poisonous swamp of a relationship, and is there a common agenda that could reunite and rebuild trust at some level? First, it should not be expected that the relationship will reach its previous heights. Instead, the first building blocks have to be restarting military and intelligence cooperation—even at a minimal level. Second, the Pakistanis will not budge until they hear what future U.S. plans for Afghanistan entail and are assured that Pakistan will be seriously consulted before the United States takes major steps—for example, such as the escalated withdrawal of U.S. troops that the Obama administration is expected to announce at the May NATO summit in Chicago.

The most realistic hope for the future is for the United States and Pakistan to jointly develop a political reconciliation plan for Afghanistan that could end the Taliban insurgency, bring the Taliban to the table and initiate a four way dialogue among the Taliban, Kabul, Washington and Islamabad. While Pakistan has supported reconciliation (but has not delivered on it), the United States has been ambivalent. The divisions within the Obama administration may now be coming to an end, however, as all parts of the U.S. government recognize that there can be no orderly U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan—and nor will Karzai have a chance to succeed—without a reduction if not an end to the insurgency.

There are four separate processes where reconciliation has been pursued. The first is the long running, off-and-on again dialogue between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This stalled in late 2011 after the Afghans became fed up with Pakistan's refusal to offer Taliban leaders with whom to negotiate, as well as the September murder in Kabul of Karzai's main interlocutor, Burhanuddin Rabbani, who the Afghans accuse the ISI of killing but which Pakistan denies.

The second is the three way U.S.-Pakistan-Afghanistan dialogue that is called the “core group dialogue.” It has also stalled due to Rabbani’s death, the November border incident, as well as Pakistan’s refusal to attend the Bonn gathering in December where a critical core group meeting was scheduled to take place. Both these dialogues are based on the assumption that once they get started, the Taliban will join them.

Third, there has been a direct Kabul-Taliban secret dialogue that has had its positives and negatives. Its key Taliban interlocutor, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the second-in-command of the Afghan Taliban, was arrested by the ISI two years ago and has not been released, nor has any reason been given for his continued detention despite repeated requests by Karzai for Pakistan to free him. The Afghans accuse the Pakistanis of being in denial that they are keeping the Taliban leaders, while the ISI by its actions has demonstrated that it will not encourage independent talks between Kabul and the Taliban without Pakistani involvement.

The fourth path has modestly proved to be the most successful. A German-led initiative with backing from Qatar brought together this summer a Taliban mediator and mid-level U.S. officials who held several meetings in Doha, Qatar. According to Western diplomats, after months of delay, the Americans had agreed to announce at the December 2011 Bonn meeting that there would be an exchange of prisoners between the United States and the Taliban as a confidence building measure and the Taliban could open a liaison office in Qatar so that talks could continue more freely.

At the last moment, Karzai called off the announcement, saying that he had not been sufficiently consulted. A few weeks later, Karzai changed his mind, agreed to a Doha office, and on January 4, 2012, the Taliban officially announced for the first time that they were ready to negotiate with the Americans from a liaison office in Doha. The first step will be a prisoner exchange. Five senior Taliban figures at Guantanamo Bay will be moved to Qatar and placed under house arrest, while the only U.S. soldier being held by the Taliban—U.S. Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, who was taken prisoner in June 2009—will be freed.

Pakistan has always opposed the Qatar office,[7] and in January 2012 an ominous development occurred. The Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban announced that they agreed to unite to intensify their attacks on U.S. troops in Afghanistan, and the Pakistani Taliban said they would refrain from attacking Pakistani forces. For months, the ISI had been in dialogue with the various Pakistani Taliban groups to initiate a cease-fire, and the announcement means that the ISI has persuaded Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar to assist in the negotiations. What this may portend for Afghanistan when the Taliban launch their spring offensive against U.S. forces is not clear, but clearly the Taliban are also—like the Americans—going to keep a “talk-fight” strategy for some time.

Indeed, despite all the peace talk activity, there has been only one point of contact facilitated by the ISI. It arranged a meeting among U.S. officials, the head of the ISI and Ibrahim Haqqani, the son of Jalaluddin Haqqani, in the United Arab Emirates in August 2011.[8] Clearly, the meeting was unsuccessful because the Haqqani network attacked the U.S. Embassy in Kabul the following month.

Pakistan needs to be brought into any U.S.-Taliban dialogue as soon as possible. Without Pakistan’s participation, it is unlikely that the Taliban leaders based in Pakistan who are resentful, but extremely fearful, of the ISI will be sufficiently emboldened to take such talks further, while Pakistan’s non-cooperation could prove to be detrimental as it could act as a spoiler. Indeed, the Afghans argue that Pakistan is already a spoiler.

To his credit, U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan Marc Grossman tried to sustain the core group dialogue on Afghanistan through summer and autumn 2011, even as the rest of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship was collapsing around him. He hoped that even as other disputes emerged, both countries had a common desire and an intrinsic need to retain their dialogue on Afghanistan reconciliation. Grossman’s efforts, however, came to a halt, overwhelmed by the weight of the military’s ire at the Americans and Pakistan’s unwillingness to cooperate due to its anger at the Qatar talks. Grossman has had a particularly tough year trying to keep the Afghan talks ongoing, combating resistance from within the interagency process in Washington and suffering from a lack of assistance from Pakistan.

Now the core group dialogue needs to be urgently reactivated. Grossman must show that he has the direct support of President Obama. The Taliban contacts made through Germany and Qatar need to be involved with the core group. Ultimately, the four processes must merge and produce a common set of negotiators and negotiations to take the peace process further. None of this is possible until a modicum of trust is reestablished between the United States and Pakistan. Only then can the critical issue of how, when and under what

conditions can Pakistan send the Afghan Taliban back to Afghanistan to take part in reconciliation.

On a broader front, the core group could also discuss how to end all terrorist safe havens in Pakistan, not just for the Taliban but for other groups that threaten Central Asia, the Caucasus, India and Kashmir. The Pakistan Army needs to be weaned away from its reliance on extremists to pursue its foreign policy goals. This can only happen once the imagined or real threats from India and Afghanistan are diminished. Only that can give friends, allies and neighbors the confidence that Pakistan is determined to further regional and global stability and not unsettle the region by leveraging extremists.

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[1] The U.S.-Pakistan relationship perhaps reached its peak in June 2004, when President George W. Bush designated Pakistan a "major non-Nato ally." See "Bush Names Pakistan 'Major Ally,'" BBC, June 17, 2004.

[2] "Pakistan Buries 24 Troops Killed in NATO Airstrike," BBC, November 27, 2011.

[3] Chris Allbritton, "Analysis: Civilians Have Hand in Showdown With Pakistan Military," Reuters, January 13, 2012.

[4] Drone strikes resumed in Pakistan on January 11, 2012.

[5] Robert Burns, "Afghanistan: Marines to Wind Down Combat in 2012," Huffington Post, November 26, 2011.

[6] The ISI alleges that the CIA and Indian intelligence are also backing Fazlullah.

[7] By mid-January 2012, there were signs that Pakistan's military was softening its position on this issue.

[8] David Ignatius, "The Challenge of Getting the Taliban to the Table," Washington Post, January 11, 2012.