

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. 4

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From: Daniel S. Markey
Re: Next Steps for Pakistan Strategy

U.S.-Pakistan relations are in crisis. For Washington, Osama bin Laden's safe haven in Abbottabad raises questions about Pakistan's complicity and/or incompetence. For Islamabad, bin Laden's killing shows its vulnerability to U.S. operations on its own soil.

The present crisis, however, offers an opportunity. If Washington moves quietly, decisively, and on multiple fronts, it can create a more effective working partnership with Islamabad that better serves U.S. interests now and over the long run.

THE PROBLEM

The core threat to U.S. interests and the central irritant in Washington's relations with Islamabad is Pakistan's use of "strategic assets"—militant and terrorist groups—to project influence in Afghanistan and to balance India. These groups raise the risk of regional war, undermine Pakistan's own stability, and increase the potential for nuclear terrorism.

Recognizing that Pakistan's assets have killed Americans in Afghanistan and India, U.S. patience with Pakistan's behavior has worn thin. Washington has escalated its drone campaign in Pakistan's tribal areas and expanded its unilateral covert operations. These developments roiled U.S.-Pakistan relations even before the Abbottabad raid.

Engineering an about-face in Pakistan's strategy will be extremely difficult. It will require changes in Pakistan's security institutions, doctrines, and personnel. It will be costly and violent. If handled poorly, it could rupture U.S.-Pakistan relations.

GRADUALISM WON'T WORK

These grave risks, particularly concerns over the fate of Pakistan's nuclear program, may tempt leaders in Washington and Islamabad to patch up their differences to preserve a minimal working relationship. Leaders on both sides will argue that if

Washington keeps Pakistan's economy afloat and Pakistan allows NATO convoys into Afghanistan, the two sides can muddle along a while longer.

But the political and strategic foundations for such minimal cooperation will not hold. American advocates of cooperation can no longer justify its cost in the face of Islamabad's manifest failings. Pakistani suspicions about U.S. intentions—especially with respect to India—will exhaust its public's patience.

Minimal cooperation will eventually collapse into counterproductive estrangement or dangerous confrontation. Tackling the rot within the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is also the only way to guard against an insider threat to Pakistan's nuclear program over the long run.

THE GOAL

Even if Pakistan's army had the will, it does not currently have the capacity to root out the entire spectrum of terrorists and militants operating from its territory. Washington should not demand the impossible; Pakistan's military will not commit suicide on American orders.

Washington should also not push Islamabad to tackle a handful of named terrorist organizations. The militant universe is constantly shifting and spawning new threats. Washington should instead push for a purge of ISI sections—and individual officers—suspected of providing support or safe haven to extremists. Only a reformed ISI can be expected to hunt LeT, the Haqqani network, or other groups that have been nurtured by the state.

Washington should seek a private commitment to change from Pakistan's leaders, followed by a shift in their public rhetoric and evidence of action. Washington will need to monitor Pakistan's reform efforts, including through clandestine means. In time, the second-order effects of a purge—that is, signs of active confrontation with militant groups that have until now enjoyed a protected status—will become apparent.

HOW TO PROCEED

Pakistan's military leaders have resisted American demands to end support for militant groups. They believe that these proxy forces serve Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan and India. Despite their surprise and humiliation after the Abbottabad raid, the Pakistani army and ISI are closing ranks against Pakistani critics and assuming a passive-aggressive posture with the United States.

Under these circumstances, a simple, direct U.S. demand for ISI reform will fall flat. Washington should instead act indirectly, harnessing (a) the power of influential Pakistanis, (b) the credible threat of curtailed U.S. assistance to Pakistan and U.S. sanctions, (c) pressure from Pakistan's closest allies, and (d) the hard edge of U.S. military force in Afghanistan.

Lobbying from Within

Many Pakistanis are now asking tough questions about their military and intelligence services. While they are angry at the undetected U.S. military incursion, they also recognize that something is deeply amiss if Osama bin Laden could hide in Abbottabad for five years. In this respect, many Pakistanis who do not consider themselves pro-American share Washington's concerns.

U.S. officials should quietly discuss this convergence of mutual interest with influential Pakistani politicians, retired generals, diplomats, and businessmen, in an effort to convince them to lobby for reform within their own system. Americans should also emphasize the economic and security benefits Pakistan stands to gain from shifting its strategy and improving relations with the United States.

Wielding Credible Threats

Since 9/11, Washington has lacked a credible “stick” to go along with the “carrots” of billions of dollars in assistance to Pakistan. The war in Afghanistan and the presence of top al-Qaeda leaders inside Pakistan made Washington dependent on Pakistan’s supply routes and intelligence sharing. The unilateral killing of bin Laden was an important demonstration that Washington is less dependent on Pakistani intelligence than it once was. To further enhance its leverage with Islamabad, Washington should begin diverting Afghanistan war supplies away from Pakistan’s ports and roads and into routes running through Russia and Central Asia.

By demonstrating this independence, the United States can credibly threaten assistance cutoffs and other sanctions. Rather than issuing such threats directly, the Obama administration should coordinate its efforts with the “bad cop” of the U.S. Congress. This process should start with congressional hearings on U.S. military—not civilian—assistance to Pakistan. This will signal that Congress is unsatisfied with Islamabad’s security strategy, not eager to punish its people. Moreover, cutting U.S. nonmilitary assistance will not change the strategic calculations of Pakistani generals.

As the Obama administration pursues other diplomatic efforts with Pakistan, Congress should draft and debate legislation conditioning military assistance on improvements in Pakistan’s counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation. Given Pakistan’s past experience of U.S. sanctions, congressional threats are credible. But the Obama administration will need to coordinate its routine with congressional leaders to make sure threats do not unleash irreversible sanctions and to keep the focus firmly on the issue at hand—reforming the ISI—and not on other matters that could easily spur a counterproductive response from Pakistan, such as nuclear proliferation or a democratic transition.

Working with Pakistan’s Allies

Washington’s leverage alone is too limited to force ISI reform. The United States will need to work with Pakistan’s most trusted allies, China and Saudi Arabia, to tip the scales decisively. Both of these states have subtly influenced Pakistan’s generals in the past and could do so again. They hold a common interest in combating international terrorism and little desire to see Pakistan look weak or duplicitous. Neither sees a benefit in a U.S.-Pakistan split.

China could start by signaling its concern during Pakistani prime minister Yusuf Raza Gilani’s visit to Beijing. Even a veiled reference to the need for discipline within the ranks of a military or intelligence service could send shockwaves back to Islamabad, where China’s every word is parsed with care. Riyadh’s historical ties with ISI and its experience fighting terrorism inside the kingdom—including counter-radicalization and detention programs—offer it special influence with Pakistan.

Pressing from Afghanistan

Finally, Washington must make its strategy in Afghanistan consistent with its approach to Pakistan. The U.S. military surge and the reconciliation process should be pursued in ways that delineate “reconcilable” from “irreconcilable” Afghan insurgents. To date, Washington’s mixed messages on this score have only encouraged Pakistanis to believe that their proxy forces—however blood-soaked—will eventually have a seat at the negotiating table.

Washington should instead press its military campaign with a special emphasis on weakening militants with bases in Pakistan. In the process, Washington would more clearly signal its intentions as it undercuts Pakistan's "strategic assets," rendering them simultaneously less influential and easier for Pakistani forces to confront should they choose to do so.

PROSPECTS AND STAKES

The opportunity to force a fundamental shift by Pakistan is likely a fleeting one. Immediately after 9/11, Washington placed sufficient pressure on Islamabad to force major—if ultimately inadequate—purges within Pakistan's army and ISI. Similarly, external pressure after the July 2005 London bombings forced Islamabad to reduce militant attacks across the Line of Control with India. These cases demonstrate that Pakistan is susceptible to outside pressure, particularly when caught off-guard. That said, prior attempts to reform ISI have been only skin deep; past pressure has been inadequate and inconsistent.

The risks to this approach are high, but so are the stakes. U.S. interests in Pakistan extend well beyond the immediate war in Afghanistan or the fight against al-Qaeda. Left unchecked, Pakistan's demographic realities and fast-growing nuclear program will almost certainly make it an even more unmanageable challenge in decades to come. Now is the time for swift and decisive U.S. action.

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