

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. 28

Date: February 26, 2013
From: Daniel Markey
Re: Support Process Over Personalities in Pakistan

Pakistan's leadership transitions over the course of 2013 will complicate, perhaps even disrupt, the already tenuous U.S.-Pakistan relationship. As in the past, Washington may be tempted to lend support to Pakistani leaders with "pro-American" leanings. U.S. officials should resist these temptations. The United States should cast its weight behind Pakistan's constitutional, rule-based process of leadership transition.

By actively encouraging Pakistan's leaders to stick to their own rules (while otherwise standing above the political fray), the United States would improve prospects for an orderly transfer of power that would contribute to Pakistan's overall stability. Pakistani leaders who emerge from such a process may not be especially friendly to Washington, but they will at least be open to businesslike cooperation on matters of greatest U.S. concern.

TUMULTUOUS POLITICS CREATE NEAR-TERM CHALLENGES

Pakistan's most powerful institutions face leadership changes in 2013. National assembly elections are expected in late spring 2013, and the opposition is favored to win. Victorious parties should form a government by summer, but the politicking will not end there. An indirect presidential election follows in September, the army chief's term ends in November, and in December the Supreme Court chief justice will reach mandatory retirement age.

All of these changes will distract Pakistan's leadership from external affairs and limit prospects for near-term bilateral cooperation. U.S. officials should give careful thought to how their actions might influence Pakistan's political environment. Counterterror operations could be particularly disruptive during the election season. U.S. drone strikes and other covert activities on Pakistani soil are broadly unpopular; if conducted in the midst of campaigning they would help mobilize support for candidates with particularly anti-American platforms and tip the balance in the next national assembly. U.S. targeting decisions throughout 2013 should give greater weight to the political costs of drone strikes as compared to their tactical benefits. Once Pakistan's sitting assembly is replaced by a caretaker government (for the two

months before election day), the United States should suspend drone strikes, making exceptions only for Ayman al-Zawahiri and plotters of imminent terrorist attacks.

THE PATH TO POLITICAL STABILITY

Given its size, location, and nuclear arsenal, the United States has a strong interest in Pakistan's political stability. A civilian democratic order should improve Pakistan's prospects for stability over the long run, but for now it remains a messy work in progress. Orderly transfers of power and on-time retirements cannot be taken for granted in a country with a long history of election rigging and military interference. Since 2007, Pakistan's activist chief justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, has been an unpredictable factor. With violence in many parts of the country, political turmoil could fuel wider conflict. If Pakistan's political actors stick to the rules in 2013—win or lose—it would be a triumph for national stability.

Admittedly, sticking to the rules could elevate less friendly faces to power in Islamabad. A new batch of leaders could impede U.S. cooperation or fight among themselves. Opposition leader and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif has a conflictual history with the army. If his Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N) party wins, it would set up another civil-military contest for power. Imran Khan, head of the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, has criticized U.S. counterterror policy, particularly drone strikes. A new chief justice is more likely to be co-opted or silenced, ending a remarkable period of judicial activism. The next army chief could—just like his two predecessors—begin his tenure by retreating from constructive diplomacy with India. He might also be less cooperative with the United States as it attempts to withdraw from Afghanistan and to accelerate the process of political dialogue with Afghan insurgents.

All of these scenarios would be setbacks for the United States, but they are manageable. The most dangerous, revolutionary scenarios will become plausible only if the process of political transition breaks down. Pakistanis might then rise in mass protest, or the army might split into factions. Recognizing these dangers, Pakistan's military and civilian leaders have all committed to following constitutional processes. The true test, however, will come when they face the imminent prospect of losing their jobs. The president, army chief, and chief justice have shown a will to power that could lead them to obstruct a peaceful transfer of power.

Bent or broken rules will threaten stability and weaken Pakistan's leaders. If the sitting government or president wins reelection through a rigged process, they would sacrifice the popular legitimacy conferred by a fair vote. That would diminish their ability to govern, deliver much-needed reforms, and expand cooperation with Washington. The United States should resist the temptation to interfere in support of friendly Pakistani faces even if they desperately seek U.S. help. Such interference could contribute to a breakdown in the political process.

Pakistan's other leaders would also weaken their institutions by extending their terms in office. Unlike in 2010, when Washington tacitly endorsed army chief Ashfaq Parvez Kayani's extension for three years past the norm, U.S. officials should express a preference for the standard practice of appointing a successor. A new extension would be deeply unpopular in the army's ranks and risk a split among the officers of the nation's most powerful institution. Similarly, Washington should speak in favor of seeing Pakistan's Supreme Court chief justice retire on time. To see the nation's top judge flout the law would damage the judiciary's newfound legitimacy and independence.

HOW TO SUPPORT PAKISTAN'S PROCESS

Because the United States has a history of interfering in Pakistani politics—including the Bush administration's attempt to broker a deal between President Pervez Musharraf and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Benazir Bhutto in

2007—Pakistanis will be on the lookout for any evidence that the United States is trying to tip the political scales in favor of pro-American politicians or generals. For instance, many Pakistanis view U.S. aid programs that fund the ruling government's pet projects, like the Benazir Income Support Program, as politically biased. Even if these are worthy programs, the United States should avoid expanding its support for them in the period before elections.

Nor will it be enough for U.S. officials to stand silently by as the political process plays out. U.S. silence or inaction in the face of Pakistani poll rigging or other political games would be perceived as meddling in favor of the rule breakers. To proceed in a situation in which even silence could count as interference, and standard talking points about America's democratic values sound more patronizing than credible, U.S. diplomats should meticulously frame policies in terms of support for Pakistan's constitution. They should pledge, in public and closed-door meetings with civilian and military leaders in power and in the opposition, to work with all who adhere to Pakistan's legal, constitutional order. That focus offers the only appropriate, politically correct device for encouraging everyone to follow the rules.

To back up this rhetoric, Washington should extend diplomatic, financial, and technical support through existing State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development projects to groups working to preserve the constitutional process, such as Pakistan's nonpartisan election commission and various election-monitoring teams. U.S. diplomats should rebuff charges of favoritism by establishing close, if discreet, back-channel ties with emissaries from opposition parties—PTI, PML-N, and others—and the chief justice. The United States should coordinate with China (as it did during the tumultuous period at the end of Musharraf's regime) to deliver a unified message to Pakistani generals about the value of adhering to the constitutional order, if chiefly as a means of safeguarding army unity. China has a major stake in Pakistan's stability, uniquely strong military-military ties, and quiet influence in Pakistani political circles.

In its efforts to buttress U.S. rhetoric and raise the costs to Pakistanis of breaking their own rules, the Obama administration should avoid loud threats of sanctions and complete aid cutoffs; they are not credible given other U.S. goals in Pakistan and would only contribute to instability. Over the past year, however, Washington has managed to calibrate the flow of hundreds of millions of dollars in military and civilian aid to Pakistan. This ability to quietly dial aid up and down, while always holding out the incentive of future assistance and partnership, offers Washington a more flexible tool that should be used as leverage with Pakistan's leaders if, for instance, the military considers delaying elections or the civilian government appears poised to rig the polls.

BACK THE WHOLE COURSE, NOT ONE HORSE

By supporting a rules-based process of transition in Pakistan rather than backing specific personalities, the United States would help to stabilize Pakistan. Washington cannot dictate Pakistan's political outcomes, but it can create clear external disincentives for Pakistani leaders to avoid rule breaking in ways that could lead to the breakdown of social and political order. By itself, outside U.S. pressure would not be sufficient. Combined with increasingly widespread domestic support for constitutional rule, however, it can tip the balance in favor of stability.

Prioritizing processes over personalities would also strengthen the U.S.-Pakistan relationship by dampening common Pakistani charges of U.S. hypocrisy and political manipulation. If Washington should have learned anything from past experience in Pakistan, it is that to support specific Pakistani leaders is, by definition, to back the wrong horse. For if Washington's favorites win, they are tainted by the association; if they lose, the winners will hold a grudge. By not alienating Pakistan's legitimate contenders for power, Washington would improve its ability to work with whomever holds the reins in Islamabad once the transitional dust clears. Pakistan's new leaders might not be friendlier, but the bilateral relationship is likely to be more normal in ways that would enable businesslike dealings on the full range of U.S. security concerns, from counterterrorism and nonproliferation to regional stability.

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