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Pakistan

The U.S.-Pakistan Co-dependency

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As 2011 closed, the mainstream press was awash with ominous, dark assessments of the state of the relationship between the United States and Pakistan. After a cross-border NATO air strike in November resulted in the deaths of 24 Pakistani soldiers, Pakistan responded forcefully, closing the Af-Pak border to NATO traffic, expelling the U.S. military from an air base inside Pakistan, [1] and boycotting the International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn, which had been tasked with outlining the next steps for the occupation.

While Pakistan is likely to re-open NATO supply routes imminently, the incident has significantly altered the tactical parameters of the alliance – after a drone sortie on November 26, for example, the United States called a halt to drone operations for almost two months, in an attempt to assuage domestic outcry inside Pakistan.

We can be forgiven for thinking we have been here before. Not much more than a year earlier, in October 2010, a similar mishap had elicited a similar reaction from Pakistan. More recently, both the Raymond Davis and Osama Bin Laden incidents, in January and May 2011, had been reported as leaving the relationship in tatters.

There has never been a shortage of alarm about the alliance. The U.S. press has routinely berated Pakistan's "duplicity," accusing it of ties to the Afghan insurgency, and of operating on its own agenda in Afghanistan. Always, these charges are given their gravity by earnest, if apocalyptic, concerns that Pakistan's nuclear stockpile will work its way into the wrong hands.

Yet for all the public handwringing and backbiting, the alliance between Pakistan and the United States has endured the duration of the Afghan occupation. Their shrieking and shrilling aside, U.S. policymakers have seen fit to pour money into the Pakistani Army, year after year, making the country one of the highest recipients of Washington's aid behind Egypt and Israel. Transfers amount to approximately eleven billion dollars since 9/11, the majority of it military in nature [2] – significant numbers, considering that the Pakistani Army's annual budget is no more than five to six billion dollars without it.

What explains this odd, Janus-faced romance? How has the U.S.-Pakistan partnership persisted in the face of such pronounced tension, even hostility?

The answer is not particularly complicated. The twin dynamics of collaboration and chaos are the product of a few simple, well-known facts. Both establishments are working from different scripts in Afghanistan, but for each the path to its own goals runs through the other. While Pakistan and the United States do not want the same things out of the Afghan endgame, neither can get what it wants without deferring to the wishes of the other.

Endgame in Afghanistan

The structuring reality in Afghanistan today is the near-certainty of a U.S. withdrawal by 2014. [3] After over a decade of murderous, catastrophic wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, current plans anticipate the transfer of security responsibilities to the Afghan national government within two years. This reluctance to maintain a heavy footprint in the region was evident in the deliberations preceding president Obama's announcement of "the surge" in December 2009, where he denied his military advisors the full panoply of forces they demanded he commit to the war. [4]

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Some on the Left have tended to explain the occupation as a product of U.S. desires to manage the ascendant power of China and Russia and, sometimes, the additional goal of ensuring favorable control over the oil and gas resources of Central Asia. But even if these figure amongst the aims of U.S. planners, the argument needs qualifying.

Although the United States may want all manner of things from its Afghan adventure, it lacks the capacity "given low levels of domestic support, an anemic economy, and its persistent failure to construct a viable national authority in Afghanistan" to sustain a fully resourced occupation much longer. (Of course, this hardly precludes a continued presence in the form of base agreements and influence through client states).

In this sense, its dilatory withdrawal (the initial date was July 2011) is not a sign that the United States in fact hopes to leave troops behind in perpetuity, but is better understood as a consequence of its attempting to leave without losing face, and without surrendering all influence in a future regime. To put it differently, the Great Game matters, but only in the context of other considerations.

Pakistan's strategy is necessarily formulated around the looming U.S. pullout. The military brass, who retain the prerogative of negotiating Pakistan's policy despite the transition to formal democracy in 2008, would like nothing more than to replicate the mid-to-late 1990s, when a relatively pliable Taliban government ruled over a ravaged, but (more) peaceful Afghanistan.

Their minimum goal is stability "given that the intensification of the insurgency in the past several years in Afghanistan has heightened levels of violence inside Pakistan's own borders, claiming several thousand lives. In an ideal world, of course, they would get more: Pakistan's wish, no doubt, is to place an ally in Afghanistan that would answer to them alone.

It is this strategic orientation that explains their much-maligned duplicity.

On the one hand, the goal of installing a pliant post-occupation government means that, for Pakistani military planners, oft-derided links to various elements in the Afghan insurgency are indispensable.

The strength of this relationship is often overstated "available evidence indicates open lines of communication and some provision of safe havens, but not that insurgent groups take their cues from Pakistan. [5]. Nonetheless, to the extent that these groups succeed in exerting their influence in a negotiated settlement, Pakistan's planners will be the happier for it.

On the other hand, there are several compelling reasons to accommodate American demands. The most obvious, but also the most important, is rooted in the asymmetries of the relationship with the United States. So long as the world's most well-stocked military has tens of thousands of troops stationed in a neighboring country, they set the rules.

Additionally, there are those (Tariq Ali, for example) who argue that Pakistan is milking the Americans for hardware and economic assistance, arrangements likely to lapse as soon as the United States leaves. While this may well be a real dynamic, it's important to note that the U.S. presence has also carried real costs for the Pakistani establishment, in the form of full-fledged insurgencies in districts in the Northwest as well as domestic unrest.

Last, as Pakistan's military is undoubtedly aware, a maximally desirable final settlement is probably unlikely. While the Afghan insurgency seems to have reasonably broad support in the Pashtun heartlands, its capacity to command the loyalty of the rest of the country's population is significantly more limited. No national peace will be sustainable if

it fully excludes other powerbrokers, be they the current quisling government or representatives of Afghanistan's Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and other populations. If its interests in a stable Afghanistan are to be served, Pakistan cannot afford to alienate the United States, through whom any settlement of this sort will be brokered.

Of course, this same fact makes Pakistan terribly important to the United States as it looks to leave. The Pakistan military's links to the Haqqani network and to elements of the Afghan Taliban so roundly and regularly denounced in U.S. mainstream media, are bound to prove indispensable if post-occupation Afghanistan is to avoid slipping into civil war. The U.S. intention is to ensure that its dependents have as much sway in this future as is possible, but as the trajectory of the negotiations has shown, no one doubts that this will involve considerable concessions to the Taliban. [6]

At least in the present conjuncture, then, mutual dependence is inescapable. It guarantees significant cooperation, and sets the bounds beyond which the relationship cannot deteriorate. Granted, the fact that both parties have an interest in shaping the character of the settlement to suit their own interests unavoidably generates tensions. Since the last of Pakistan's major military offensives in South Waziristan in 2009, for example, one of the Americans' principal grievances has concerned the failure of the Pakistani Army to sanction an operation against the Haqqani network's safe havens in North Waziristan.

But the larger strategic realities - not to mention concerns about capacity and blowback - mean that from Pakistan's perspective, an operation against the Haqqanis, who constitute one of the insurgency's four nodes, is not just unlikely but fundamentally unwise. [7]

The Destructive Great Game

The foregoing helps clarify the tendentious, shallow character of much of what passes for analysis of Pakistan's role in the Afghan drawdown. While Pakistan is certainly culpable of "double-dealing," this posture is rooted firmly in regional strategic realities. Its links to the Taliban and the Haqqanis have never been a product of Islamist aspirations of "bearded generals" bent on civilizational conquest, nor an irrational obsession with India bred into every military Pakistani planner.

Hypothetically, had the syllabi of our military academies long been purged of Islamist and anti-India content (and there's more than enough of it in what officers are taught), it's improbable that much of significance would change. The military would still find it necessary to balance the competing imperatives of acceding to U.S. demands and cultivating ties to the insurgency. In short, it's the demands of bourgeois statecraft that render a certain amount of duplicity incumbent on Pakistan's army.

None of this should distract from the fact that the war in Af-Pak has taken a horrific, grievous toll on the people of the region. In case the point needs clarifying, a course of action that is rational, from the perspective of State managers locked in heightened rivalries, is hardly going to align with policy that would be rational from the perspective of the region's great majority.

Afghanistan, now beginning the second decade of its occupation by U.S. and NATO forces, lies in tatters. As Nick Turse noted in late 2010, the hundreds of billions of dollars that the United States has expended in its military and civilian efforts have made no discernible impact on the persistent, desperate misery of the Afghan people. "Pick a measurement affecting ordinary Afghans and the record since November 2001 when Kabul fell to Allied forces is likely to show stagnation or setbacks and, almost invariably, suffering." [8]

In a country where roughly 850 children die, daily, of preventable diseases like diarrhea and pneumonia, 50 billion dollars have been squandered erecting a State overrun by "warlords and businessmen." [9] In the words of Faheem Haider, the country is now little more than their "personal fiefdom." [10]

While the links between the insurgency and the opium trade are widely known, it's not well-publicized that only 25% of total domestic revenue from the drug trade accrues to the Taliban and farmers. The other 75% "is captured by government officials, the police, local and regional power brokers and traffickers." [11]

Nor has the construction of this neocolonial, garrison State put an end to the violence. Quite the contrary. The escalation of night raids and air strikes, foundational to U.S. strategy as it attempts to negotiate its withdrawal from a position of strength, has rendered the last two years the deadliest since the insurgency began.

While much is made of the UN's allegation that most of these civilian deaths have been at the hands of the Taliban, Gareth Porter has shown that the official statistics vastly undercount the number of civilians killed by occupation forces. [12] Official protocol, for example, counts all adult males killed in night raids as insurgents, unless evidence later 'proves' them innocent. [13]

Sober Realities and the Way Forward

The most recent developments in the U.S.-Pakistan alliance come at a time when relations between the civilian and military arms of Pakistan's government are at their lowest since the last coup in 1999.

Nor are the two trends unrelated — recent tensions were triggered by allegations that the former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, Hussain Haqqani, sent a memo in the wake of the Osama bin Laden assassination, asking for American help in staving off a military coup. Though it's unlikely that the civilian leadership knew of the memo (whose contents were confirmed by Mike Mullen), and almost unthinkable that the military was actually contemplating an overthrow in May, the consequent threat to Pakistan's democracy is real enough. [14]

Even though a coup is probably not in the cards, the fracas illustrates the persisting shallowness of Pakistan's most recent transition to democracy: the civilians cannot claim, in practice, the authority over the State apparatus to which they are constitutionally entitled. As ever, a waffling, unpopular bourgeoisie finds itself incapable of carrying the democratic revolution to its conclusion.

The war has taken a grave toll in more palpable ways, as well. Particularly since the insurgency in Afghanistan re-emerged a few years into the U.S. invasion, the northwest of Pakistan has been the staging ground for massive domestic military offensives, and - particularly in the Obama years - an unprecedented wave of drone strikes responsible for the deaths of several hundred civilians, at minimum. [15]

These same regions rank among the most deprived in all of Pakistan. [16] In a country blighted by unconscionable levels of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and landlessness, billions of dollars are annually appropriated by the armed forces. The military budget, and the funds allocated to servicing Pakistan's foreign and domestic debt, together add up to roughly 60% of the government's budget. [17] Not surprisingly, this leaves pitiful sums to be spent on health, education and other social programs.

Though a recent IMF program was halted due to the inability of the Pakistani government to meet the pace of its austerity targets, no establishment party offers a meaningful alternative to the steady dismantling of those already

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miserly forms of welfare spending that do exist (food, fuel, and electricity subsidies, already slashed in recent years, remain on the chopping block).

The goal of a sustainable, just peace in Af-Pak demands more than any of the forces currently in or around power can promise. Foreign and domestic policy will have to be wrested from the sordid array of actors animated by interests irreconcilable with the needs of the region's people.

This task is formidable, and will fall to the Left. A December conference of several progressive parties from both sides of the border is an encouraging step in the right direction - the final resolution rightly commits to organizing "coordinated days of action and other initiatives at the political as well as the cultural and educational levels." [18]

This said, as the conference participants themselves admitted, there's no obscuring the fact that, sadly, the short term belongs to the elites, domestic and foreign, who have run roughshod over the region for the past several decades.

As the United States, Pakistan and a host of other power-brokers scramble to bend the negotiations to their will, it's the specifics of the final settlement that are indeterminate — not the structuring fact that Afghanistan will be ruled by an "alliance of foreign and domestic powers" against whom the Left must unreservedly struggle.

But even the immediate future is bleak, progressives in both countries can take heart from developments in the wider world. If there were ever a year that demonstrated that the challenges of a long slumber were surmountable, it was 2011. May 2012 see this spirit spread to Af-Pak.

[1] Confirming, in the process, what otherwise the Pakistani Army had always denied: that the U.S. military had, in fact, been granted permission to operate from within Pakistan's borders.

[2] Lawrence Wright, "The Double Game," The New Yorker (May 2011) <http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/...>

[3] Of course, if any of the loonies up for the Republican nomination manage to spring a victory in November, all bets are off.

[4] According to Bob Woodward's Obama's Wars, Petraeus, McChrystal and others in the military argued that a full counter-insurgency campaign was unviable unless Obama committed a force of roughly 80,000 troops to Afghanistan. Of course, nor did Obama opt for the alternative, christened "counterterrorism-plus" by Biden, which was to concentrate on Al-Qaeda, rather than the insurgency and the tasks of "nation-building."

[5] "The truth is, according to half a dozen senior officials with access to the intelligence, the evidence of Pakistan's affinity for terrorists is often circumstantial and ambiguous, a matter of intercepted conversations in coded language, and their dealings are thought to be more pragmatic than ideological, more a matter of tolerating than directing..." (Bill Keller, "The Pakistanis Have a Point," (December 12, 2011) <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/m...>

[6] Karen DeYoung, "Clinton: Talks with Taliban not 'pleasant' but 'necessary,'" The Washington Post (June 2011) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/natio...>

[7] Bill Roggio, "Taliban appoint al Qaeda-linked commander to lead Peshawar shura," The Long War Journal (January 2012) <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archi...>

[8] Nick Turse, "How Much 'Success' Can Afghans Stand?," ZNet (September 2010) <http://www.zcommunications.org/how-...>

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[9] Ross Eventon, "Victory in Afghanistan," New Left Project (July 2011) <http://www.newleftproject.org/index...>

[10] Faheem Haider quoted in Eventon 2011

[11] Julien Mercille quoted in Eventon 2011.

[12] Gareth Porter, "U.N. Reported Only a Fraction of Civilian Deaths from US Night Raids," IPS News (March 2011)
<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=...>

[13] Gareth Porter, "US Night Raids Killed 1,500 Civilians," Asia Times (November 2011) <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South ...>

[14] See Cyril Almeida, "A sceptic's guide to memogate," DAWN (November 2011) <http://www.dawn.com/2011/11/18/a-sc...>

[15] See Muhammad Idrees Ahmad, "The magical realism of body counts," Al-Jazeera English (June 2011) <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/op...>

[16] "Malnutrition a major problem of public health in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, FATA: survey," Business Recorder (November 2011)
<http://www.brecorder.com/general-ne...>

[17] Syed Fazl-e-Haider, "Pakistan drugged out on defense and debt," Asia Times (March 2011) <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South ...>

[18] "Pakistan Afghanistan Progressive Parties Conference Joint Declaration" International Viewpoint (December 2011)
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.o...>