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Washington's Pakistan Meltdown

How the U.S. and Pakistan Became the Dysfunctional Nuclear Family of International Relations

By Dilip Hiro

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The United States and Pakistan are by now a classic example of a dysfunctional nuclear family (with an emphasis on “nuclear”). While the two governments and their peoples become more suspicious and resentful of each other with every passing month, Washington and Islamabad are still locked in an awkward post-9/11 embrace that, at this juncture, neither can afford to let go of.

Washington is keeping Pakistan, with its collapsing economy and bloated military, afloat but also cripplingly dependent on its handouts and U.S.-sanctioned International Monetary Fund loans. Meanwhile, CIA drones unilaterally strike its tribal borderlands. Islamabad returns the favor. It holds Washington hostage over its Afghan War from which the Pentagon won't be able to exit in an orderly fashion without its help. By blocking U.S. and NATO supply routes into Afghanistan (after a U.S. cross-border air strike had killed 24 Pakistani soldiers) from November 2011 until last July, Islamabad managed to ratchet up the cost of the war while underscoring its indispensability to the Obama administration.

At the heart of this acerbic relationship, however, is Pakistan's arsenal of 110 nuclear bombs which, if the country were to disintegrate, could fall into the hands of Islamist militants, possibly from inside its own security establishment. As Barack Obama confided to his aides, this remains his worst foreign-policy nightmare, despite the decision of the U.S. Army to train a commando

unit to retrieve Pakistan's nukes, should extremists seize some of them or materials to produce a "dirty bomb" themselves.

Two Publics, Differing Opinions

Pakistan's military high command fears the Pentagon's contingency plans to seize its nukes. Following the clandestine strike by U.S. SEALs that killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad in May 2011, it loaded elements of its nuclear arsenal onto trucks, which rumbled around the country to frustrate any possible American attempt to grab its most prized possessions. When Senator John Kerry arrived in Islamabad to calm frayed nerves following Bin Laden's assassination, high Pakistani officials insisted on a written U.S. promise not to raid their nuclear arsenal. He snubbed the demand.

Since then mutual distrust between the two nominal allies — a relationship encapsulated by some in the term "AmPak" — has only intensified. Last month, for instance, Pakistan became the sole Muslim country to officially call on the Obama administration to ban the anti-Islamic 14-minute video clip *Innocence of Muslims*, which depicts the Prophet Muhammad as a womanizer, religious fraud, and pedophile.

While offering a bounty of \$100,000 for the killing of Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, an Egyptian-American Christian producer of the movie, Pakistan's Railways Minister Ghulam Ahmad Bilour called on al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban to be "partners in this noble deed." Prime Minister Raja Ashraf distanced his government from Bilour's incitement to murder, a criminal offense under Pakistani law, but did not dismiss him from the cabinet. The U.S. State Department strongly condemned Bilour's move.

Pakistan also stood out as the only Muslim state whose government declared a public holiday, "Love the Prophet Muhammad Day," to encourage its people to demonstrate against the offending movie. The U.S. Embassy's strategy of disarming criticism with TV and newspaper ads showing President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton condemning "the content and the message" of the film failed to discourage protesters. In fact, the demonstrations in major Pakistani cities turned so violent that 23 protesters were killed, the highest figure worldwide.

Taking advantage of the government's stance, proscribed jihadist organizations made a defiant show of their continued existence. In Lahore, the capital of Punjab, the country's largest province, activists from the banned Lashkar-e Taiba (Army of the Pure), whose leader Hafiz Saeed is the target of a \$10 million bounty by Washington, led protesters toward the American consulate where perimeter defenses had been breached earlier in the week. In Islamabad, activists from the Sipah-e-Sahaba (Soldiers of the Prophet's Companions), an outlawed Sunni faction, clashed with the police for hours in the course of a march to the heavily guarded diplomatic enclave.

These outlawed organizations continue to operate with impunity in an environment that has grown rabidly anti-American. A June 2012 survey by the Washington-based Pew Research Center (PRC) found that 74% of Pakistanis consider the United States an enemy. By contrast,

only 12% believe that U.S. aid helps solve problems in their country in a situation in which 89% describe their nation's economic situation as "bad."

The American public's view of Pakistan is equally bleak. February polls by [Gallup](#) and Fox News [indicated](#) that 81% of Americans had an unfavorable view of that country; just 15% held a contrary view, the lowest figure of the post-9/11 period (with only the remaining "axis of evil" states of Iran and North Korea faring worse).

Clashing Views on the War on Terror

Most Americans consider Pakistan an especially unreliable ally in Washington's war on terror. That it provided safe haven to bin Laden for 10 years before his violent death in 2011 reinforced this perception. Bin Laden's successor, Ayman Zawahiri, is widely believed to be hiding in Pakistan. So, too, are Mullah Muhammad Omar and other leaders of the Afghan Taliban.

It beggars belief that this array of Washington's enemies can continue to function inside the country without the knowledge of its powerful Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI) which reputedly has nearly 100,000 employees and informers. Even if serving ISI officers are not in cahoots with the Afghan Taliban, many retired ISI officers clearly are.

The rationale for this, top Pakistani officials say privately, is that the Afghan Taliban and the allied Haqqani Network are not attacking targets in Pakistan and so pose no threat to the state. In practice, these political-military entities are being sustained by Islamabad as future surrogates in a post-American Afghanistan. Their task is to ensure a pro-Islamabad government in Kabul, immune to offers of large-scale economic aid from India, the regional superpower. In short, it all boils down to Washington and Islamabad pursuing clashing aims in war-ravaged Afghanistan and in Pakistan as well.

The Pakistani government's multifaceted stance toward Washington has wide public support. Popular hostility toward the U.S. stems from several interrelated factors. Above all, most Pakistanis view the war on terror from a radically different perspective than Americans. Since its primary targets have been the predominantly Muslim countries of Afghanistan and Iraq, they equate it with an American crusade against Islam.

While U.S. pundits and politicians invariably cite the \$24 billion in assistance and military aid Washington has given Islamabad in the post-9/11 period, Pakistanis stress the heavy price they have paid for participating in the Washington-led war. "No country and no people have suffered more in the epic struggle against terrorism than Pakistan," said President Asif Ali Zardari at the United Nations General Assembly last month.

His government argues that, as a result of joining the war on terror, Pakistan has suffered a loss of \$68 billion over the past decade. A widely disseminated statistic at home, it includes estimated losses due to a decline in foreign investments and adverse effects on trade, tourism, and businesses. Islamabad attributes all this to the insecurity caused by the terrorist acts of local jihadists in response to its participation in Washington's war. Then there are the roughly 4,000 Pakistani military fatalities suffered during post-9/11 operations against terror groups and other

homegrown militants — significantly higher than all allied troops killed in Afghanistan. Some 35,000 civilians have also died or suffered injuries in the process.

Drones Fuel Popular Rage

During a September address to the Asia Society in New York, Foreign Minister Hinna Rabbani Khar was asked for an explanation of the rampant anti-American sentiment in her country. She replied with a single word: “drones.” At any given time, CIA drones, buzzing like wasps and armed with Hellfire missiles, circle round the clock over an area in Pakistan’s tribal zone, their high-resolution cameras recording movements below. This fills people on the ground with unending terror, being unable to guess when and where the missiles will be fired.

A June Pew Research Center survey shows that 97% of Pakistanis familiar with the drone attacks held a negative view of them. “Those who are familiar with the drone campaign also overwhelmingly (94%) believe the attacks kill too many innocent people,” states its report. “Nearly three-quarters (74%) say they are not necessary to defend Pakistan from extremist organizations.” (In stark contrast, a February Washington Post-ABC News poll found that 83% of Americans — and 73% of liberal Democrats — support Obama’s drone onslaught.)

A recent anti-drone “march” by a nine-mile long motorcade from Islamabad to the border of the South Waziristan tribal agency was led by Imran Khan, head of the Movement for Justice political party. Joined by protesters from the U.S. and Britain, it was a dramatic reminder of the depth of popular feeling against the drones. By refraining from forcibly entering South Waziristan in defiance of an official ban, Khan stayed within the law. And by so doing, he enhanced his already impressive 70% approval rating and improved the chances of his party — committed to ending Islamabad’s participation in Washington’s war on terror — to achieve a breakthrough in the upcoming parliamentary election.

Unlike in Yemen, where the government has authorized the Obama administration to stage drone attacks, Pakistani leaders, who implicitly accepted such strikes before the Pentagon’s gross violation of their country’s sovereignty in the bin Laden killing, no longer do so. “The use of unilateral strikes on Pakistan territory is illegal,” said Foreign Minister Khar. Her government, she explained, needed to rally popular backing for its campaign to quash armed militant groups, and the drones make that impossible. “As the drones fly over the territory of Pakistan, it becomes an American war and the whole logic of this being our fight, in our own interest, is immediately put aside and again it is a war imposed on us.”

Underlying the deployment of a drone, helicopter, or jet fighter to hit a target in a foreign country is an updated version of the Vietnam-era doctrine of “hot pursuit,” which ignores the basic concept of national sovereignty. Pakistani leaders fear that if they do not protest Washington’s continued use of drones for “targeted killings” of Pakistan-based individuals selected in the White House, their arch-rival India will follow suit. It will hit the camps in Pakistan allegedly training terrorists to destabilize Indian Kashmir. That is one of the ongoing nightmares of Pakistan’s senior generals.

The Nuclear Conundrum

Since India would be the prime target of any nuclear-armed extremists, the Indian government dreads the prospect of Pakistan's nukes falling into such hands far more than President Obama. The alarm of both Delhi and Washington is well justified, particularly because Pakistan's arsenal is [growing](#) faster than any on Earth — and the latest versions of nukes it's producing are smaller and so easier to hijack.

Over the past five years, Pakistani extremists have staged a series of attacks on sensitive military installations, including nuclear facilities. In November 2007, for example, they attacked Sargodha airbase where nuclear-capable F-16 jet aircraft are stationed. The following month a suicide bomber targeted a Pakistani Air Force base believed to hold nuclear weapons at Kamra, 37 miles northwest of Islamabad. In August 2008, a group of suicide bombers blew up the gates to a weapons complex at the Wah cantonment containing a nuclear warhead assembly plant, leaving 63 people dead. A further assault on Kamra took place in October 2009 and yet another last August, this time by [eight suicide bombers](#) belonging to the Pakistani Taliban.

Given Pakistan's dependence on a continuing supply of U.S.-made advanced weaponry — essential to withstand any onslaught by India in a conventional war — its government has had to continually reassure Washington that the security of its nuclear arsenal is foolproof. Its leaders have repeatedly assured their American counterparts that the hemispheres containing nuclear fuel and the triggers for activating the weapons are stored separately under tight guard. This has failed to allay the anxieties of successive American presidents. What disconcerts the U.S. is that, despite contributing hundreds of millions of dollars to underwrite programs to help Pakistan secure its nuclear arms, it [does not know](#) where many of these parts are stored.

This is not going to change. The military planners in Islamabad correctly surmise that Delhi and Washington would like to turn Pakistan into a non-nuclear power. At present, they see their nuclear arsenal as the only effective deterrent they have against an Indian aggression which, in their view, they experienced in 1965. “We developed all these nukes to use against India,” said an unnamed senior Pakistani military officer recently quoted in the London-based *Sunday Times Magazine*. “Now they turn out to be very useful in dealing with the U.S.”

In short, Pakistan's military high command has come to view its nuclear arsenal as an effective deterrent not only against its traditional adversary, India, but also its nominal ally in Washington. If such thinking solidifies as the country's military doctrine in the years following the Pentagon's withdrawal from Afghanistan, then Pakistan may finally find itself removed from Washington's list of non-NATO allies, ending the dysfunctional nuclear family of international politics. What that would mean in global terms is anyone's guess.