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U.S.-Pakistani Relations Beyond Bin Laden

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May 10, 2011

The past week has been filled with announcements and speculations on how Osama bin Laden was killed and on Washington's source of intelligence. After any operation of this sort, the world is filled with speculation on sources and methods by people who don't know, and silence or dissembling by those who do.

Obfuscating on how intelligence was developed and on the specifics of how an operation was carried out is an essential part of covert operations. The precise process must be distorted to confuse opponents regarding how things actually played out; otherwise, the enemy learns lessons and adjusts. Ideally, the enemy learns the wrong lessons, and its adjustments wind up further weakening it. Operational disinformation is the final, critical phase of covert operations. So as interesting as it is to speculate on just how the United States located bin Laden and on exactly how the attack took place, it is ultimately not a fruitful discussion. Moreover, it does not focus on the truly important question, namely, the future of U.S.-Pakistani relations.

Posturing Versus a Genuine Breach

It is not inconceivable that Pakistan aided the United States in identifying and capturing Osama bin Laden, but it is unlikely. This is because the operation saw the already-tremendous tensions between the two countries worsen rather than improve. The Obama administration let it be known that it saw Pakistan as either incompetent or duplicitous and that it deliberately withheld plans for the operation from the Pakistanis. For their part, the Pakistanis made it clear that further

operations of this sort on Pakistani territory could see an irreconcilable breach between the two countries. The attitudes of the governments profoundly affected the views of politicians and the public, attitudes that will be difficult to erase.

Posturing designed to hide Pakistani cooperation would be designed to cover operational details, not to lead to significant breaches between countries. The relationship between the United States and Pakistan ultimately is far more important than the details of how Osama bin Laden was captured, but both sides have created a tense atmosphere that they will find difficult to contain. One would not sacrifice strategic relationships for the sake of operational security. Therefore, we have to assume that the tension is real and revolves around the different goals of Pakistan and the United States.

A break between the United States and Pakistan holds significance for both sides. For Pakistan, it means the loss of an ally that could help Pakistan fend off its much larger neighbor to the east, India. For the United States, it means the loss of an ally in the war in Afghanistan. Whether the rupture ultimately occurs, of course, depends on how deep the tension goes. And that depends on what the tension is over, i.e., whether the tension ultimately merits the strategic rift. It also is a question of which side is sacrificing the most. It is therefore important to understand the geopolitics of U.S.-Pakistani relations beyond the question of who knew what about bin Laden.

From Cold to Jihadist War

U.S. strategy in the Cold War included a religious component, namely, using religion to generate tension within the Communist bloc. This could be seen in the Jewish resistance in the Soviet Union, in Roman Catholic resistance in Poland and, of course, in Muslim resistance to the Soviets in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, it took the form of using religious Islamist militias to wage a guerrilla war against Soviet occupation. A three-part alliance involving the Saudis, the Americans and the Pakistanis fought the Soviets. The Pakistanis had the closest relationships with the Afghan resistance due to ethnic and historical bonds, and the Pakistani intelligence service, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), had built close ties with the Afghans.

As frequently happens, the lines of influence ran both ways. The ISI did not simply control Islamist militants, but instead many within the ISI came under the influence of radical Islamist ideology. This reached the extent that the ISI became a center of radical Islamism, not so much on an institutional level as on a personal level: The case officers, as the phrase goes, went native. As long as the U.S. strategy remained to align with radical Islamism against the Soviets, this did not pose a major problem. However, when the Soviet Union collapsed and the United States lost interest in the future of Afghanistan, managing the conclusion of the war fell to the Afghans and to the Pakistanis through the ISI. In the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States played a trivial role. It was the ISI in alliance with the Taliban — a coalition of Afghan and international Islamist fighters who had been supported by the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan — that shaped the future of Afghanistan.

The U.S.- Islamist relationship was an alliance of convenience for both sides. It was temporary, and when the Soviets collapsed, Islamist ideology focused on new enemies, the United States chief among them. Anti-Soviet sentiment among radical Islamists soon morphed into anti-American sentiment. This was particularly true after the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait and Desert

Storm. The Islamists perceived the U.S. occupation and violation of Saudi territorial integrity as a religious breach. Therefore, at least some elements of international Islamism focused on the United States; al Qaeda was central among these elements. Al Qaeda needed a base of operations after being expelled from Sudan, and Afghanistan provided the most congenial home. In moving to Afghanistan and allying with the Taliban, al Qaeda inevitably was able to greatly expand its links with Pakistan's ISI, which was itself deeply involved with the Taliban.

After 9/11, Washington demanded that the Pakistanis aid the United States in its war against al Qaeda and the Taliban. For Pakistan, this represented a profound crisis. On the one hand, Pakistan badly needed the United States to support it against what it saw as its existential enemy, India. On the other hand, Islamabad found it difficult to rupture or control the intimate relationships, ideological and personal, that had developed between the ISI and the Taliban, and by extension with al Qaeda to some extent. In Pakistani thinking, breaking with the United States could lead to strategic disaster with India. However, accommodating the United States could lead to unrest, potential civil war and even collapse by energizing elements of the ISI and supporters of Taliban and radical Islamism in Pakistan.

The Pakistani Solution

The Pakistani solution was to appear to be doing everything possible to support the United States in Afghanistan, with a quiet limit on what that support would entail. That limit on support set by Islamabad was largely defined as avoiding actions that would trigger a major uprising in Pakistan that could threaten the regime. Pakistanis were prepared to accept a degree of unrest in supporting the war but not to push things to the point of endangering the regime.

The Pakistanis thus walked a tightrope between demands they provide intelligence on al Qaeda and Taliban activities and permit U.S. operations in Pakistan on one side and the internal consequences of doing so on the other. The Pakistanis' policy was to accept a degree of unrest to keep the Americans supporting Pakistan against India, but only to a point. So, for example, the government purged the ISI of its overt supporters of radical Islamism, but it did not purge the ISI wholesale nor did it end informal relations between purged intelligence officers and the ISI. Pakistan thus pursued a policy that did everything to appear to be cooperative while not really meeting American demands.

The Americans were, of course, completely aware of the Pakistani limits and did not ultimately object to this arrangement. The United States did not want a coup in Islamabad, nor did it want massive civil unrest. The United States needed Pakistan on whatever terms the Pakistanis could provide help. It needed the supply line through Pakistan from Karachi to the Khyber Pass. And while it might not get complete intelligence from Pakistan, the intelligence it did get was invaluable. Moreover, while the Pakistanis could not close the Afghan Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan, they could limit them and control their operation to some extent. The Americans were as aware as the Pakistanis that the choice was between full and limited cooperation, but could well be between limited and no cooperation, because the government might well not survive full cooperation. The Americans thus took what they could get.

Obviously, this relationship created friction. The Pakistani position was that the United States had helped create this reality in the 1980s and 1990s. The American position was that after 9/11,

the price of U.S. support involved the Pakistanis changing their policies. The Pakistanis said there were limits. The Americans agreed, so the fight was about defining the limits.

The Americans felt that the limit was support for al Qaeda. They felt that whatever Pakistan's relationship with the Afghan Taliban was, support in suppressing al Qaeda, a separate organization, had to be absolute. The Pakistanis agreed in principle but understood that the intelligence on al Qaeda flowed most heavily from those most deeply involved with radical Islamism. In other words, the very people who posed the most substantial danger to Pakistani stability were also the ones with the best intelligence on al Qaeda — and therefore, fulfilling the U.S. demand in principle was desirable. In practice, it proved difficult for Pakistan to carry out. The Breakpoint and the U.S. Exit From Afghanistan

This proved the breakpoint between the two sides. The Americans accepted the principle of Pakistani duplicity, but drew a line at al Qaeda. The Pakistanis understood American sensibilities but didn't want to incur the domestic risks of going too far. This psychological breakpoint cracked open on Osama bin Laden, the Holy Grail of American strategy and the third rail of Pakistani policy.

Under normal circumstances, this level of tension of institutionalized duplicity should have blown the U.S.-Pakistani relationship apart, with the United States simply breaking with Pakistan. It did not, and likely will not for a simple geopolitical reason, one that goes back to the 1990s. In the 1990s, when the United States no longer needed to support an intensive covert campaign in Afghanistan, it depended on Pakistan to manage Afghanistan. Pakistan would have done this anyway because it had no choice: Afghanistan was Pakistan's backdoor, and given tensions with India, Pakistan could not risk instability in its rear. The United States thus did not have to ask Pakistan to take responsibility for Afghanistan.

The United States is now looking for an exit from Afghanistan. Its goal, the creation of a democratic, pro-American Afghanistan able to suppress radical Islamism in its own territory, is unattainable with current forces — and probably unattainable with far larger forces. Gen. David Petraeus, the architect of the Afghan strategy, has been nominated to become the head of the CIA. With Petraeus departing from the Afghan theater, the door is open to a redefinition of Afghan strategy. Despite Pentagon doctrines of long wars, the United States is not going to be in a position to engage in endless combat in Afghanistan. There are other issues in the world that must be addressed. With bin Laden's death, a plausible (if not wholly convincing) argument can be made that the mission in AfPak, as the Pentagon refers to the theater, has been accomplished, and therefore the United States can withdraw.

No withdrawal strategy is conceivable without a viable Pakistan. Ideally, Pakistan would be willing to send forces into Afghanistan to carry out U.S. strategy. This is unlikely, as the Pakistanis don't share the American concern for Afghan democracy, nor are they prepared to try directly to impose solutions in Afghanistan. At the same time, Pakistan can't simply ignore Afghanistan because of its own national security issues, and therefore it will move to stabilize it.

The United States could break with Pakistan and try to handle things on its own in Afghanistan, but the supply line fueling Afghan fighting runs through Pakistan. The alternatives either would

see the United States become dependent on Russia — an equally uncertain line of supply — or on the Caspian route, which is insufficient to supply forces. Afghanistan is war at the end of the Earth for the United States, and to fight it, Washington must have Pakistani supply routes.

The United States also needs Pakistan to contain, at least to some extent, Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan. The United States is stretched to the limit doing what it is doing in Afghanistan. Opening a new front in Pakistan, a country of 180 million people, is well beyond the capabilities of either forces in Afghanistan or forces in the U.S. reserves. Therefore, a U.S. break with Pakistan threatens the logistical foundation of the war in Afghanistan and poses strategic challenges U.S. forces cannot cope with.

The American option might be to support a major crisis between Pakistan and India to compel Pakistan to cooperate with the United States. However, it is not clear that India is prepared to play another round in the U.S. game with Pakistan. Moreover, creating a genuine crisis between India and Pakistan could have two outcomes. The first involves the collapse of Pakistan, which would create an India more powerful than the United States might want. The second and more likely outcome would see the creation of a unity government in Pakistan in which distinctions between secularists, moderate Islamists and radical Islamists would be buried under anti-Indian feeling. Doing all of this to deal with Afghan withdrawal would be excessive, even if India played along, and could well prove disastrous for Washington.

Ultimately, the United States cannot change its policy of the last 10 years. During that time, it has come to accept what support the Pakistanis could give and tolerated what was withheld. U.S. dependence on Pakistan so long as Washington is fighting in Afghanistan is significant; the United States has lived with Pakistan's multitiered policy for a decade because it had to. Nothing in the capture of bin Laden changes the geopolitical realities. So long as the United States wants to wage — or end — a war in Afghanistan, it must have the support of Pakistan to the extent that Pakistan is prepared to provide support. The option of breaking with Pakistan because on some level it is acting in opposition to American interests does not exist.

This is the ultimate contradiction in U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and even the so-called war on terror as a whole. The United States has an absolute opposition to terrorism and has waged a war in Afghanistan on the questionable premise that the tactic of terrorism can be defeated, regardless of source or ideology. Broadly fighting terrorism requires the cooperation of the Muslim world, as U.S. intelligence and power is inherently limited. The Muslim world has an interest in containing terrorism, but not the absolute concern the United States has. Muslim countries are not prepared to destabilize their countries in service to the American imperative. This creates deeper tensions between the United States and the Muslim world and increases the American difficulty in dealing with terrorism — or with Afghanistan.

The United States must either develop the force and intelligence to wage war without any assistance — which is difficult to imagine given the size of the Muslim world and the size of the U.S. military — or it will have to accept half-hearted support and duplicity. Alternatively, it could accept that it will not win in Afghanistan and will not be able simply to eliminate terrorism. These are difficult choices, but the reality of Pakistan drives home that these, in fact, are the choices.