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afgazad@gmail.com

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U.S.-Pakistan ties and the curse of secrecy

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When President Barack Obama telephoned Pakistan’s president to say U.S. forces had found and killed bin Laden, he offered him a choice. He could say Pakistan helped find bin Laden, or that it knew nothing, according to a senior western official. Pakistan initially chose to stress the former – that it had helped – but later shifted to condemning what it called the U.S. violation of its sovereignty.

The story illustrates the complicity between the United States and Pakistan in their deliberately ambiguous relationship. This ambiguity has its uses. It allows Washington to keep working with Pakistan in the face of angry questions at home about why Osama bin Laden was living there. And it lets Pakistan cooperate with the United States, for example on drone attacks, while trying — not particularly successfully — to minimise the domestic backlash.

But the result of that ambiguity has been a disconnect between the leadership of both the United States and Pakistan and their own people, who have little knowledge of the understandings being reached in the many high-level meetings between the two countries (and which will continue despite the deep distrust on both sides.)

As Christine Fair says in her interview with NBR, ”the Obama administration has had no illusions about Pakistan.” When it took office, it had full knowledge of Pakistan’s reluctance to eradicate militant groups, and indeed of the rapid expansion of its nuclear programme. But she added, “the Obama administration, like past administrations, has been willing to look the other way when it deems necessary.”

And for all the furious debate in both countries about the state of U.S.-Pakistan relations, “the leaderships of both countries know that they need each other in ways that are both humiliating and difficult to explain to publics that are ever more outraged and appalled by the perfidy of the other.”

The problem with this pattern of public fury and private reconciliation is that it leaves very little room to build trust between the two countries and almost no scope for properly informed public debate. Some secrecy is of course needed in war and diplomacy. But with the United States and Pakistan, it has become the automatic default position.

This secrecy and complicity did not just start with bin Laden and drone strikes. It goes way back to U-2 spy planes flying over the Soviet Union – Gary Powers, shot down in Russia in 1960, took off from Peshawar. It goes back to the jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979-1989, when Washington knew Pakistan would be forced to lie to the Soviet Union about its involvement for fear of inviting Russian retaliation on its own soil. It goes back to the United States turning a blind eye to Pakistan’s expanding nuclear weapons programme in the 1980s.

The United States is now talking about establishing new ground rules for the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. So how about introducing some openness into those new ground rules?

Consider one example where transparency just might be less damaging than secrecy.

The United States, which has begun tentative direct talks with representatives of the Taliban, wants Pakistan to facilitate the process of reconciliation. So does Pakistan (though they may not see eye-to-eye on how it should work.) As far as I understand from conversations with officials from various countries, including from Pakistan, these talks are not about reaching a straight-forward power-sharing agreement with the Taliban that would allow U.S. troops to leave Afghanistan. Rather they are one part of a wider and complex process meant eventually to bring all Afghan parties into a broad political settlement.

Yet such is the secrecy around the talks that there is a serious risk that if enough people believe the Taliban are about to return to power, their opponents will prepare for civil war, building up arms and funding in a way that makes this a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As Ronald Neumann, a former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, writes here about his visit to the country in March, “there is a desperate need to clarify U.S. intentions. From President Hamid Karzai to his opponents to non-political Afghans, I found everyone asking what our long-term goals are. Afghanistan is a traumatized nation after 30 years of conflict. Doubts about American intentions lead to conspiracy theories, hedging strategies and even talk of civil war if too much haste to reach a political settlement means the Taliban could be returned to power — something that many Afghans who suffered under the Taliban’s savage rule are determined to resist at all costs.”

I have written before that there is rather greater strategic convergence between the United States and Pakistan than appears on the surface. Both want stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan - rather

than wanting to reinstall a Taliban government in Kabul - has been insisting for a while it wants a stable and neutral Afghanistan. Both the United States and Pakistan want stability in Pakistan - such a statement of the obvious that it is often overlooked.

Meanwhile, India – always the elephant in the room in discussions about Pakistan – has begun a slow but steady attempt at peace-making - its focus nowadays being very much on doing what it takes to build its economy. Pakistan desperately needs to salvage its own economy – a view, analysts say, also promoted by army chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, who sees the country’s security as coming from its economic strength. If a political settlement in Afghanistan and an India-Pakistan thaw were to open up trade across the region, all three countries would benefit and the gain of one would not necessarily be at the expense of the other (this idea at the moment is largely aspirational – but the fact that it is on the table at all shows how much times have changed.)

So arguably, both the United States and Pakistan are roughly on the same page on what needs to happen. Yet their relations are a tactical and emotional disaster. Those long decades of secrecy have not helped. As Najam Sethi wrote in his column, the “carefully contrived and mutually agreed ambiguity has now run aground.”

If something needs to change in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, there is one approach that has not been tried yet. Try breaking that habit of confining nearly everything to secret understandings between military and political leaderships, and instead trusting the people of the countries affected — and that includes Afghanistan — to have a properly informed debate about what is the best way to bring stability to the region.