

The bin Laden aftermath: The U.S. shouldn't hold Pakistan's military against Pakistan's civilians



By C. Christine Fair, May 4, 2011

ISLAMABAD -- After a team of [helicopter-borne U.S. Navy Seals](#) stormed a compound in the densely populated Bilal Town neighborhood in the Pakistan Army town of Abbottabad, Osama bin Laden was dead. Pakistan was notified *after* the operation. The U.S. Congress and citizens alike are dumbfounded that America's archenemy was hiding in the plain sight of the Pakistan military and intelligence rather than in the mountainous frontier of the tribal areas. Former President George W. Bush famously declared that the United States would [smoke him out of his cave](#).



However, Abbottabad is far from a cave. The small city is about an [hour's drive](#) from Islamabad, reached through roads that trace the modest altitude climb. The town is a hilly and verdant spot where many Pakistanis retreat for the summer when the plains are scorching. It's near some of the famous hiking spots such as Natiagali. Abbottabad is covered in most guidebooks for Pakistan, including [Lonely Planet](#). Most notably, the hill-town is also home to [Pakistan's Military Academy](#) and indeed, Bin Laden's massive, albeit non-luxurious, lair was a mere kilometer from this prestigious institution and the security that accompanied it.

Analysts and U.S. officials speaking on and off the record have speculated about the possible support bin Laden had from Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies. It stretches credulity to the breaking point to believe that *someone* in Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies did not know about Bin Laden's whereabouts, and even afforded the world's most wanted fugitive a support network. John Brennan, President Barack Obama's top counterterrorism adviser said that it is [inconceivable](#) that bin Laden did not have some support network within Pakistan, though he stopped short of saying that this support was official.

It is possible that Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies succumbed to a profound level of incompetence. But ultimately such speculation is nonproductive. Judgment should be deferred until the numerous investigations are done.

Many good questions and no good answers

Whether this happened due to incompetence or complicity, Pakistan has much explaining to do. Nearly a year ago, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton boldly [declared](#), "I'm not saying that they're at the highest levels, but I believe that somewhere in this government are people who know where Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda is, where Mullah Omar and the leadership of the Afghan Taliban is, and we expect more co-operation to help us bring to justice, capture or kill those who attacked us on 9/11." Pakistan has [long denied](#) that bin Laden was on Pakistani territory. Notwithstanding these demurrals, Clinton was right.

The bin Laden imbroglio is clearly a further strain on already-troubled U.S.-Pakistan relations. American legislators and other officials have grown wary of continuing to provide military and civilian support to Pakistan given that the state [continues to aid and abet an array](#) of U.S. foes including the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network, whose operatives are responsible for the deaths of thousands of Americans as well as the [citizens of Afghanistan](#) and NATO countries. Pakistan continues to aid and abet groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba. In light of this evidence, it is baffling that [Clinton certified](#) that Pakistan is cooperating to eliminate these groups and even cease state support of them, as required by the conditions on security assistance imposed by the Kerry-Lugar-Berman aid legislation. She made this certification on March 18, 2011. We now know that she did so even while U.S. intelligence agencies and the White House were gathering a picture of this important al-Qaeda safe-house sprawled out comfortably amidst Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies.

The American Congress and citizens alike want answers. Since 9/11, Pakistan has been allocated some [\\$20 billion](#) in U.S. assistance and lucrative military reimbursements to compensate Pakistan's for its costs incurred in supporting the global war on terror -- all the while supporting U.S. adversaries in that same war.

In the wake of this outrage -- which is merely the last in a series of concatenated outrages -- [Congress is considering](#) cutting off assistance to Pakistan. While these urges are understandable, this would be a strategic blunder for several reasons, and the United States should remain committed to Pakistan despite the obvious temptations to retreat and take its checkbook with it.

First, bin Laden is dead. The threat posed by al-Qaeda and other international and regional terrorist groups is not. The United States must resist all immediate impulses and remain stone-cold focused on the longer term goal of regional stability.

Second, *Pakistanis* are not the same as their government and they are not interchangeable with their military and intelligence agencies. Withdrawing aid from Pakistan would hurt Pakistanis more than the Pakistani Army.

Third, even if *someone* in the Pakistani government helped bin Laden remain in Pakistan undetected, it is highly unlikely that the civilian government was involved. Indeed, Pakistan's civilian governments have been long left out of national security affairs, whether domestic or foreign. Foreign policy is set by Army General Headquarters, not by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It would be a mistake to again punish Pakistan's civilians for the crimes of omission and commission by the security agencies that have done much to vitiate these same institutions.

Fourth, Pakistan remains at the core of U.S. national security interests. Its security competition with India is dangerous. The United States has not yet learned the limits of diplomacy: it cannot engage India strategically (namely, the provision of the civilian nuclear deal) without considering the negative impact on its engagement with Pakistan. After the U.S. civilian-nuclear deal, Pakistan has set its own nuclear machinery into overdrive. It now has the [fastest growing arsenal](#) in the world. Equally important, Pakistan will remain a locus of terrorist groups operating in and beyond the South Asia region for time to come.

Engage civilians, civilians, and more civilians

Engaging and investing in Pakistan's civilian government and citizens is paramount and should not be held hostage to the evolving bin Laden drama. Pakistanis have generally been fed anti-American rhetoric infused with a stylized history of bilateral ties and outright fictions. The U.S. diplomatic mission in Islamabad seems incapable of affecting this discourse. *Yet, it must.* While Pakistanis decry America as the perfidious "Great Satan," the simple fact is that the United States has done more for Pakistanis than any other country. Americans should be proud that U.S. development assistance has helped educational outcomes and improved maternal and child health, among other development successes, in Pakistan. These successes have not been as dramatic as some would hope, but they are still important.

It is also a fact that the policies of the United States in the Muslim world and the way it has engaged Pakistan in particular gives credence to these most unfavorable depictions of the United States. Pakistanis have genuine gripes about U.S. policies towards Israel and its treatment of Palestinians, U.S. relations with Middle East dictators and Gulf State autocratic monarchs, and wars to promote democracy while simultaneously bolstering Pakistan's string of military dictators at the expense of its parliamentary democratic moorings. These legitimate grouses coexist comfortably with the baseless conspiracies and distorted versions of U.S.-Pakistan bilateral history. The United States needs to address these facts and fictions forthrightly. It cannot do so from the comforts of Fortress America and by engaging only Pakistan's English media.

The only way to disprove Pakistanis' deepest doubts about U.S. commitment to Pakistanis and their democratic development is to remain focused on the goal of a democratic, civilian-governed Pakistan, however elusive and fraught that goal may be. That is the most likely -- albeit far from certain -- route to a Pakistan that is increasingly at peace with itself and its neighbors.

The United States must also learn to help Pakistan in ways that are more economically productive. Pakistan needs more trade, not more aid. Pakistan has long asked for [access to U.S. textile markets](#) and

has long been denied. It is an absurd commentary upon U.S. legislative functioning that the interests of U.S. textile lobbies have trumped those of U.S. national security interests. Pakistan also needs technical support to improve its bureaucracy, to help its national and provincial assemblies do their jobs better, to enable civilian institutions to over time take a larger role in security governance, and to help Pakistan's dilapidated civilian security agencies become capable of handling the threats its country faces.

President Obama has shown courage, sagacity, and resolution in his decision-making thus far. He needs to work assiduously to ensure that the United States maintain its resolve to stay engaged with Pakistan. To abandon Pakistan because of the flawed and dangerous choices of its military and intelligence agencies is to miss the point: the United States needs to help Pakistanis help themselves. This is not driven by altruism. The security of the United States and its allies depends on it.

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