

An Unworthy Ally

Time for Washington to Cut Pakistan Loose

C. Christine Fair and Sumit Ganguly

Ever since 9/11, the United States has provided Pakistan with a steady supply of security and nonsecurity assistance. U.S. officials have justified these generous transfers—worth more than \$30 billion since 2002—on the grounds that they secure Pakistan's ongoing cooperation in Afghanistan, bolster Pakistan's ability to fight terrorism, and give the U.S. government influence over the country's ever-expanding nuclear weapons program. Failing to deliver this support, the argument runs, could dramatically weaken the will and capacity of Pakistan's security forces and possibly even lead to the collapse of the Pakistani state. In that event, Pakistan's nuclear know-how, material, or weapons could well fall into the hands of nefarious actors.

Yet that logic is fundamentally flawed. Many of the weapons Washington gives Islamabad are ill suited to fighting terrorism, and continued transfers will do nothing to convince the Pakistani government to end its long-standing support for terrorist groups. In fact, U.S. assistance gives Pakistan an incentive to foster a sense of insecurity concerning its nuclear arsenal and expanding ranks of jihadists. Since the current approach has little chance of aligning Pakistan's interests with those of the United States, the time has come for Washington to change course. If Washington cannot end Pakistan's noxious behaviors, it should at least stop sponsoring them.

OLD HABITS DIE HARD

Pakistan's reliance on militant proxies is as old as its very existence as an independent state. As early as 1947, when Pakistan was emerging

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from the collapse of the British Raj, the new government was backing anti-Indian tribal militias in the disputed territory of Kashmir. In Afghanistan, meanwhile, by 1950, Islamabad was promoting a Pakistan-based Islamist party known as Jamaat-e-Islami. Members of that party would later become prominent mujahideen who, with the backing of Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), would go on to fight both Afghanistsans pro-Soviet leaders and Soviet troops in Afghanistan in the 1970s and 1980s. After 1989, Pakistan redeployed these battle-hardened fighters to Indian Kashmir, where they displaced indigenous secular nationalist insurgents in their battle against Indian rule in the province.



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Pakistan's support for nonstate actors has not been limited to Islamist groups. From the late 1970s until the mid-1990s, the Pakistani government funded and trained Sikh separatists in their bloody campaign of terror in India's Punjab region. It also sponsored various ethnonationalist rebels in northeastern India until the 1970s, when East Pakistan achieved independence as Bangladesh and China cut off its support for the insurgents. Pakistan's support for these groups attests to its strategic compulsion to work against India, beyond its more commonly appreciated Islamist ideological objectives.

Pakistan has come to rely on nonstate actors in Afghanistan and India because they are relatively inexpensive and disproportionately effective. They shield the state from the risks of deploying regular forces while affording its officials a degree of plausible deniability. Pakistan's nuclear capacity, meanwhile, has allowed Islamabad to use these actors with the knowledge that its neighbors, particularly India, will hesitate to retaliate. That Pakistan can request foreign assistance to contain the menace of its wayward proxies compounds their appeal. Jihadist organizations are integral to Pakistan's regional strategy. For the country's security establishment, the notion of cutting them off is anathema.

PUNISHED BY REWARDS

Even as they support terrorist groups that threaten U.S. interests, Pakistani officials are wont to claim that Washington has been a perfidious ally. They note, for example, that the United States failed to come to Pakistan's aid during its 1965 and 1971 wars with India, despite a bilateral defense pact signed in 1954 and shared commitments under the Central Treaty Organization and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. They claim that the United States drew Pakistan into an anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s and then abandoned Islamabad, leaving it to deal with the aftermath of the conflict once U.S. objectives had been achieved. And they claim that Washington unjustly withheld an order of F-16 fighter jets that Pakistan had agreed to purchase, because of sanctions imposed in 1990.

Yet in all these instances, Pakistan's historical retelling is either a distortion of reality or an outright fiction. For starters, the United States was not obligated to help Pakistan in its 1965 war with India, both because Pakistan had initiated that conflict and because Washington's various agreements with Islamabad pertained only to communist

threats. In fact, even though sanctions imposed on both India and Pakistan after the 1965 war legally prohibited the United States from helping Pakistan when conflict with India reignited over East Pakistan in 1971, the Nixon administration nonetheless came to Islamabad's assistance. Indeed, President Richard Nixon bent U.S. law to authorize military aid even as American officials understood that Pakistan was committing genocide against ethnic Bengalis in East Pakistan.

Over the next decade, Washington would repeatedly compromise its commitment to nuclear nonproliferation to the benefit of Pakistan's military rulers. When Afghanistan became mired in Soviet-backed chaos in December 1979, for example, the administration of U.S. President Jimmy Carter decided to drop the nuclear-related sanctions it had imposed on Pakistan earlier that year and instead sponsor Pakistan's efforts to oust Soviet forces from Afghanistan. Yet Pakistani President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq rebuffed Carter's offer of some \$325 million in aid as "peanuts," betting that a Republican president would offer Pakistan a better deal after the 1980 election. He was right. After assuming office in January 1981, Ronald Reagan secured a waiver of the 1979 sanctions, and by 1982, the United States had initiated a six-year aid package worth some \$3.2 billion.

As for the claim that Islamabad was drawn into Washington's Afghan jihad, the chronology suggests otherwise. Seeking leverage against the government in Kabul, Pakistan had been supporting Islamist militants in Afghanistan at its own expense since 1974—five years before Soviet troops crossed into the country. In other words, Pakistan brought the United States, and its wallet, into a campaign it had been pursuing on its own for years.

Then there is the myth about the F-16 fighter jets. By 1984, CIA staff working on nonproliferation issues, along with some members of Congress, had become concerned that Pakistan was advancing its nuclear weapons program on the United States' dime. Others in the White House and Congress, as well as those running the CIA's covert operations in Afghanistan, maintained that Washington should continue to set aside its nonproliferation goals in favor of countering the Soviet threat in Afghanistan.

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The Pressler Amendment, passed in 1985, attempted to resolve these conflicting sentiments by moving the nuclear redline that would trigger the cessation of U.S. aid: from the achievement of technical advances in Pakistan's nuclear program

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to the possession of a nuclear weapon. (Many Pakistanis mistakenly believe that Congress passed the amendment specifically to harm Pakistan, but the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs was in fact actively involved in getting the legislation passed.) The amendment simply required the president to certify that Pakistan did not have a nuclear device for U.S. aid to continue. And the many discrepancies among interagency assessments of Pakistan's nuclear status allowed him to do so without perjuring himself.

But over the next five years, as Pakistan continued to advance its nuclear program, it became increasingly difficult to certify that Pakistan had not built a nuclear weapon. Finally, in 1990, President George H. W. Bush declined to do so, and the sanctions that Carter had enacted in 1979 came back into force.

The renewed sanctions prevented Pakistan from taking possession of 28 American F-16s it had agreed to buy in the early 1980s. The planes sat unused in the Arizona desert, accruing storage fees for Pakistan. Although the Clinton administration eventually resolved the dispute by finding a third-party buyer and then reimbursing the Pakistani government, Pakistan would later exploit the F-16 imbroglio to its own benefit. In 2005, after four years of Pakistani lobbying, the George W. Bush administration agreed to sell Pakistan as many F-16s as it cared to purchase. A 2009 State Department cable would later reveal that the F-16 sales were meant, in part, to exorcise the "bitter legacy" of the Pressler Amendment. Yet the Pressler Amendment was hardly an instance of American perfidy, and the F-16 sales thus validated a key Pakistani myth about American behavior. Bush administration officials believed they had to right the wrongs of a past they seem to have misunderstood.

The 36 updated F-16s the U.S. government eventually sold to Pakistan would lay the cornerstone of its future relationship with Islamabad. The planes were only part of a broader provision of weaponry: in the years since 9/11, the United States has also supplied

Past attempts to induce Pakistan to change its behavior have largely failed, and there is little reason to believe that a change in course is imminent. Indeed, what little convergence of interests existed between

NO MORE CARROTS

The strategic demands of today's South Asia are distinct from those of the Cold War era, but the central dynamic of U.S.-Pakistani relations remains constant. The United States turns a blind eye to Pakistan's misdeeds because it depends on the country's leaders to counter U.S. enemies in the region—first the Soviets, now the mélange of militant groups active in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As a result, the United States has subsidized both the expansion of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and its stable of Islamist terrorists through programs ostensibly created to manage those same concerns.

All the while, the United States has not required Pakistan to stop backing militant groups, such as the Afghan Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba, even as Islamabad battles those militants who have turned against the state. Indeed, Islamabad has created a permanent revenue stream by arguing that so long as it is fighting militants, it should be entitled to U.S. aid. The United States has been willing to comply because it considers the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons a core national interest.

The weapons systems were accompanied by direct financial assistance. The Bush administration used the Coalition Support Fund, initially intended to reimburse Pakistan for the costs of assisting the U.S. military in Afghanistan, to secure Pakistani cooperation on the maintenance of transit corridors into Afghanistan and to encourage Pakistan's army to confront militants in the country's tribal areas. Although these policies began during the Bush years, they have continued, with some modifications, under the Obama administration. And despite Barack Obama's understanding of Pakistan's misdeeds—demonstrated, for example, in a 2009 white paper on U.S. policy toward the country—that limit American complicity in them. As a result, Washington has continued to pay Pakistan to do what any sovereign state should do: eliminate terrorists exploiting its territory.

The country with 15 reconnaissance drones, 20 Cobra attack helicopters, six C-130 Hercules transport aircraft, a Perry-class missile frigate, and many other armaments.

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Washington and Islamabad during the Cold War has long since disappeared. After six decades of policy predicated on Pakistani blackmail, it should be possible to achieve U.S. interests with a different approach. A strategy of containment is the United States' best option.

Above all, U.S. relations with Pakistan should be premised on the understanding that Pakistan is a hostile state, rather than an ally or a partner. To be sure, accepting that reality does not mean abandoning Pakistan altogether. The United States should maintain its diplomatic relations with Pakistan, and it should address a long-standing Pakistani complaint by providing Pakistani products greater access to American markets, signaling that Washington takes Islamabad's legitimate concerns seriously enough to risk the ire of domestic business interests. It should also continue training Pakistanis in critical capacities such as peacekeeping, disaster relief, and civil-military relations through the U.S. government's International Military Education and Training program. And it should continue to provide Pakistan with modest assistance in such areas as basic health care, gender equality, and primary and occupational education. Yet it must delink that help from the failed counter-terrorism programs with which many such human development programs are currently bundled. And above all, Washington must end its support for the country's rigid military establishment, which sustains a perverse strategic culture that has ill served Pakistani and U.S. interests for decades.

To that end, the United States should stop supplying Pakistan with strategic weapons systems, and it should prevent Pakistan from replacing and repairing those pieces of equipment that it has already received. The provision of U.S. weapons cannot reshape Pakistan's will to maintain its militant proxies, but those weapons do equip Pakistan to challenge India. Indeed, the vast majority of the weapons systems provided to Pakistan since 2001 are better suited for a conventional conflict with its neighbor than for internal security operations. These transfers undermine U.S. efforts to cultivate a relationship with India, an important democratic partner on a range of crucial issues, from securing regional sea-lanes to managing China's rise.

Washington should also reconsider its approach to Pakistani civil society. In the past, it has reached out to some of Pakistan's illiberal groups, including members of the Islamist political parties Jamaat-e-

Islamic and Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam, because it was eager to demonstrate good will toward Muslim organizations amid the tensions of the so-called war on terror. But this policy gave such organizations credibility they did not deserve. Both Jamiat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam, for example, have long-standing ties to militant groups. Powerless to reform such organizations, the United States should instead direct its resources toward those groups whose values and goals align most closely with U.S. interests.

Only when Pakistan's tax base is broadened will citizens begin to hold their government accountable.

To this end, Washington should support those elements of Pakistani civil society—locally operating anticorruption and human rights groups, for example—that seek a democratic, pluralistic, and stable country. Doing so effectively will require better social intelligence on Pakistan and, in turn, American personnel with deeper in-country experience.

Repairing Pakistan's civil-military relations, on the other hand, will require reforming the country's tax system. Today, less than one percent of Pakistanis pay income taxes, and the country's tax-to-GDP ratio is among the world's lowest. Only when Pakistan's tax base is broadened will citizens begin to hold their government accountable for its overinvestment in defense and underinvestment in human development. Washington should therefore encourage the International Monetary Fund to condition new agreements with Pakistan on the completion of promised economic reforms, including an overhaul of its tax system. In the past, Pakistan's confidence that it was too dangerous to fail has allowed it to renege on its promises to international lenders. Allowing Pakistan to face the consequences of its failures may force it to fix its economic policy in the future.

Should Pakistan continue to back nonstate actors, the United States should aggressively use every tool available to sanction Pakistanis—ordinary citizens, military and civilian officials, and militant leaders—who engage in or sponsor terrorism. Many of Pakistan's elite travel to the United States for medical treatment or to visit family members; Washington should deny visas to those Pakistanis linked to terrorist activity by credible intelligence.

In a related vein, the United States should curb the ability of militant groups based in Pakistan to project power internationally. All the major Pakistan-based and Pakistan-backed militant groups—including Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, and Jaish-e-Mohammed—raise funds, spread propaganda, or recruit fighters abroad. The United States should work with the relevant countries to detain and charge people involved in such activities. And in consultation with foreign governments, Washington should also consider expanding the Joint Special Operations Command's targeting program to capture and kill high-value militants, in South and Southeast Asia and in those European and Middle Eastern countries where militant groups have extensive infrastructure.

Finally, the United States should remove itself from Pakistan's nuclear coercion loop. It is questionable whether the billions of dollars in aid sent to Islamabad over the past six decades has bought the United States actionable information on the Pakistani nuclear program. What is evident, however, is that Pakistan uses its nuclear arsenal to extract rents from the United States and to deter India from retaliating against attacks by its militant proxies. With this in mind, the United States should make two points clear to Pakistan. First, Washington should tell Islamabad that it will be held accountable if any of its nuclear material is found in the hands of another state or nonstate actors. Punitive measures could well include air strikes on Pakistan's nuclear facilities. And second, although in the past the United States has pushed India to de-escalate the situation in the aftermath of Pakistani-sponsored terrorist attacks, Washington should tell Pakistan that it will not intervene in any future crises. How New Delhi decides to respond to Pakistani provocations should be its decision, not Washington's.

Without a doubt, ending Washington's deference to the Pakistani military would be a dramatic shock to Pakistan's political system. But if such a strategy is implemented with care and vigor, it will offer a feasible alternative to ongoing attempts to conciliate Pakistan's generals in the false hope that they might somehow develop interests aligned with those of the United States.

FROM RESILIENCE TO REFORM

Critics of radically reorienting U.S. policy toward Pakistan argue that cutting the country off would be ineffective at best and dangerously

destabilizing at worst. They claim, for example, that U.S. sanctions in the 1990s failed to prevent Pakistan from acquiring a nuclear weapon and testing it in 1998 and that a punitive approach would be similarly fruitless today. But the chronology of this argument is confused: although Pakistan tested its first nuclear weapon in 1998, the country had assembled the materials for a bomb by the late 1980s, well before U.S. sanctions came into force.

Nor did the cutoff of aid in 1990 lead to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan and 9/11, as proponents of continued support for Pakistan contend. To the contrary, the emergence of the Taliban had everything to do with the United States' withdrawal of support for reconstruction in Afghanistan and its willingness to let Pakistan orchestrate events there after the Soviets left. These decisions had nothing to do with the cutoff of aid to Pakistan per se. Indeed, Pakistan worked relentlessly to install an Islamist government in Afghanistan after the Soviet retreat, first under Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and later under the Taliban, in an attempt to keep Indian influence out of Kabul.

The collapse of Afghanistan in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal nevertheless offers a number of cautionary tales for policymakers managing the drawdown of the U.S. presence there. To begin with, U.S. diplomats should recognize that a negotiated settlement between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban, facilitated by Pakistan, would advance Pakistan's interests, not those of the United States. Any such agreement would install Taliban commanders in posts that they did not have to earn at the ballot box, undermining the country's democratic gains and providing renewed safe havens for Islamist militants supported by Pakistan.

Americans must also understand the risks of diminishing their financial support for the Afghan government. After the Soviet Union cut off aid to Afghanistan in 1991, Islamist militants managed to wrest control of the country from Mohammad Najibullah, the Afghan president who had been backed by Moscow. When the last American check is cashed, the Afghan government will become ever more vulnerable to Pakistani depredations.

Advocates of continued aid to Islamabad often argue that Washington needs Pakistan's cooperation to bring supplies to Afghanistan via Pakistani routes. But this is not the case. When Pakistan restricted U.S. access to supply routes in 2011, the United States managed to

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transport goods to Afghanistan by air and through Central Asia. That policy may have been temporarily expensive, but as the United States diminishes its presence in Afghanistan, it should likewise be able to do so without relying on Pakistan.

Perhaps the greatest concern raised by advocates of the status quo is that discontinuing aid would lead to the collapse of the Pakistani state and the arrival of Islamist terrorists at the nuclear gates. Yet Pakistan is far more resilient than most analysts appreciate, and state failure is not in the offing. When Pakistan became independent, in 1947, it faced a daunting set of challenges. It lacked a functioning national democratic party. Its ministries and armed forces were short-staffed and dysfunctional. Large portions of its population were resentful of Islamabad's rule. And it was ill equipped to police the dangerous border with Afghanistan that it had inherited from the Raj. At the time, British and some Indian leaders expected the country to collapse and merge with its neighbor.

It never did, of course, and over the next nearly seven decades, equally difficult challenges would arise, the loss of East Pakistan and massive natural disasters among them. Through them all, Pakistan has managed to persist—in large part due to the competence of the country's armed forces and the strength of its civil society groups, which remain effective despite their frequently illiberal goals.

Pakistan will not fail. Under U.S. pressure, it is more likely to undertake crucial political and fiscal reforms. If it does, the result will be better for Pakistanis, better for U.S. interests in South Asia, and better for anyone interested in a Pakistan at peace with itself and its neighbors. ●