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An Assessment**

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Pakistani Partnerships with the United States: An Assessment

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Executive Summary

This essay assesses the relationships between the U.S. and different elements within Pakistan's political and military leadership in the context of ongoing regional counterterrorism and counter-insurgency efforts.

Main Argument

- Since anti-American sentiment is widespread in Pakistan, political and military leaders tend to justify partnership with the U.S. as a necessary evil rather than a positive good.
- Pakistan's military is conflicted in its partnership with the U.S., in part because of doubts about whether U.S. and Pakistani strategic interests are aligned, and in part because the Pakistani military lacks a robust, effective capacity to tackle the insurgents and terrorists that the U.S. perceives to be the greatest threat to regional and international security.
- Given the political fragility of the ruling coalition government in Islamabad, it is important to note that Pakistan's other political party leaders, including former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, range widely in their support for cooperation with the U.S.
- Islamist parties stand no chance of winning national power through the ballot box, but in certain instances they may prove to be the only U.S. conduit for effective, albeit limited, counterterrorism cooperation.

Policy Implications

- Expanding technical assistance to civilian institutions and political parties in Pakistan may help to solidify Pakistan's civilian democracy and avoid a return to military rule.
- Reaching out to different political parties, including those with limited regional constituencies, may offer a means to enhance U.S.-Pakistan cooperation at the subnational level.
- Undertaking several major assistance programs that provide high-profile demonstrations of U.S. partnership and meet serious development needs could help to mitigate anti-Americanism in Pakistan.
- Offering Pakistan's military and intelligence the platforms, tools, and training appropriate to counter-insurgency operations has the potential to induce deeper cooperation with the U.S.

The identity and interests of Pakistan's leaders are of profound importance to U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic operations in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the neighboring regions. The cultivation of effective relationships in Pakistan requires understanding the nuances of Pakistan's leadership. While anti-American sentiment is widespread in Pakistani society, the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis are also opposed to terrorism and Islamist extremism. Many Pakistanis and their leaders are open to the prospect of partnerships with the United States as long as they perceive concrete opportunities for economic, political, or social advancement.

This essay examines the identity, interests, and popular standing of Pakistan's major leaders, particularly with respect to their willingness to cooperate or engage in partnerships with the United States. The first section provides an overview of Pakistani public attitudes toward cooperation with the United States. The subsequent three sections then assess Pakistan's major political party leaders, top military officers, and influential individuals from outside the realm of formal party politics, respectively. For each set of leaders, the essay identifies bases of popular and institutional support as well as the extent of these leaders' willingness to support U.S. efforts in the region. The essay concludes with some options for how the United States might cultivate more effective relationships in Pakistan.

Pakistani Public Attitudes

Pakistan's history has been punctuated by an on-again, off-again partnership with the United States.¹ Over the past 60 years, most Pakistanis have—rightly or wrongly—come to view U.S. influence as a primary determinant of their nation's fate and a heavy hand behind the actions of their leaders. Partnership with Washington has always had critics in Pakistan. Pakistanis to the left of center have long criticized U.S. “imperialism,” while Islamists, particularly after the Iranian Revolution, pursued their own anti-Western agendas. Since the early 1990s, when the Cold War's end and Islamabad's determined pursuit of a nuclear capability inclined Washington to distance itself from Pakistan, mistrust of the United States became more firmly engrained in the public mind, and even Pakistan's right-of-center nationalists no longer saw the United States as a reliable ally. U.S. intervention in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001, and

¹ Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947–2000* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2001).

the subsequent uptick in violence throughout the region have convinced many ordinary Pakistanis that the United States is to blame for Pakistan's heightened insecurity.²

President Musharraf's initial decision to lend support to the Bush administration's war on terrorism must be viewed within this context of widespread Pakistani anti-Americanism. Musharraf justified his post-September 11 decision as an inescapable strategic move intended to shield Pakistan from the wrath of an injured superpower.³ Over the subsequent seven years, he failed to convince Pakistanis of the benefits of cooperation with the United States or of the threat posed by extremist groups based in Pakistan, even as his own near-assassination experiences undoubtedly sensitized him to that threat. The unpopularity of the Bush administration in Pakistan and throughout much of the Muslim world compounded the challenges confronting Musharraf.

Today, even Pakistani leaders who favor a partnership with the United States often find it easier to justify the relationship to the public as a necessary evil than as a positive good. Judging from Pakistan's mass media and parliamentary debate, there is a widely held view that the United States is making unreasonable demands of Pakistan's government and military, while Pakistan's civilian population suffers extreme disruption and hardship due to U.S. military operations in the region. Instead of blaming extremists for acts of terrorism within Pakistan, many Pakistanis have tended to hold the United States accountable for provoking militants by invading Pashtun lands in Afghanistan, for the "collateral damage" caused by Predator drone attacks along the Afghan border, and for a range of other recent and historical U.S. policies perceived as unfairly targeting Muslims. It remains to be seen whether the repressive lifestyle imposed by the Pakistani Taliban in the Swat Valley in early 2009—and the subsequent military response—will galvanize public opinion against extremists over the long run or pave the way to more extensive cooperation with the United States.

This does not mean that most Pakistanis would prefer to live in an extremist-dominated state. In fact, there was widespread public revulsion to the expansion of severe Taliban rule in the Swat Valley. Even fewer Pakistanis support terrorist violence against Americans. Quite understandably, however, most Pakistanis would prefer to live in a country less directly implicated in U.S. military and intelligence operations. That sense of victimization and powerlessness probably helps to explain a great deal of Pakistan's popular dissatisfaction with the United States.

² "Results of a New Nationwide Public Opinion Survey of Pakistan before the June 2008 Pakistani By-Elections," *Terror Free Tomorrow*, New America Foundation, <http://www.terrorfreetomorrow.org/upimagesftf/PakistanPollReportJune08.pdf>.

³ Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 201–4.

Given this widespread dissatisfaction, cooperation with Washington would be even more limited than it is today if Islamabad's actions were determined strictly by majority sentiment. In particular, the use of Pakistani facilities for U.S. military and intelligence operations would probably come to an end, as would Pakistan's military operations in support of U.S. and NATO operations inside Afghanistan.⁴ It is also likely that the enormous volume of overland shipments supporting international efforts in Afghanistan would be curtailed.

As a practical reality, however, there remains a significant gap between popular public sentiment and actual policy outcomes in Pakistan. Pakistan's top civilian leaders hail from a privileged elite class, often described as an oligarchy, which dominates the major political parties and dampens direct democratic accountability.⁵ That elite enjoys good relations with the United States and, for the time being, appears to appreciate the value of U.S. partnership as well as the urgent threat posed by Pakistan's extremist networks. There may be signs that this oligarchy's vise-grip on power is starting to slip—the power of independent media outlets, the rise of NGOs of all stripes, the pressures of demographic change, and the many other aspects of globalization all pose threats to traditional social and political power structures—but decisionmakers in Islamabad have yet to be supplanted by more authentically democratic alternatives.

Pakistan's Political Leadership

Turning now to the government, President Asif Ali Zardari is the most important political leader supporting Pakistani cooperation with the United States. Zardari inherited the co-chairmanship of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) from his assassinated wife, Benazir Bhutto, just before the national elections of February 2008. The PPP is a center-left party founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Benazir Bhutto's father) with a traditional power base in rural Sindh Province complemented by a significant national following. In the February 2008 parliamentary elections, the PPP won 125 of 342 seats in the National Assembly and currently leads a coalition that includes several smaller regional parties, the most important being the Awami National Party

⁴ Habibullah Khan and Nick Schiffrin, "Allegations that CIA Predator Drones Have Bases in Pakistan," *ABC News*, February 23, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=6938365&page=1>.

⁵ Stephen P. Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 68–70.