

## Can Pakistan's Neighbors Help Deal with Pakistan?

BY *Mahin Karim*

Although the United States and NATO have announced their intentions to draw down their forces in Afghanistan, the question of maintaining some presence in the region to prevent the re-emergence of terrorist-friendly forces and preserve regional stability is tied up with questions of state instability in Pakistan. The recent downturn in U.S.-Pakistan relations only adds to the complexity of this issue. A year after the U.S. raid and subsequent killing of Osama bin Laden on Pakistani territory, domestic grievances in both countries toward the other continue to plague the relationship, bringing into question not only its future but perhaps also its continued value.

Despite these challenges, the United States is understandably reluctant to pull the plug on its relationship with Pakistan. The prospect of state failure in a nuclear power poses a significant geopolitical and security challenge not just to U.S. interests but also to peace and stability in South and Central Asia. Democratic transition in Pakistan remains a weak political process, hampered by the often contradictory interests of a strong and deeply entrenched military establishment with ties to religious extremists. Efforts of civilian-led administrations for institutional reform and improved relations with India have often been sabotaged by a powerful military-intelligence establishment defined by an anti-Indian agenda.

Yet while concerns over Pakistan's future stability drive an imperative within U.S. policy corridors to "re-set" the relationship, perhaps the solution to the conundrum lies instead with Pakistan's neighbors. India, China, and Iran share vulnerable strategic borders with Pakistan, and risk a spillover effect should Pakistan collapse. All three have a strong stake

in containing any instability emerging from Pakistan, and in some respects may be in a better position than the United States to influence the country's future.

### THE RISE OF INDIA AND CHINA

India's rise as an Asian power and its aspirations to be a global player offer an intriguing opportunity. Recent trends in Indian relations with the smaller South Asian countries indicate a significant shift in New Delhi's approach toward its neighborhood—as exemplified by improved relations with countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka—from India's historical role as a "big brother" to a renewed focus on regional integration and growth. This shift signals an awareness that India cannot assume its place on the global geopolitical stage without first resolving issues in its immediate neighborhood. Likewise, India's smaller neighbors realize that closer ties with New Delhi allow them to benefit from India's economic growth and ascension as a global power.

While India-Pakistan hostility poses the biggest challenge in resetting traditional South Asian antipathies, there are hopeful signs of change on that front. For once, the political leadership in both countries seems committed to rebuilding the relationship, with a willingness to temporarily table the Kashmir issue in favor of promoting greater economic integration as well as stronger cultural and people-to-people ties. The decision by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) to grant India most-favored nation status, despite the military establishment's objections and the party's precarious political status, and the Pakistan business community's support of that move indicate a political will that India and the international community would do well to nurture. Pakistan's powerful "shadow" establishment still has the potential to derail these efforts, as it has done in the past. But indirect intervention on this front by the United States and other international stakeholders may be helpful, providing both carrots and sticks to strengthen Pakistan's civilian institutions against pressure from the country's military.

India also offers the United States the potential to conduct quiet diplomacy with Pakistan's western-flanking neighbor—Iran. While the United States may be reluctant to engage Iran on this issue, given its mistrust of Iran's motives and conflicting priorities in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf, an unstable Pakistan is no more in Iran's interests than it is in India's or the United States'. India has good relations with Iran and is also invested in infrastructure projects that would connect India through Afghanistan to Iran's Chabahar port, offering an alternative transit route to Central Asia. Rather than pressing New Delhi to curb its energy relations with Iran, the United States might consider letting the relationship be and testing India's capabilities as a mature regional power. For India, this could be a unique opportunity to prove its aspiring "global power" mettle by first demonstrating its diplomatic credentials on a regional platform.

While Pakistan's relationship with China is more complicated, there is the potential for quiet diplomacy there too. China continues to be influential in Islamabad and uses this position to indirectly provoke India. However, there are signs that Beijing increasingly shares U.S. and Indian fears about political instability in Pakistan. In recent years, Chinese officials have been more vocal in their condemnation of Islamabad's failure to check militant groups in Pakistan suspected of provoking instability in western China, as well as over increased attacks on Chinese workers that threaten infrastructure investments in Pakistan. China has the very real capability to direct its influence toward containing Pakistan, if it chooses to do so. There are indications that it has quietly done so in the past—e.g., through back-channel disapproval of Pakistani military aggression against India. The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from the region, and the realization that the United States will no longer foot the bill for

regional stability, could compel Beijing to step up to the plate in dealing with Pakistan.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The traditional antagonisms of South Asia present challenges as well as opportunities. U.S. assistance to Pakistan has yielded unsatisfactory dividends, and counterproductively contributed to increasing levels of anti-Americanism, which fuel Pakistan's extremist elements and bolster the power structures of its "shadow" establishment. Perhaps it is time to let the region play a larger role in taking care of the problem. Rather than continue to throw good money after the bad, an alternative strategy that engages regional actors to deal with Pakistan may allow the United States to achieve its desired objectives in the region without necessarily bearing the costs.

India, China, and Iran have indirectly benefited from the West footing the bill for counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to the detriment of the West's—and in particular the United States'—public image. The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces will compel these countries to assume responsibility for ensuring security in their own backyard, and may offer opportunities for new security architectures that will indirectly benefit U.S. interests in Asia. Both India and China demand recognition as mature powers in the global geopolitical arena—let them demonstrate the behavior and responsibilities that go with great-power status. ♦

**MAHIN KARIM** is a Senior Associate in Political and Security Affairs at The National Bureau of Asian Research. She can be reached at <[mkarim@nbr.org](mailto:mkarim@nbr.org)>.

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