

# ISA S Brief

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## The 'US-Pak' Relationship: A Complex but Categorical Imperative

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### Abstract

*The 'rollercoaster' nature of the 'US-Pak' relationship is a complex one. Yet for both Pakistan and the United States (US), it is a categorical imperative, one of 'necessity', rather than one of choice. It is transactional rather, than spontaneous. It is bred not in love, but in need. It is a difficult equilibrium, but one that needs to be maintained in appropriate balance for the sake of security, regional and beyond. That is the challenge both parties confront.*

Pakistanis tend to become perturbed by the expression 'Af-Pak'. This is a neologism, a new word coined by hyphenating two existing ones. The term 'Af-Pak' is owed to Richard Holbrook, the US Special Envoy. Pakistanis want their country to be regarded by the US as worthy of attention by itself, as a standalone, powerful and sophisticated ally. They resent being suffixed, or linked by a hyphen, with the feudal tribes next door. The US is perhaps wrong to use it on this count.

Americans claim that it is not a bureaucratic shorthand that reduces the eight syllables. They say it implies the perception of Afghanistan and Pakistan as being a single theatre. They are also wrong on this count because it is not. The stage needs to provide space for many other actors such as India, China, Iran, the Central Asian Republics and Russia, just for starters. There may well be others who are *deus ex machina* (God out of the machine). These are players who appear late in a Greek Drama but have sufficient impact to alter the course and

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conclusion of the story. Afghanistan is a play, perhaps a tragic one, whose finale is still nowhere in sight.

The *gung-ho* attitude of the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) invasion has long since evaporated. The Western allies saw this as the *justum bellum* (just war), a concept that dates back to the ideas of the Roman thinker Cicero. Perhaps it was just or perhaps it was a quagmire that they were lured into. This is something that only history can tell with any modicum of certitude. The US idea, as pronounced by President Barrack Obama, was to 'disrupt, dismantle and defeat' the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. At the present time, that goal seems stupendously ambitious. The relationship between NATO and President Karzai is now both strained and strange. It is one between an uneasy guest and an uneasy host. Both want the transition to occur soon and the outsiders depart, just as many others – the Greeks, the British, the Russians – have come and gone through ages.

Leave, yes, but what kind of Afghanistan are they to leave behind? Afghanistan is a made-up nation, a collection of nomadic tribes and ethnicities, whose territorial claims against each other are uncertain, and unresolved. The British wanted it because they saw the need for a buffer between Russia and India. The Russians wanted it as part of their drive to warm waters. The Americans wanted it to deny the extremists of a safe haven. Pakistan wanted it, or at least wants it under friendly control, to obtain strategic depth vis-à-vis India. India is anxious to prevent it. China wanted its investments there protected. So what has been called 'The Great Game' goes on. But the players in the game must know they all have a price to pay if they wish to continue exercise of power, which they can only do in the face of implacable hostility.

Trapped between its history and geography, Pakistan is paying a heavy price in this respect. No country in the world suffers as much from terrorism as Pakistan does. Reportedly there had been 12,244 attacks in the country in 2010, a more than five-fold increase since 2006. With the killing of Osama bin Laden, and now Ilyas Kashmiri, it is the Pakistanis who have to bear the brunt of reprisals. Yet, it is alleged that the Pakistani Military or Inter-Services Intelligence use their own chosen extremists or fundamentalists in order to be able to install a regime of choice in Kabul. Only 14 per cent of Pakistanis appear to have a favourable view of the US as an ally. Yet, it is one that the entire country, and most certainly, its powerful army is largely funded by. This funding, if the mood of the US Congress is any yardstick, is being provided with increasing reluctance. The 'US-Pak' (yet another neologism) 'trust deficit', already palpable before the Osama bin Laden raid, is ever expanding. Friendship proposals appear to be written in disappearing ink. It is difficult to predict if the situation will hasten the elections in Pakistan, now due for 2013 and even that is subject to change. Neither the Pakistan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif nor the army appears to want to inherit the thorny

mantle of governance, especially in the case of the army, when its reputation has taken a beating.

Right now, given the nature of Pakistan's governance, it is perhaps as important to see who inherits the mantle of the army, rather than the Government itself. Some would suggest it is more. True, with the Osama bin Laden and allied issues, the army has taken a beating, but not enough to cause its demise. The meek and half-hearted attempt of the civilian leaders to capitalise on the army's vulnerability, by putting it on the carpet in the Parliament, has been a touch pathetic. While the Army will survive, Chief of Staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani may not. Even now, he is due to retire on 28 November 2013. Analysts are already watching out for possible successors. A favourite is the current Chief of General Staff (CGS), Lieutenant General Waheed Arshad. He has a War Studies degree from Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, and strong Turkish connections. He was in Singapore recently for the Shangri-La Dialogue. But Pakistan's military politics is equally complex. In order to make it to the top, General Arshad must play his cards with caution and circumspection. Otherwise, he may be kicked upstairs like his predecessor as CGS, General Khalid Shameem Wynne, who was made Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, a position long in title but short on power.

The visit to Pakistan by US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton shows that the US is eager to mend fences. As for providing shelter and succour to bin Laden, Clinton has said she has no evidence that the Pakistani leadership was aware of it at 'the highest levels'. She obviously lets the President and the Premier off the hook, but does she consider the army chiefs as 'leaders at the highest levels'? It is unclear, as it was possibly meant to be. She was followed by the current the current Central Intelligence Agency Chief and future Defense Secretary, Leon Panetta. Pakistanis are usually generous to a fault with regard to protocol, but Panetta did not exactly have the red carpet rolled out for him, and was not received at high political levels, the way someone of his status would have been at happier times.

It is widely believed that the lower echelons of the Pakistan military are deeply penetrated by extremists. Some are even ready to forgo the US financial support. Once, the now seen as jihadist, former President Zia ul Haq had deprecatingly described it as 'peanuts'; recently even Kayani urged that it be diverted to civilians, perhaps this is the army's way of saying they do not need it. Though, the problem is that the US may need it, if only to keep the Pakistan Army tied to it in some way, by fair means or foul. This need is too strategic to allow it to fall by the wayside. The US, and the world, simply cannot allow Pakistan to morph into a 'Jihadistan', any more than it already has. So the 'US-Pak' relationship continues, at times amidst nuanced jibes. It is a 'transactional relationship' now, based on outcomes of negotiations, rather than one that is spontaneous. Pakistan, for instance hits the Taliban just

enough to keep the US tolerably satisfied, but not so hard that its own objectives are undermined. It is a complex but categorical imperative. It is also an equilibrium that is not easy to maintain. But the security of the region, and much of the wider world, depends on the will and ability of both parties to try and maintain it. The relationship thus remains complex. Also, to paraphrase the philosopher Emmanuel Kant, it is a 'categorical imperative'. The security of the region, and much of the wider world, depends on the will and ability of both parties to try and maintain it. The Pakistanis have sought to indicate to the Americans that they are committed, but not wedded, to the relationship. When piqued, as is often the case these days, they keep pointing to other options, and closer friends. China, for instance.

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