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US-Pak relations: Reflecting on 2011

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Abstract

This brief looks at Pakistan-US (United States) relations in 2011 and examines the reasons for the steady deterioration in ties in the course of the year. It discusses the strategic divergences between the two countries, as well as the compulsions for them to cooperate with each other.

US-Pak relations took a turn for the worse on 26 November 2011 when NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) forces killed 24 Pakistani soldiers on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. While firing and skirmishes along the border have been a recurring phenomenon, this incident brought US-Pak relations to a head. Condemning the attacks in the strongest terms, the Pakistan Chief of Army Staff, General Kayani warned that any future aggression will see Pakistan responding ‘with full force, regardless of the cost and consequences’.² The anger was so intense that the Pakistan government has contemplated reframing its terms of engagements with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Pakistan also publicly

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² Saeed Shah, ‘Pakistan military ordered to return fire if attacked by Nato forces’, *The Guardian* (2 December 2011) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/02/pakistan-military-return-fire-nato>. Accessed on 6 December 2011.

rejected the invitation to attend the Bonn Conference on Afghanistan, demanded the eviction of the US from the Shamsi air base in Baluchistan and blocked NATO supply routes through Pakistan. The Bonn Conference, held on 5 December 2011 was intended to secure Afghanistan's political future, but ended up with little in terms of specific commitments.³ Pakistan's absence was significant as it has real influence with the Afghan Taliban and has the best chance of bringing them to the negotiating table. The US has tried to mitigate the diplomatic crisis by withdrawing from the Shamsi base and halting drone strikes since 26 November 2011, but relations continue to be tense.

Deteriorating Relations

The November 26 incident was clearly a low point in Pakistan-US relations, but Pakistan's anger had been building steadily through a series of developments from the beginning of 2011. The year began on a tense note with the controversial Raymond Davis affair when an American CIA contractor shot dead two young Pakistani men in broad daylight in Lahore. The US pressed for Davis' release on the ground that he was protected by diplomatic immunity. Despite strong public disapproval, Pakistan's government took recourse to Sharia law to acquit Davis and find a way out of the impasse. The acquittal evoked strong criticism of the Government for failing to take a firm stand and for appearing to accommodate US interest. Few months later, relations between the two countries were tested again with the killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in May 2011. This killing was seen as a serious violation of Pakistan's territory and sovereignty, as the raid against him was conducted unilaterally by US forces, without the consent or knowledge of Pakistani authorities.

Relations dipped precariously again in October 2011, when the outgoing Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, accused Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, of having strong links with the Haqqani network, calling it a 'veritable arm' of Pakistan's ISI.⁴ The US also alleged that the government of Pakistan had permitted safe havens for the Haqqani group, which the Pakistani government vehemently denied. Barely recovering from that accusation, Pakistan found itself in the grips of the Memo gate scandal when a Pakistani-American businessman, Mansoor Ijaz, alleged that he was asked to deliver a memorandum from the former Pakistani Ambassador to the US, Hussain Haqqani, to Admiral Mullen on 10 May 2011. The memo was controversial as it contained request for US intervention to curtail Pakistan's military in return for undertakings by its civilian government on several key

³ Bonn Conference Offers Few Details for Afghanistan Past 2014 (6 December 2011) <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/asia/---Bonn-Conference-Offers-Few-Details-on-Supporting-Afghanistan-Past-2014-135103068.html> Accessed on 26 December 2011.

⁴ 'Haqqani network is a 'veritable arm' of ISI: Mullen', *Dawn* (22 September 2011) <http://www.dawn.com/2011/09/22/haqqani-network-is-a-%E2%80%9Cveritable-arm%E2%80%9D-of-isi-mullen.html> Accessed 6 December 2011.

matters pertaining to national security, including, amongst other things, establishing an independent inquiry to investigate any involvement of Pakistani officials in harbouring Osama bin Laden and senior Al-Qaeda operatives; handing over of known Al-Qaeda and Haqqani leaders; and stopping ISI cooperation with the Taliban.⁵ These conditions are at the centre of US-Pak tensions, and ceding to any of these would be tantamount to acquiescing to the US and compromising on Pakistan's sovereignty. In a climate of rising anti-US sentiments, any US intervention in Pakistan's domestic affairs would be extremely provocative.

Contentious issues

Both Pakistan and the US joined hands in the war on terror to combat the challenges of militancy and terrorism. However, the growing anti-US sentiments in Pakistan and divergences in strategic interests have prevented the two from fully cooperating with each other. The threats to US security come primarily from Al-Qaeda and its allies such as the Haqqani network which are hostile to US interests. Pakistan, on the other hand, is more concerned with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) which has been responsible for attacks within Pakistan. Indeed, the US has accused Pakistan of providing sanctuary to members of the Afghan Taliban such as Mullah Omar and the Haqqani network and believes that Pakistan views these groups as its strategic assets. Pakistan naturally needs to look to the future after the US withdraws from the region, leaving a power vacuum, which will attract many contenders, including India, which is of particular concern to Pakistan. Given the tenuous nature of India-Pakistan relations, Pakistan cannot afford to open another hostile front on its West and would want a pro-Pakistan government in Afghanistan. It is in Pakistan's interest to hedge its bets and maintain some relations with the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network who may be the potential future players in Afghanistan. Thus, while there have been some instances of US-Pak cooperation with the arrest of some key Al-Qaeda figures including the capture of Younis al Mauritani in September 2011, Pakistan has been reluctant to carry out any operation in North Waziristan where the Haqqanis are based.

US-Pak differences are further inflamed by the continuing drone attacks by the US to hunt leaders of Al-Qaeda and other related organisations.⁶ These attacks come at a huge cost of high collateral damage and casualties including civilians and children. For the US, however,

⁵ For details see 'Text of Memo', *Pakistan Today* (6 December 2011) <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2011/11/text-of-memo/> Accessed 7 December 2011.

⁶ There were 70 drone attacks up to November 2011. In 2010, there were 118 drone attacks which were more than the combined attacks of the past 6 years. See New America Foundation, 'The Year of the drone An Analysis of U.S. Drone Strikes in Pakistan, 2004-2011' <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones> Accessed 6 December 2011.

despite the growing unpopularity of the drone attacks, they remain an effective means to attack the militant organisations and their leadership. The drone strikes have proved successful in killing several high profile Al-Qaeda leaders such as Ilyas Kashmiri and Abu Zaid al-Iraqi and a senior Haqqani commander Khan Mohammad.

Just as Pakistani leaders are under political pressure from the public, there is domestic pressure in the US making it difficult for the Obama administration to provide unconditional assistance to Pakistan. In September 2011, the US Senate Committee passed a bill making financial assistance to Pakistan contingent upon its cooperation against the Al Qaeda and its associates such as the Haqqanis. This kind of action by the US is inflammatory in Pakistan which sees the US acting in a high-handed manner, whether in terms of military strikes or threats to withhold assistance.

The Need for Cooperation

Despite their differences, the two countries find it difficult to move away from each other. Pakistan is dependent on the US for weapons and training of its military. In addition, Pakistan receives a massive package of economic and humanitarian aid, making it one of the largest recipients of US foreign assistance. It has received US \$22 billion in military and economic assistance since 2001. For the year 2011, USD \$2.4 billion was earmarked for development, humanitarian aid and security related programmes.⁷ The US' financial assistance also remains crucial to curb rising militancy within the country.

The US also needs Pakistan to achieve success in its war on terror and in its strategy towards Afghanistan. While the US has reservations on how much Pakistan is doing at its end towards combating terror, it realises that in view of its commitment to gradually wind down its operations in Afghanistan beginning July 2011, it needs Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Washington believes that Islamabad wields enough influence with members of the Afghan Taliban to help in brokering a deal with Kabul. In addition, the US has also relied on Pakistan's cooperation and intelligence to target top Al-Qaeda leaders.

Notwithstanding divergences in their strategic interests, US-Pak cooperation is critical to continuing the war on terror and to ensuring stability in South Asia. The problem however is that events in 2011 have taken US-Pak relations down a disastrous slope. There is tremendous mistrust between the governments, the intelligence agencies and the general public on both sides. Anti-US sentiments in Pakistan are at a point that US involvement in Pakistan seems to have

⁷ K. Alan Kronstadt, 'Pakistan-U.S. Relations: A Summary', Congressional Research Service, Table 1. Direct Overt U.S. Aid Appropriations and Military Reimbursements to Pakistan, FY2002-FY2012 (21 October 2011) <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41832.pdf>. Accessed 6 December 2011.

outlived its welcome. This deterioration in relationship is not in the interest of either party and political pragmatism must prevail. Both countries have to take steps to salvage the relationship as there is too much at stake. Pakistan needs to allay US apprehensions on its commitment to fight terrorism in the region. The US needs to back down from its high-handed approach, particularly in terms of its military forays in Pakistan. Effective though the drone strikes may be, this may be one of those instances where the battle is won, but the war is lost.

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