



Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies



SPECIAL ASSESSMENT

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Asia-Pacific Responses to U.S. Security Policies

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Precarious Partnership: Pakistan's Response to U.S. Security Policies

ROBERT G. WIRSING

Executive Summary

- The Pakistan government's capacity for adapting its national interests to U.S. strategic imperatives has been put to its severest test ever in the period following the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001.
- The adherence of Pakistan to the global coalition against terrorism brought a number of substantial benefits to Pakistan, including both a political and economic boost. However, the consequent loss of its Afghanistan ally was a crippling setback, one that has triggered a strong — and politically hazardous — wave of anti-American sentiment in Pakistan.
- Kashmir's lofty status among Pakistan's strategic concerns has ensured Pakistan's leaders' great reluctance either to cave in entirely on the contentious matter of cross-border infiltration or to relax the distinction between legitimate "freedom struggles" and acts of terrorism.
- There are profound differences between American and Pakistani conceptions of the "nuclear danger" in South Asia. Washington tends to understand the threat to be emanating largely from Pakistan's nuclear transgressions, while Islamabad insists that the danger springs from an entirely different source — India primarily — and thus requires a remedy tailored specifically to India.
- Pakistanis generally hold the view that U.S. security policy in Asia, including what they see as Washington's progressive shift towards an Indo-centric strategic design, is neglectful of Pakistan's basic national interests and, thus, a potential impediment to an enduring Pakistani partnership with the United States.
- For U.S. policymakers, heading off deepening Pakistani suspicions of American strategic intentions — ensuring, in other words, that Pakistan does not end up as America's "most distrustful ally" — presents a continuing challenge.

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INTRODUCTION

Pakistan was hailed during the 1950s as a frontline bulwark against Communist expansionism. Bound to the United States in multiple security treaties, it won an enviable reputation as “America’s most allied ally.”

Pakistan’s reputation among Americans slipped in the 1960s, rose swiftly during the Afghanistan War (1979-1989), only to fall again in the years following the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991. The inconstancy of the relationship with the United States has greatly bothered Pakistanis. In fact, nothing has drawn more rueful public commentary in Pakistan in the past decade than what Pakistanis almost universally understand to have been Pakistan’s unceremonious dumping by Washington once its usefulness in bringing down the Soviet Union had expired.

Just how favorably Washington was disposed towards Pakistan at any given time has been shaped by many factors, including the state of Pakistan’s confrontational relationship with its Indian neighbor, the strength of its embrace of political democracy and free market economy, the spirit in which it incorporated Islam into its state identity, and the license it took in the pursuit of nuclear weapons. More than any of these, however, what always impacted most heavily on Pakistan’s standing in Washington was its strategic utility or “fit” — whether and to what extent, in other words, its leaders seemed able and willing to meld Pakistan’s national interests to U.S. policy imperatives of the day. In this transparently dependent relationship, it was always Washington’s perception of strategic necessity, together with Pakistan’s capacity for adapting to it, that drove the U.S.-Pakistan relationship.

Pakistan’s notable capacity for adaptation of this kind has been put to what is probably its severest test in the period following the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001. Washington’s almost immediate identification of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan as state sponsor of the al Qaeda terrorist network and, thus, as active accomplice to the terrorist attacks and logical first target in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), plunged the Army-ruled government of Pakistan into acute crisis. Pakistan’s geographic proximity to Afghanistan made it a primary candidate for renewed alliance with the United States. Also arguing for alliance with the United States were neighboring India’s prompt offer to Washington of total support in the war on Afghanistan and Pakistan’s dire military and economic weaknesses. By no means least among Pakistani calculations, however, was the possibility of punishment by Washington — conceivably even military punishment — if Islamabad made the wrong choice. Thus, Pakistan’s actual choice, announced on 16 September, to join the global coalition against terrorism and to offer immediate tangible aid, including military bases, in Washington’s impending war on Afghanistan, came as no surprise.

Far from settled, however, were the matters of how much longer and how fully Islamabad would continue to honor that decision, whose policy implications clearly went well beyond the immediate rupture of Pakistan’s ties with Afghanistan. No other Asian country, excepting Afghanistan, has had to make more risk-filled policy decisions — or to make them under greater duress — in the wake of 9/11 than Pakistan. There are already ample signs of pressures building in Pakistan to reverse some of them. No issue in Pakistan’s public debate over the next few years will surpass in magnitude that concerning the wisdom of Pakistan’s compliance with U.S. strategic doctrine and policy — particularly as it relates to the war on terrorism.

Naturally, Pakistan's compliance with U.S. strategic doctrine and policy is most severely tested in relation to those issues — Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan, the Kashmir dispute with neighboring India, and nuclear weapons development — that bear most heavily upon Pakistan's immediate geostrategic interests. It is these issues that are examined most closely here.

THE AFGHANISTAN DEBACLE

On the day following the terrorist attacks on the United States, the President of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, publicly appealed for a “concerted international effort ... to fight terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.” A few days later, Pakistan was formally enlisted in the global coalition against terrorism. Islamabad quickly launched a desperate effort to persuade the Taliban leadership to hand Osama bin Laden over to the West for punishment; but by the time the U.S.-led bombing campaign against Afghanistan began on 7 October, Islamabad had cut its formal diplomatic ties with Kabul (the last nation in the world to do so) and was resigned to the virtually complete abandonment of its former ally.

From the Pakistani point of view, there was a bright side to all of this. For one thing, Pakistan's immediate transformation from pariah to partner on the embattled frontline against terrorism brought a welcome political boost. For another, while Musharraf was careful to describe his decision to support the international campaign against terrorism as one based on principles, the promise of relief for Pakistan's beleaguered economy brought an obvious material boost.

There was also a dark side to Pakistan's choice, however, and it was responsible for the apparent duress that attended Musharraf's decision. On 20 September, President George W. Bush had warned that “every nation in every region now has a decision to make: *Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.* From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.” Musharraf had made plain in a candid address to the nation only one day earlier that taking what he called “wrong decisions” in the country's moment of crisis (by which he implied declining to join the coalition against terrorism) could have threatening consequences for Pakistan's “critical concerns.” These he identified as Pakistan's security against “external threat,” revival of the economy, the country's “strategic nuclear and missile assets,” and “the Kashmir cause.” These had to be safeguarded at all costs. “Any wrong judgment on our part,” he warned, “can damage all our interests.”

Musharraf was, of course, looking for a strategic tradeoff: In return for Pakistan's collaboration with the global coalition, Pakistan's key interests would be safeguarded. Musharraf made clear in due time that this meant (1) that Pakistan's armed forces should not be pressed to engage in military action outside of Pakistan's borders (in Afghanistan and later in Iraq); (2) that the coalition should in the conduct of military operations in Afghanistan seek to minimize “indiscriminate” killings of innocents; (3) that any post-Taliban government in Kabul should be friendly to Pakistan, that the Afghans themselves should choose it, and that Afghanistan's (in Musharraf's phrasing) “demographic contours,” meaning Pashtun-majority, should be factored into its composition; (4) that the Kashmiris' struggle for self-determination should not be defined as terrorism and the Kashmiri guerrillas' “freedom struggle” not be made a target of a broad coalition

crackdown on regional terrorism; and (5) that there should be no international move to disarm Pakistan's nuclear and missile defenses.

Looking back over the past year or so of the war on terrorism, it seems that Pakistan's interests have taken some fairly massive hits. This was undeniably the case when it came to Afghanistan, where neither the coalition's conduct of the war nor the war's outcome were exactly tailored to Islamabad's specifications. Indeed, the war supplied ample grounds for the apprehensions frequently expressed by President Musharraf during this period in regard to the war's negative impact on public opinion in Pakistan. In disturbingly large numbers, Pakistanis were reported to dislike America and to be overwhelmingly unsympathetic with the GWOT. These views surfaced, for instance, in a massive Pew Global Attitudes opinion survey, conducted roughly a year after 9/11, of more than 38,000 people in 44 nations.* According to the survey, only 10 percent of Pakistanis (the second lowest percentage among all the nations surveyed) had a favorable opinion of the United States; only two percent (the lowest figure among all the nations surveyed) had a positive impression of the spread of American ideas and customs; only nine percent (again, the lowest figure among all nations surveyed) preferred American ideas about democracy; and while 45 percent opposed the U.S.-led war on terrorism, only 20 percent favored it.

Additional evidence of anti-American feelings surfaced in the results of the October 2002 elections of Pakistan's national and provincial assemblies. In the National Assembly election, an alliance of religious parties, the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), won an unprecedented 52 of 272 seats (19 percent), assuring Islamists of a power brokering role in the central government for the first time in Pakistan's history. In the provincial elections, the alliance won outright control of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and a share in power in a coalition government in Baluchistan — both of them geographically adjacent to the strategically sensitive Afghanistan border. Electoral support for the MMA was largely confined to these two provinces; and even in them there were a number of alternative explanations (e.g. public disgust with the incumbents' corruption and misgovernment) for the MMA's electoral success. Nevertheless, the centrality of anti-American diatribe in the MMA's election campaign implied that anti-Americanism had had more than a minor impact on the electoral outcome.

Especially hazardous for Musharraf, in any event, was the MMA's insistent demand for an end to American military presence in Pakistan — a demand that ran afoul not only of the Pentagon's plans for forward troop deployment in a region of exceptional instability, but of its capacity for tracking down remnant al Qaeda and Taliban fugitives.

KASHMIR—TERRORISM OR FREEDOM STRUGGLE?

President Musharraf raised the issue of Kashmir with Secretary of State Colin Powell on 16 September 2001 during the secretary's hastily arranged post-9/11 visit to Islamabad. Musharraf emphasized to Powell that there could be no normalization of India-Pakistan relations without resolution of the Kashmir dispute and, moreover, that resolution had to be “in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmiri people.” This was a formulation that Musharraf knew would raise India's hackles while also sending a reminder to Washington that Pakistani collaboration with the United States would come with a *political* as well as an economic price.

The political price asked of Washington was bound to be steep. For years, the government of India had been attempting (without much success) to persuade global

* The survey was conducted in Pakistan in August-September 2002. Respondents, mainly urban, numbered 2032.

opinion that the roots of the Kashmiri insurrection, begun in 1989, lay mainly on the Pakistani side of the border. It had increasingly emphasized not only what it claimed was Pakistani society's steady drift towards Islamic extremism and fundamentalism — its "talibanization," in other words — but also what New Delhi claimed was Pakistan's official sponsorship of terrorism in Kashmir. The terrorist assault on the United States in September 2001 thus presented New Delhi with an opportunity to join its hitherto largely ignored concerns over the threat of radical Islam with the now hugely heightened and overlapping concerns of the United States. No less importantly, the assault significantly increased New Delhi's prospects for reframing the world's understanding of the Kashmir dispute in terms better fitted to New Delhi's strategic interests — that it was a dispute having less to do with human rights, in other words, than with the menace of global terrorism.

It quickly became apparent that Washington faced a dilemma: How to balance its immediate requirement for Pakistan's seemingly irreplaceable partnership in the war on terrorism against its longer-term requirement for the goodwill of Pakistan's vastly bigger and more powerful rival. Largely to pacify India, the Department of State at the end of 2001 added to its infamous list of "designated terrorist organizations" two Pakistan-based groups. Washington sent an even stronger message to Islamabad of its growing dissatisfaction with Pakistan's Kashmir policy with the dispatch to Islamabad in June 2002 of Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. Armitage maintains that in his two-hour meeting with Musharraf he managed to extract from the Pakistani leader the pledge of "a permanent end" to Pakistan's support of terrorist activity in Kashmir. News accounts of the meeting suggested there was room for varied interpretation. In any event, Musharraf's apparent concession was described in the *Washington Post* as "a huge foreign-policy victory for India." This seeming U-turn in Pakistan's Kashmir policy actually produced little more, however, than a suspension — not a permanent cessation — of Pakistan-aided cross-border infiltration.

Pakistan's reluctance to cave in entirely on the matter of infiltration is understandable. In recent years, the ratio of "guest" to "indigenous" militants fighting in Kashmir has grown substantially in favor of the former — most of them Pakistanis. The fact is that the active armed element of the Kashmir insurgency has gradually been not so much talibanized as Pakistanized. Were Pakistan to permanently sideline the Pakistani element, while also putting the militants' Pakistan Army support system out to pasture, there would be no more insurgency, at least not one New Delhi could not easily handle. For Pakistan to help India out in this manner was not in the cards. As Musharraf told *Time* correspondent Lally Weymouth in an interview published shortly after Musharraf's meeting with Armitage, Kashmir — unlike Afghanistan — "is our national interest."

New Delhi's spectacular mobilization from December 2001 to October 2002 of upwards of 700,000 troops on the border with Pakistan did little or nothing to dissuade Pakistan from its "national interest" in Kashmir. On the contrary, India's unilateral decision in October to withdraw its forces was made without there having been any unambiguous change either in the "ground realities" in Kashmir or in the rhetoric Musharraf used in public utterances on the subject of Kashmir — including his insistence that the international community maintain a distinction between what he styled "acts of legitimate resistance and freedom struggles on the one hand and acts of terrorism on the other."

Notwithstanding Musharraf's rhetoric, the danger remained that New Delhi's relentless efforts to bracket Pakistan-supported separatism in Kashmir with the American-led GWOT's arch enemy — "terrorism with a global reach" — might yet succeed in giving international warrant to an Indian preemptive strike on Pakistan.

THE NUCLEAR NIGHTMARE

President Musharraf had included Pakistan's "strategic nuclear and missile assets" on the list of "critical concerns" he identified in his 19 September 2001 address to the nation. He had good reasons for its inclusion. Apart from inevitable lingering suspicions in Washington stemming from Islamabad's previous close ties to the Afghan Taliban, there remained between Pakistan and the United States a host of unsettled issues relating to Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. Pakistan was clearly vulnerable to pressure in regard to these issues; and the possibility existed that their exacerbation could at any time — and notwithstanding Pakistan's cooperation in the war on terrorism — trigger a major upheaval in Islamabad's equation with Washington.

High on Washington's own list of critical concerns about Pakistan's real or potential nuclear transgressions was the threat that Pakistan's nuclear weapons or fissile materials might fall into extremist hands in the event of a radical Islamist takeover of the government. Apart from the fact that Pakistan's nuclear program had been developed with Beijing's illicit, but utterly crucial, assistance, there was now the startling report (denied by Pakistan) of a Chinese-facilitated nuclear barter — advanced missiles in exchange for uranium enrichment technology — underway recently between the Pakistanis and North Korea, the third member of Washington's Axis of Evil.

Seen from Islamabad, the South Asian region's nuclear danger sprang from an entirely different source — India primarily — and thus required a remedy tailored specifically to India. Musharraf outlined the Pakistani point of view in this regard in an address to the U N General Assembly in November 2001 — not long after 9/11. Reassuring his audience that Pakistan was "fully alive to the responsibilities of its nuclear status," Musharraf pointed out that "a stable South Asian security mechanism" could be achieved; but its achievement was dependent on "a peaceful resolution of disputes, preservation of nuclear and conventional balance, confidence building measures and non-use of force prescribed by the UN Charter." The linkage to Kashmir was obvious in the first of these, Pakistanis' anxiety over their country's diminishing ability to keep pace with Indian military acquisitions, whether conventional or nuclear, in the second.

This anxiety showed up in a different context some months later, in June 2002, in Weymouth's above-mentioned interview with Musharraf. Speaking of the "root cause" of Kashmir, the Pakistani president offered a formulation that seemed to depart from the standard interpretation of Kashmir as the single "core issue" between India and Pakistan. "If you want a guarantee of peace," he reportedly told Weymouth, "there are three ways: 1) denuclearize South Asia; 2) ensure a conventional deterrence so that war never takes place in the subcontinent; and 3) find a solution to the Kashmir problem." It was the second of these, implying that Washington should arm Pakistan and thus be a conventional arms "balancer" in the region rather than India's preferred military partner, which hinted at Islamabad's actual strategic priorities: While sending a subtle reminder of Pakistan's unavoidable dependence on nuclear deterrence for its security, it also avowed Islamabad's conviction *that an enduring regional arms balance, conventional or nuclear, could not possibly be achieved irrespective of Washington's own regional arms policy.* It happened that this policy was showing increasing signs, Islamabad's apprehensions notwithstanding, of deepening military cooperation with India.

PAKISTAN IN THE "POST-POST-COLD WAR WORLD"

One is immediately struck when examining Pakistani reactions to American strategic doctrine by the profound lack of correspondence between the way Pakistani and American leaders tend to view the emerging world order. As outlined by Richard N. Haass, Director of Policy Planning Staff at the Department of State, in an address to the Foreign Policy Association in April 2002, what he termed the "post-post-cold war world" would not only be one in which "American primacy was unprecedented and uncontested" but also one in which "increasingly potent transnational challenges intersect with still important traditional concerns." Haass explicitly cited the India-Pakistan conflict as one in which traditional (rival nation) concerns would predominate. But the doctrine of integration, which he advanced to encompass the complexities of the new traditional/transnational era and to capture the ideas and policies of the Bush administration, left hardly any room for a conception of the world compatible with Islamabad's understanding of its national security predicament.

According to Haass, the principal aim of American foreign policy was "to integrate other countries and organizations into arrangements that will sustain a world consistent with U.S. interests and values, and thereby promote peace, prosperity, and justice as widely as possible." Integration, he said, was "about bringing nations together and then building frameworks of cooperation and, where feasible, institutions that reinforce and sustain them even more." Far from being a defensive response, integration, he said, was "a profoundly optimistic approach to international relations.... We can move from a balance of power," he said, "to a pooling of power."

Haass commended Pakistan in the address for having made the proper strategic choice, namely to reorient Pakistan's foreign policy and to "stand with the United States and the rest of the international community against the Taliban and al Qaeda." Simultaneously, however, he explicitly named India among those countries slated for partnership with Washington. "This is an era of new partnerships," he advised.

Haass' comments did not appear to hold out any hope that the United States would bring pressure to bear on India to end "state terrorism" in Kashmir or that the United States would actively mediate the Kashmir dispute. His comments seemed much more likely to endorse intensified military-to-military relationships between Indian and U.S. armed forces than to license the sale of advanced military hardware to Pakistan — an interpretation of integration that would surely be favored in Islamabad. Implicit in Haass' remarks was a steadily widening world of enduring partnerships. Yet, Musharraf was bound to wonder, as he did in an interview with Larry King in October 2001, whether Pakistanis, once the moment of their country's immediate strategic utility had passed, would experience once again the sense of "betrayal and abandonment" that had been their lot in past encounters with the United States. The doctrine of integration, seen from Islamabad, promised not so much a *pooling* of power among the world's countries as short shrift for the American-orchestrated *balancing* of power that Islamabad felt was essential for peace and security to thrive in the South Asian region. Pakistanis had grounds for thinking, in other words, that Haass' comments signaled not Pakistan's enduring partnership with America but rather Pakistan's far from commanding position in Washington's long-term strategic thinking.

FROM "MOST ALLIED" TO "MOST DISTRUSTFUL" ALLY?

President Musharraf presides over a multiethnic and economically weakened country located precariously on the fault line dividing the Islamic and Hindu worlds. The huge stresses and strains of Pakistan's situation are plainly evident in both its domestic and international policies. Once America's "most allied ally," Pakistan is today a frontline state in the West's war on terrorism — a war that has so far identified Muslim states and sub-state groups almost exclusively as the enemy. Whether, how long, and how zealously Muslim Pakistan will choose to remain a frontline state in this war will depend largely on the reckoning Islamabad makes of the potential gains for its national interest — its continuing strategic "fit," in other words, with evolving U.S. security doctrine and policy. For U.S. policymakers, heading off deepening Pakistani suspicions of American strategic intentions — ensuring, in other words, that Pakistan does not end up as America's "most distrustful ally" — presents a continuing challenge.

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