

“US-China: A new hyphenation driving US-Pak Relations?”

By Sameer Lalwani and Hamza Shad June 8, 2018



A Brief History

Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, it has had a mixed relationship with the United States, encompassing several ups and downs over the decades. Pakistan came into being as a sovereign state, like many former colonial territories, during the early Cold War. The U.S. Cold War grand strategy of containment of communism and Soviet influence shaped its early interactions with Pakistan.

For its part, Pakistan was eager to ally itself with the leading superpower as a means to boost its defense capabilities. In exchange of military aid, advanced technology, and an informal security umbrella, Pakistan gave the United States access to bases, shared intelligence, and was formally in the anti-Soviet bloc as a member of both the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and **Southeast Asia Treaty Organization** (SEATO).

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Their covert strategy was to encourage a ‘jihad’ against the Soviets and to **arm and train militants** – the mujahideen – to liberate Afghanistan. While this approach was successful in defeating the Soviets, it did not prepare Afghanistan for the civil war and chaos that would follow, as some elements of the U.S. and Pakistan – backed mujahideen’s morphed into the Taliban, who took over and imposed harsh, regressive laws.

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During the 1980s, Pakistan also made significant strides towards developing nuclear weapons capabilities. Research suggests that the United States was fully aware of the program’s developments but unwilling to sanction Pakistan for its nuclear program due to the prioritization of containing communism and cooperating in Afghanistan.

As the Cold War ended, however, the U.S. incentives to ignore growing evidence of Pakistani nuclearization declined, causing a significant downturn in relations. The United States invoked a piece of legislation known as the Pressler Amendment in 1990 to sanction Pakistan and further sanctioned it under the Glenn and Symington Amendments in 1998 after it conducted nuclear tests.

These punitive measures dealt a significant blow to Pakistan’s economy and fostered public distrust, and even hostility, towards the United States.

Post-9/11 Relations

Following the devastating terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, an opportunity for rapprochement between the United States and Pakistan emerged. The United States invaded Afghanistan within a month in order to eliminate Al Qaeda and its Taliban patrons.

Like an echo of the anti-Soviet jihad, the United States again sought the cooperation of Pakistan in fulfilling U.S. objectives in Afghanistan. It, therefore, **waived** the nuclear-related sanctions against Pakistan in 2001 and formally designated Pakistan a **major non-NATO ally** in 2004, proceeding to give **billions of dollars** in assistance to the country for support in the War on Terror.

Yet, the two countries' different visions for what stable peace in Afghanistan and the broader region should look like hindered full strategic cooperation. Although Pakistan did support U.S. efforts in several ways, its ongoing support for the Taliban and other related militant groups (whether tacit or active) – what some U.S. analysts have termed a “double game” – continues to be a major source of tension.

Many in the United States believe that its failures in Afghanistan stem from Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan. On the other hand, many Pakistanis attribute this failure to an over-militarized U.S. strategy without genuine efforts at a negotiated settlement. They also blame the United States for employing a reckless level of force, including drone strikes on Pakistani soil, that has intensified, if not triggered, Pakistan's domestic terrorism problem.

The discovery and **assassination of Osama Bin Laden** in May 2011 in Abbottabad – a city home to Pakistan's military academy – caused further damage to U.S.-Pakistan ties. To many Americans, both of the possibilities that the Pakistani state was either harboring Bin Laden or ignorant of his presence were grounds for a rupture in relations.

The Pakistani government denied that it had prior knowledge of Bin Laden's whereabouts, while many Pakistanis were outraged by the raid because they felt it was a violation of Pakistani sovereignty.

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From the U.S. standpoint, Pakistan had engaged in reckless nuclear proliferation (discovered with the disruption of the A.Q. Khan network in 2003), worked against U.S. efforts to stabilize Afghanistan, and backed international terrorist networks that conducted horrific attacks like the one on Mumbai in November 2008.

Abbottabad was the final straw and bilateral relations have struggled to recover ever since. From Pakistan's standpoint, the United States had also contributed to the deterioration of the relationship. The U.S. appeared to renege on three assurances it had made to the Musharraf government after 9/11 on Kabul, Kashmir, and Pakistan's strategic assets.

United States also failed to invest significant effort in resolving the decades-long Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan.

And while it did not seek to harm Pakistan's nuclear weapons and delivery systems, it provided a significant boost to Indian capabilities with the Indo-U.S. civil nuclear deal signed in 2005 and implemented as legislation in 2008.

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The Future

For better or worse, U.S.-Pakistan relations going forward in the twenty-first century may increasingly be shaped by the role of China. China's rise on the global stage has been a major driver of U.S. foreign policy considerations in recent years. To balance against China in the Asia-Pacific region, the United States has actively **courted** India as a strategic partner since the early 2000s.

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As part of this strengthening of U.S.-India ties, the United States has treated India and Pakistan differently than in the past, much to Pakistan's frustration. Most notably, the Indo-U.S. civil nuclear deal that was finalized in 2008 removed significant obstacles to U.S. India strategic cooperation and gave India access to international nuclear commerce despite it not being party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Because this exception was only made for India, Pakistan felt (and China concurred) that the United States was **discriminating** against it.

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Parallel to the Indo-U.S. alignment, Pakistan has been growing closer to China, already its longtime supporter. Diminishing U.S. aid has been replaced by the huge influx of investment and loans from China for the China-

It remains to be seen to **what extent** China can fully replace the United States in Pakistan, but it seems unlikely that the U.S.-Pakistan relationship will completely lapse. The United States will continue to take interest in Pakistan's stability, and the two countries will still have to cooperate on certain issues such as counterterrorism, nonproliferation, and the security and reconstruction of Afghanistan.

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The South Asian “Trilemma” for U.S. Strategy

At some level, there is a fundamental tension or trilemma between the three U.S. strategic objectives of balancing China, ensuring nuclear security and strategic stability, and preventing international terrorist safe havens. The means to these ends require aligning closely with India to balance a rising China, cooperating closely with Pakistan, and building up the Afghan state to eliminate ungoverned spaces, but pursuing one can undermine another.

Aligning with India induces insecurity in Pakistan, resulting in less cooperation and greater reliance on asymmetric assets to counterbalance a rising India on both its borders. Cooperation with Pakistan to enhance its stability foments distrust in both U.S.-India and U.S.-Afghan relations, slowing both those efforts.

And nation-building in Afghanistan diverts increasingly scarce U.S. attention and resources away from the challenge of balancing China. How the United States seeks to juggle or resolve these tensions will have a significant impact on the U.S.-Pakistan relationship in the long run. Some refuse to acknowledge the tradeoff and are loath to think that the United States, as the sole superpower, should have to give anything up.

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Other strategic thinkers seem to suggest that the United States should privilege its relations with India and Afghanistan and abandon Pakistan, which may be forming a bloc with China. By contrast, an alternative strategy might try to order U.S. objectives and work to still achieve them based on the relative priority level.

commons. At the same time, the United States could continue to cooperate with Pakistan to help it develop into a stable, middle-income country contributing to regional security.

No doubt, abetting India's rise with material support will make it harder for the United States to cooperate with Pakistan, but not impossible if it deftly manages second-order consequences with diplomatic tact and commits to ensuring Pakistan's minimum-security needs of regional strategic stability. Because balancing China is the priority, the United States will not be able to dictate or get everything it wants with Pakistan, so it will have to prioritize what it most values.

For instance, it could prioritize supporting Pakistan's own stability and preventing a nuclear arms race while downgrading its position on Afghanistan and yielding space to a negotiated settlement closer to what Pakistan seeks.

The U.S. did not prevent Northern Alliance forces from taking Kabul after the Taliban fell, and it was never able to reverse their influence on the Afghan state, which Pakistan saw as opening space for Indian influence.

History provides a useful lesson for skeptics. Despite conventional wisdom, even while the United States was cooperating with Pakistan in the Afghan jihad to bleed the Soviets, it did not completely foreclose on its nonproliferation agenda, and in fact was actually partially successful given its objectives. As [Miller and Rabinowitz](#) argue in a 2015 article in *'International Security'*, the United States was successfully able to set constraints on states with nascent nuclear capabilities, including Pakistan.

They show that even during the 1980s, the United States sought to prevent overt Pakistani nuclearization because of the potential “domino effect” and disruptive effect on regional stability that could have. Through negotiations and incentives like aid packages, the United States was able to significantly delay Pakistan's nuclear testing.

Even though Pakistan had the capacity to do so by the early 1980s, it did not conduct any nuclear tests until 1998 in response to India's own tests. The post-9/11 period is also instructive. The United States was also partially successful in getting Pakistan to adopt at least some part of the fight as its own.

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were rather limited and peppered with **peace agreements** that ceded ground to militant networks, but between 2007-2009, Pakistan gradually began taking more offensive and decisive action.

Although a network of dangerous militant groups still operates within and around Pakistan, the threat they pose to the world and the U.S. homeland has diminished because of Pakistan's contribution to the fight.

Conclusion

The United States and Pakistan will no doubt continue to disagree on several critical policy areas as is routinely the case between sovereign countries, even allies. It is conceivable the U.S.-Pakistan relationship will continue to deteriorate, but the question then is whether it would result in a hard or soft landing.

History suggests that there still remains plenty of room to navigate spheres of cooperation that advances each country's national security aims even during rough patches. This prospect does not necessarily arise from alliances or altruism, but cold, calculating, and mutual self-interest.

Dr. Sameer Lalwani (@splalwani) is a Senior Associate for Asia Strategy and Co-Director of the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center where Hamza Shad is a Research Assistant.

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