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U.S.–Pakistan Reset: Still Need to Deal with Terrorist Sanctuaries

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A Pakistan parliamentary committee has released its recommendations for “resetting” the parameters of U.S.–Pakistan relations. U.S.–Pakistan ties have been severely strained since the November 26, 2011, NATO attack that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers along the border with Afghanistan. Since then, there have been no high-level U.S. visits to Pakistan, and NATO supply routes running through Pakistani territory have been shut down. The Pakistani parliament’s efforts to reframe the relationship could be helpful in restoring ties, as long as the U.S. brings its own terms to the table.

Starting Point for U.S.–Pakistan Negotiations.

The recommendations from the parliamentary commission include calling for the U.S. to end drone strikes on Pakistani territory; to

apologize for the November 26, 2011, NATO strike; to start paying fees for the transit of NATO shipments for the war in Afghanistan; to refrain from “hot pursuit” operations by U.S. forces from Afghanistan into Pakistani territory; and to increase transparency of the activities of foreign security contractors. The parliament will now debate the commission’s recommendations and eventually vote on a resolution on U.S.–Pakistan ties, possibly within the next week.

The most contentious demand from the U.S. perspective is the call to end drone strikes. The drone missile campaign in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) has proven to be one of Washington’s most effective tools in fighting global terrorism. An increase in the tempo of drone strikes in this region from mid-2009 to 2011 led to the crippling of al-Qaeda. The U.S. media have reported that documents found at Osama bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad showed bin Laden was worried about the devastating impact of the drone campaign on his organization.¹

The three-month cooling-off period between the U.S. and Pakistan has had some benefits for both sides. It has provided space for

de-escalation of the negative rhetoric surrounding relations in both the Pakistani and U.S. media. The lack of high-level U.S. visits to Pakistan, in particular, has meant that U.S. visitors did not become lightning rods for the Pakistani media to generate anti-American stories. U.S. civilian aid also has continued to flow to Pakistan during this period, demonstrating U.S. commitment to Pakistani economic development even in the face of deteriorating security relations. There seems to be growing recognition within Pakistan that U.S. aid is helpful to the country and not merely a way for the U.S. to buy influence.

Moreover, a parliamentary debate on ties could strengthen Pakistan’s democratic institutions, although the military will continue to have the final say on most security-related issues. Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar has said the parliamentary debate would allow the Pakistani people to “take ownership” of the relationship, which could go a long way toward reducing anti-American sentiment in the country.

The suspension of ties has also allowed each side to examine some of the key assumptions about the relationship. For instance, while shutting down NATO supply routes through

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Pakistan has proven difficult for the U.S. and NATO forces, it has not been the unmitigated disaster many in the U.S. and NATO feared it would be. Media reports indicate it has been about six times more expensive for the U.S. and NATO to rely solely on the so-called Northern Distribution Network through the Baltic states, Russia, and Central Asia. But the cut-off of Pakistani routes did not force the U.S. to alter the tempo of its military operations inside Afghanistan.²

Many of the countries involved in the Northern Distribution Network are eager to continue to serve as supply routes both into and out of Afghanistan in order to receive transit fees. In fact, Russia is reportedly considering allowing NATO to use one of its airfields to move troops and non-lethal cargo to and from Afghanistan.³ While Pakistan still represents the cheapest and most efficient transit route for supplies, the U.S. and NATO have other options should Pakistan continue to hold up cooperation.

U.S. Should Also Set Terms for Relationship.

In resetting U.S.–Pakistan relations, the U.S. also needs to put forward some of its own terms for the relationship. Trust is a two-way street, and U.S. leaders have lost faith in Pakistan's credibility as a reliable counterterrorism partner following the discovery of bin Laden in the heart of a Pakistani military cantonment town and its refusal to crack down on the Afghan Taliban

and Haqqani network bases within its territory. Moving forward, the U.S. should:

Continue drone strikes as necessary. As long as terrorist sanctuaries continue to exist in Pakistan, the U.S. will have to take steps to deal with them in the absence of effective Pakistani action. The drones have proven their effectiveness in reducing threats and degrading al-Qaeda. If Pakistan demonstrates that it can be trusted to act on information about terrorist targets, U.S. officials can then consider cooperating more closely with their Pakistani counterparts and allowing them to take the lead in conducting drone missions.

Demand Pakistani cooperation in a joint investigation into how bin Laden was able to shelter in Pakistan for so long. Members of the U.S. Congress continue to be puzzled by the fact that the world's most wanted terrorist could have hidden under the nose of the Pakistani military for so long. Even if Pakistani officials were not complicit in hiding bin Laden, they need to track down and prosecute those individuals who were involved in protecting him. Media reports have indicated there were contacts between members of the Pakistani terrorist group Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) and Osama bin Laden's courier. If true, these revelations show that Pakistan's segmented approach to terrorism contributed to bin Laden's ability to live undetected deep inside Pakistan. Pakistan has long sought to distinguish between

Kashmir-focused terrorist groups—which it allows to operate freely in Pakistan as a buffer against India—and al-Qaeda. U.S. officials should reject this distinction and make clear that they view any individuals who facilitate al-Qaeda as threats to America.

Encourage Islamabad to continue opening trade ties to India, and build on the vision of enhanced regional trade to widen constituencies for peace in India and Pakistan. Pakistan–India relations took a major step forward with Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani's recent announcement that Pakistan will grant India Most Favored Nation (MFN) trade status by the end of the year. Pakistan's focus on improving economic ties with its neighbors will help contribute to overall stability in the region by enhancing regional integration and boosting overall trade and economic growth. The key to stabilizing Afghanistan is to reduce Indo-Pakistani rivalry. The U.S. needs to continue its diplomatic efforts to help the two countries resolve tensions in an effort to create a new security paradigm in the region that discourages zero-sum thinking and encourages regional economic integration and cooperation.

Persevere in coaxing greater Pakistani cooperation with the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. Pakistani military leaders have failed to crack down on Taliban and Haqqani network sanctuaries because they assess these groups

1. Peter Bergen, "Bin Laden's Final Days—Big Plans, Deep Fears," CNN, March 16, 2012, at http://articles.cnn.com/2012-03-16/opinion/opinion_bergen-bin-laden-final-writings_1_drone-strikes-year-bin-bin-laden?_s=PM:OPINION (March 21, 2012).
2. Ajit Kumar Singh, "Pakistan: Teetering on the Brink—Analysis," Eurasia Review, March 12, 2012, at <http://www.eurasiareview.com/12032012-pakistan-teetering-on-the-brink-analysis/> (March 21, 2012).
3. David M. Herszenhorn, "Russia May Let NATO Use Airfield as Afghan Hub," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2012, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/europe/kremlin-willing-to-let-nato-use-airfield-for-afghan-transit.html> (March 21, 2012).

will serve as assets for Pakistan in the future. However, there are signs that Pakistani leaders increasingly recognize that a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan would have a destabilizing impact on Pakistan. U.S. officials must build on this sentiment by convincing Pakistani leaders that unless they use their resources to force the Taliban to compromise in Afghanistan, Pakistan will suffer in the future from an emboldened Taliban leadership.

Overcoming Frustration on Both Sides

The Pakistani parliament's efforts to reframe the relationship could be

helpful in restoring U.S.–Pakistan ties. However, Pakistani leaders must appreciate that the U.S. has certain red lines when it comes to fighting terrorism and will insist on action to further degrade the terrorist sanctuary in Pakistan's tribal border areas. While there is an opportunity to improve relations, Pakistani officials should not overplay their hand but should recognize that U.S. officials are equally frustrated with the relationship.

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