

U.S.-Pakistan Nexus Redux?

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By Ehsan Ahrari

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Ehsan Ahrari, a strategic analyst based in Norfolk, Virginia. Ahrari writes that the U.S. must be realistic about how much influence Pakistan really exercises over Afghanistan, and be prepared for an impasse. In fighting transnational terrorism, it is essential that Washington pursues only its own agenda, and not that of India or Russia.

II. Essay By Ehsan Ahrari

"U.S.-Pakistan Nexus Redux?"

by Ehsan Ahrari, Norfolk, Virginia

In the aftermath of the horrendous tragedy of September 11, 2001, the United States is once again making overtures toward Pakistan. Washington needs its assistance in capturing Usama Bin Ladin, the suspected mastermind behind the terror attacks on America.

Pakistan was America's ally during the peak of the Cold War. It allowed the flight of U-2 spy planes from its base in Peshawar in the late 1950s over the Soviet Union. One of those planes was shot down by the USSR in 1960. The rhetoric that came out of Moscow following that incident included a threat of retaliatory attack on the Peshawar base, if such flights were to continue. The United States never fully rewarded Pakistan's steadfastness by offering military assistance at the time of its dire need, or by unequivocally supporting it on matters that were important to Pakistan's security. U.S. military assistance was cut off during the 1965 Indo-Pak border war. America's overall strategic interests weighed heavily even in determining the modalities of its political support for Islamabad.

U.S. interests once again weighed heavily in the aftermath of the Soviet military invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. Washington rediscovered the U.S.-Pak alliance, and the latter became the conduit of America's war on the communist occupiers of Islamic Afghanistan. Incidentally, this was also the era-1980-1985-when the CIA trained the Afghan Mujahideen. That

decision still haunts the United States, since the "Afghan Arabs," who received military training to fight the Soviets, later on targeted the United States. It was during 1980-1985 that Usama Bin Ladin first became involved in the Afghan conflict.

Now, the United States has approached Pakistan because, one more time, we need its assistance. However, in its earnest pursuit of Bin Ladin, and equally important, in its resolve to eradicate transnational terrorism, the United States needs to be mindful of the following.

First, in our grim resolve to capture Bin Ladin, we should not forget how fragile the Pakistani government really is. While insisting that it cooperate with us, we should not try to ignore the political realities, domestic difficulties, and security concerns that it is currently facing. As much as we hate to admit it, Bin Ladin is still very popular in Pakistan. So, any U.S.-Pakistan dealings over this issue have to be discreet, even secretive. The Taliban should be approached with firmness and clarity about extraditing Bin Ladin. In their case as well, an effective modus operandi is to avoid all aspects of public diplomacy. Above all, the United States should be realistic about how much influence Pakistan really exercises over Afghanistan, and be prepared for an impasse.

Second, the United States should remain very sensitive about not becoming an unwitting promoter of India's agenda in the name of fighting terrorism in that neighborhood. For India, fighting terrorism may be a euphemism for getting the United States to take military action against Islamist groups who are currently destabilizing the part of Kashmir that is under its control. As condemnable as the actions of these groups are, it is not our battle to fight. U.S. interests in South Asia are best served if it remains engaged with both India and Pakistan.

Third, by the same token, Russia may also use Washington's anger over terrorist attacks on its soil by raising the level of brutality against the Chechen civilian population, without any concern of being criticized by the United States. America's commitment to human rights makes this country a shining city on the hill, a phrase that Ronald Reagan so fervently and frequently used. Washington should not take its eyes off this noble goal regarding Moscow's treatment of Chechens as it escalates its own fight against global terrorism.

The shameful terrorist attacks on U.S. soil have not diminished its status as the world leader-which, in some ways, is more important than its status as the sole superpower. As such, it has to remain focused on its own agenda. As we mourn the needless loss of lives of thousands of our citizens, it is worth reminding ourselves that the battle against transnational terrorism will be a long and arduous one. By regularly reminding ourselves of this reality, we are likely to keep our level of frustration low, especially when our objectives are slow in materializing. Military actions against the perpetrators of terror attacks on the United States-once sufficient evidence is at hand-are essential for our immediate satisfaction. However, the long-term solution to this scourge is likely to be slow and difficult to surface. We need to prepare ourselves for uphill battles of all sorts. But, most important, we have to make sure that in fighting transnational terrorism, we pursue only our agenda, and not that of someone else.

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