POLICYBRIEF

SALVAGING A TROUBLED MARRIAGE:
LESSONS FOR U.S.-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

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SUMMARY

The new U.S. administration has inherited the challenge of a U.S.-Pakistan relationship in crisis. This policy brief argues that although strategic partnership may be impractical, sustained ties remain essential. Therefore, the White House should frame U.S.-Pakistan relations as a scaled-back but long-term relationship meant to persevere after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. In refashioning U.S.-Pakistan policy, policymakers should bear in mind three important lessons. First, neither side exerts much influence over the other; second, limited opportunities for cooperation with official Pakistan should be seized; and third, coercive diplomacy has little utility. Instead, the United States should engage Pakistan's private sector and young, urban middle class—both of which will play a key role in that country's long-term future.

Not long ago, U.S.-Pakistan relations were flush with potential. In 2009, Congress passed legislation tripling economic assistance to Pakistan, signaling a desire to expand the relationship beyond mere security cooperation. Several months later, Washington and Islamabad launched a strategic dialogue series on a variety of security and nonsecurity issues. At the opening session, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton announced "a new phase in our partnership, with a new focus and a renewed commitment to work together to achieve the goals we share"[1]

Unfortunately, this new phase was short-lived. A series of incidents in 2011 plunged the relationship into crisis, bringing diplomatic and military relations to a standstill. Although tensions eased in 2012, the relationship remains deeply troubled today.

A consensus is emerging among policymakers that the relationship needs a major redesign, but opinion is split on what this shift should entail. Should the two sides make another push for a lasting strategic partnership, which seemed so promising just a few years back? Or is it time to tone down expectations and objectives, and settle for a short-term, counterterrorism-based arrangement to help achieve objectives in Afghanistan?

In fact, both options are problematic. A strategic partnership is impractical, and a relationship viewed solely through the lens of the war in Afghanistan is too limiting. What would work

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best is a combination of the two. The White House should frame U.S.-Pakistan ties as a scaled-back but long-term relationship meant to persevere after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

The rationale for downsizing ties comes down to mistrust, which runs deep, and interests, which diverge sharply. Both imperil the security cooperation that constitutes the essence of the current relationship. Furthermore, in both countries public opinion toward the other country is hostile, depriving elected officials of the political incentive to push for a closer rapport. With the relationship on tenterhooks, a single devastating event could well sever it altogether. This nearly happened in November 2011, when North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) warplanes accidentally killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers stationed on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Amid all these constraints and pressures, the goal of forging a strategic partnership is unrealistic.

Meanwhile, the case for a relationship with Pakistan beyond 2014—when most U.S. troops will have left Afghanistan—is compelling. Quite simply, Pakistan is endowed with immense strategic importance—and for reasons having little to do with Afghanistan. Pakistan boasts a large and young population (two-thirds of Pakistanis are under 30), and it will soon become the world's fifth most populous country. It also has the world's seventh-largest army and has nearly surpassed Great Britain as the fifth-largest nuclear power.

Moreover, Pakistan's closest allies—Saudi Arabia and China—are critical players in world politics, and its chief nemesis, India, is the world's largest democracy. Pakistan is also in the Indian Ocean region, which may become the most geopolitically significant region of the 21st century. The analyst Robert Kaplan has argued that this area "may comprise a map as iconic to the new century as Europe was to the last one."[2] Large shares of the world's people, wealth, and threats (from piracy and militancy to environmental destruction) are found in the Indian Ocean Region, and it also abounds with natural resources and sea lanes for trade. For all these reasons, discarding Pakistan from U.S. foreign policy strategy after 2014 would be a grave mistake.

A retooled relationship with Pakistan—scaled back yet long term—will be most effective if its designers and implementers are mindful of what has and has not worked in the recent past. The new administration should carefully consider three lessons in particular as it wades into the turbulent waters of U.S.-Pakistan relations.

First, each side enjoys only limited influence over the other. The United States may appear to wield considerable leverage because of the sizable military and economic assistance it provides to Islamabad. Likewise, Pakistan may seem to enjoy ample clout given the critical NATO supply routes on its soil, which transport materiel to and from Afghanistan—and also given the close contacts it maintains with the Afghan Taliban. In reality, both the United States and Pakistan have been repeatedly stymied in their attempts to extract favors from the other. Washington has been rebuffed in its efforts to compel Islamabad to eliminate the Pakistan-based sanctuaries of militants who attack U.S. troops in Afghanistan, while Islamabad has struggled, largely unsuccessfully, to obtain a variety of coveted prizes from Washington. These benefits range from a lead role in the Afghan political reconciliation process to a civilian nuclear accord and better market access for textile exports.

This lack of influence can be attributed to the same factors that stand in the way of a deeper relationship—interests that don't align, trust deficits, and domestic political considerations. The White House

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should acknowledge the futility of making requests that can't be granted and should lower expectations for what Washington can realistically get out of the relationship. There are too few areas of convergence for the situation to be otherwise.

However, the few opportunities that do exist should be warmly embraced. The second important lesson is that despite all the hostility, the relationship offers genuine potential for cooperation. Last October, the two sides reached preliminary agreement on a joint effort to counter improvised explosive devices (many of which are produced in Pakistan yet detonated in Afghanistan) and finalized a deal on a bilateral commission charged with getting the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table. Another promising possibility is a joint countermilitancy effort exclusively targeting the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), an umbrella group of militants who take aim at both the Pakistani state and U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

Although U.S. and Pakistani views of the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network diverge sharply, both sides are determined to eliminate the TTP. These brutal fighters, who in fall 2012 shot a celebrated 14-year-old advocate for women's education in the head, inspire repugnance within the Pakistani government and the vast majority of the population alike. Many TTP fighters have taken refuge in the eastern Afghanistan province of Kunar, while others hunker down in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal area. Stepped-up intelligence sharing between Washington and Islamabad (and Kabul) could enhance prospects for a coordinated campaign of Pakistani Army assaults on TTP fighters in the tribal belt and U.S. drone or air strikes in Kunar.

Such cooperative efforts, however, must be pursued delicately. The third lesson for U.S.-Pakistan relations is that coercive diplomacy has minimal utility For several years, Washington repeatedly and publicly berated Pakistan for not implementing stronger measures against militants, with some U.S. policymakers threatening aid cutoffs if such steps were not taken. The tactic had little effect; instead it fueled public hostility in Pakistan that Islamabad has been happy to exploit.

In more recent months, Washington has wisely restricted such hectoring to private audiences. The new administration should build on this softer diplomacy by taking a message of engagement to a wider public audience. American officials should do more interviews on Urdu and vernacular Pakistani television and radio stations—the chief information source for great majorities of Pakistanis. More broadly, U.S. diplomacy should look beyond the English-speaking, liberal upper class and engage, through small-scale aid projects and media outreach, more of the "real" Pakistan—such as the young, urbanizing middle class. This group is certainly more conservative and religious than Pakistan's cosmopolitan elite. Yet it is also a relatively well-educated, globally minded, Internet-savvy population. Demographically speaking, it will dominate for decades.

At the same time, the new administration should build on earlier efforts to strengthen links with the Pakistani private sector. Public officials in cities are struggling to provide basic services to their proliferating residents; provincial authorities are overburdened by new responsibilities mandated by decentralization policies; and the central government is constrained by deficiencies of will, governance, and capacity. Therefore, Pakistan's private sector will increasingly be called on to serve the country's needs.

This is not to say that Washington's traditional interlocutors in government should be forgotten—particularly given that, with Pakistan's elections expected in the spring of 2013, the government will soon have a fresh dispensation. And regardless of the composition of this new government, the ultimate powerbroker in Pakistan—the military—will remain unchanged. Washington will need to maintain relations with this institution as well. Yet it would do itself a disservice by neglecting the country's emerging forces. Like the young urban middle class, Pakistan's business sector (and especially small and medium enterprises, which already generate 85 percent of nonagricultural jobs in rapidly urbanizing Pakistan) is an often overlooked resource that is well worth engaging.

The possibilities for partnership with official Pakistan are limited. Yet this reality should neither preclude the White House from seizing the opportunities that do exist nor prevent the United States from expanding its engagement with unofficial Pakistan—and particularly those playing an instrumental role in the country's long-term future.

ENDNOTES

1 The quotation is from Clinton's opening remarks at the U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue, held in Washington, D.C., on March 24, 2010. For a full text of her remarks, see http://still4hill.com/2010/03/24/text-secretary-clinton-foreign-minister-qureshi-opening-session-of-the-u-s-pakistan-strategic-dialogue/.

2 Robert Kaplan, "The Indian Ocean and the Future of U.S. Power," Globalist, October 30, 2010, http://www.theglobalist.com/printStoryId.aspx?StoryId=8780.

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