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When $10 Billion Is Not Enough: Rethinking U.S. Strategy toward Pakistan

In the five years since Pakistani president General Pervez Musharraf announced his intention to cut ties with the Taliban and join the war on terrorism, U.S. policy toward Pakistan has been one of unstinting support. That approach has brought some genuine gains: more al Qaeda members have been captured and killed in Pakistan than anywhere else in the world since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Yet today, it is worth asking whether U.S. policy has reached its limits and if it is now being guided more by inertia than strategy. Washington's close alliance with Musharraf may now have run its course.

Many experts see Afghanistan's growing insurgency as a consequence of Pakistani weakness, if not outright complicity, with militants in the Pashtun border areas.[1] Criticism has centered on the September 2006 peace deal between Islamabad and local leaders in North and South Waziristan, one of the seven tribal regions on the rugged Afghan border that have historically fallen outside of government control. Pakistan's initial military efforts to root out Taliban and al Qaeda elements in North Waziristan largely failed. Army operations proved ineffective, and the country's heart was never in the fight.[2] Musharraf's decision to use tribal elders to rein in insurgents is less a strategy for victory than a means of removing his army from the battlefield and protecting them in their barracks.[3] Anyone who doubts that the threat to the Pakistani forces is real need only consider the November 2006 suicide attack that killed 41 recruits just days after the military's air strike on a madrassa in the Bajaur border area.

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In the coming months, Musharraf's retreat is likely to run up against an increasing number of officials in the U.S. government and on Capitol Hill who view Afghanistan as a major front in the global counterinsurgency, who are dissatisfied with progress against the Taliban, and who imagine that the road to a sustainable government in Kabul passes through Islamabad. When asked in December 2006 about the presence of Taliban and al Qaeda fighters moving across the Pakistan border, then–U.S. national intelligence director John Negroponte said that "sooner or later, [Musharraf's government] will have to reckon with it."[4] That day may not be far off.

Washington's close alliance with Musharraf may now have run its course.

The U.S. approach to Pakistan is heavily influenced by personal relationships at the top. When President George W. Bush met with Musharraf at the White House in September 2006, he echoed many of the familiar themes he has voiced for the past five years on Pakistan. "When [Musharraf] looks me in the eye and says … there won't be a Taliban and won't be al Qaeda, I believe him, you know?" Bush said.[5] This personal affinity forged in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks has set the course for the past five years of the U.S.-Pakistani relationship.

How deep this trust runs will play out over the coming months as insurgent activity in Afghanistan likely increases with winter's thaw and Musharraf takes steps to ensure his election victory in late 2007 or early 2008. Bush may consider Musharraf to be his man in Pakistan, but partnerships based on coercion and inducement often give the weaker parties unexpected leverage. Musharraf has demonstrated his skill at convincing Washington that he maintains just enough control over extremist forces to be reliable, but not enough to prevent him from being vulnerable and requiring the type of bolstering that Washington is well suited to provide. Musharraf's memoir, *In the Line of Fire*, and the subsequent U.S. media tour successfully reinforced this dual message of threat and indispensability.[6]

The ultimate reason for the consistency of U.S. policy toward Pakistan, however, is not Musharraf's vision or trustworthiness but the perceived lack of alternatives.[7] The two "centrist" political parties and their exiled leaders, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, are considered by many Pakistanis and Pakistan experts to be hardly more democratic, honest, or capable than Musharraf's military rule.[8] The dominant view holds that the military is the only effective institution in Pakistan and will likely play the dominant role in politics for the foreseeable future.[9] Democracy advocates must contend with the notion that even if Musharraf decides to take off his uniform and to hold

free and fair elections, the military will still be calling the shots after the votes have been counted.

For all the talk of the United States' global dominance and despite considerable U.S. support to the Pakistani military, Washington finds itself with relatively little leverage to influence events in Pakistan.[10] During the past five years, the United States has given Pakistan more than $10 billion in assistance, channeled primarily through the Pakistani military. What Pakistan gives in return may be only enough to keep the money coming.

After the September 11 attacks, many U.S. policymakers believed that Pakistan was one place where they were justified in saying, "You are either with us or against us." Nevertheless, despite the billions of dollars spent, the United States has not made the necessary commitment to solidify the relationship for the long term. This is not merely a function of the scale of assistance, but of its type. U.S. engagement with Pakistan is highly militarized and centralized, with very little reaching the vast majority of Pakistanis. More problematic still, U.S. assistance does not so much reflect a coherent strategy as it does a legacy of the initial, transactional quid pro quo established in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks and a familiar menu of what the United States was already organized to provide. U.S. soft power in Pakistan, the ability to influence by attraction and persuasion, is far lower than it could be, considering the historic, economic, and personal bonds that unite the two countries.

Is it possible for the United States to convince Pakistanis that it is interested in a serious, long-term partnership rather than merely a short-term alliance of convenience? Doing so will require a better understanding of Pakistan and an assistance strategy more aligned with the needs of average Pakistanis. In January 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill to fully implement the recommendations of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, more widely known as the 9/11 Commission. Included was a 90-day window for the Bush administration to develop a long-term strategy for Pakistan and the threat of an aid suspension if the president does not attest to Islamabad's commitment to rooting out the Taliban. Because those commissioners graded the administration's approach to Pakistan a C+ in 2006, this policy review is long overdue.

A closer look at the numbers for U.S. assistance to Pakistan since the September 11 attacks may spark a broader discussion of long-term objectives. Money is not everything, but it often sends a clearer signal of our priorities than official statements. Elections and transitions offer the opportunity to rethink U.S. interests and policy options. If Washington squanders the chance and allows its approach to Pakistan to be governed by little more than blind faith, both Musharraf and U.S. policy are sure to remain in the line of fire for the foreseeable future.

U.S. Engagement since 9/11

Between the end of the Cold War and the September 11 attacks, the United States distanced itself from Pakistan, closing off the financial spigots that had once flooded Islamabad with support aimed at driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan.[11] The freewheeling days of funneling $200,000 monthly stipends as well as weapons and supplies to anti-Soviet commanders through Pakistan's intelligence services were replaced with a web of sanctions intended to punish Pakistan for its nuclear program and later for a military coup. On account of Islamabad's then-undeclared nuclear program, in October 1990 the United States blocked the delivery of about 70 F-16 jets that Pakistan had purchased, which comprised the core of their conventional defense.[12] New weapons purchases became off-limits, and exchange programs with Pakistani military officers ground to a halt, causing U.S. policymakers to lose touch with a generation of the Pakistani military. What had once been one of the largest U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) offices in the world, employing more than 1,000 staff around the country, shrank to almost nothing virtually overnight.

The urgency of responding to the September 11 attacks precipitated a major U.S. reengagement with Pakistan despite Washington's prolonged absence and prohibitive legislative restrictions. Once it became clear that Pakistan would condemn the attacks, turn against the Taliban, and help the United States, Washington's immediate objective became to secure logistical support for military operations in Afghanistan against al Qaeda and potentially the Taliban regime.[13]

This eventual support took six forms that now provide the strategic foundation for the bilateral relationship.[14] First, Pakistan allowed the United States to fly sorties from the south over Pakistani airspace, vital because of Iran's unwillingness to open its airspace to U.S. planes. Second, Islamabad granted U.S. troops access to a select number of its military bases, although it insisted that the bases should not be utilized for offensive operations. Third, tens of thousands of Pakistani troops provided force protection for these bases and U.S. ships in the Indian Ocean. Fourth, Pakistan provided logistical support to the U.S. war effort, including vast amounts of fuel for coalition aircraft and port access for the delivery of vital supplies. Fifth, the military deployed to its western border in a mostly failed effort to cut off retreat to al Qaeda and Taliban members fleeing Afghanistan. Sixth, Islamabad provided Washington with access to Pakistani intelligence assets in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The bulk of this cooperation continues today.

What is truly unique about this arrangement is that no formal agreement or user fees were negotiated, nor was a repayment mechanism created.[15] Yet, a quid pro quo had been established. Musharraf saw his government's effort as

a concession for which he would pay a domestic price and therefore needed a demonstration of U.S. support in return.[16] Bush waived U.S. sanctions, reopened the U.S. assistance pipeline, and promised to forgive $2 billion of Pakistan's debt and encouraged other creditors to do the same.

The reality is that U.S. assistance since the September 11 attacks is not money intended to transform the nature of the Pakistani state or society or to strengthen Pakistan's internal stability. In effect, it is politically determined assistance, a "thank you" to Musharraf's regime for the critical role Pakistan has played in Operation Enduring Freedom. This is why the 9/11 Commission members concluded that U.S. assistance had not "moved sufficiently beyond security assistance to include significant funding for education efforts."[17] In this way, very little is unique about the current U.S.-Pakistani relationship. It is history repeating itself, resembling the 1980s, when the United States established a quid pro quo with General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq to help fight the Soviets. Any efforts by U.S. officials to alter its terms to focus on internal reforms would prompt Zia's reply, "Sir, what you are proposing is neither part of the quid nor the quo."[18]

> Washington finds itself with relatively little leverage to influence events in Pakistan.

The legacy of the initial post–September 11 arrangement persists today. The strategic direction for Pakistan was set early on by a narrow circle at the top of the Bush administration and has been largely focused on the war effort in Afghanistan rather than on Pakistan's internal situation—even though in many ways the two are related. The various departments and agencies have largely been left to operate within this preexisting framework. For those in Congress who argue that U.S. taxpayers should be getting more for their money, the Bush administration and Islamabad's reply is that the terms of the agreement have been set. The more the United States wants from Pakistan, the more it will have to give.[19]

The Balance Sheet

The most interesting questions to ask Pakistan experts inside and outside of the U.S. government are the simplest ones: how much money does the United States provide to Pakistan, and what is it meant to do? The answers almost always vary. The United States has provided Pakistan with more than $10 billion in military, economic, and development assistance over the past five-plus years. This number has likely been matched, if not exceeded, by classified monies that have gone toward intelligence and covert military ac-

tion. One supposes the "millions of dollars" in bounties, or "prize money," that Musharraf's memoir alleges that the CIA paid to the Pakistani government for captured al Qaeda members would fall in this basket.[20]

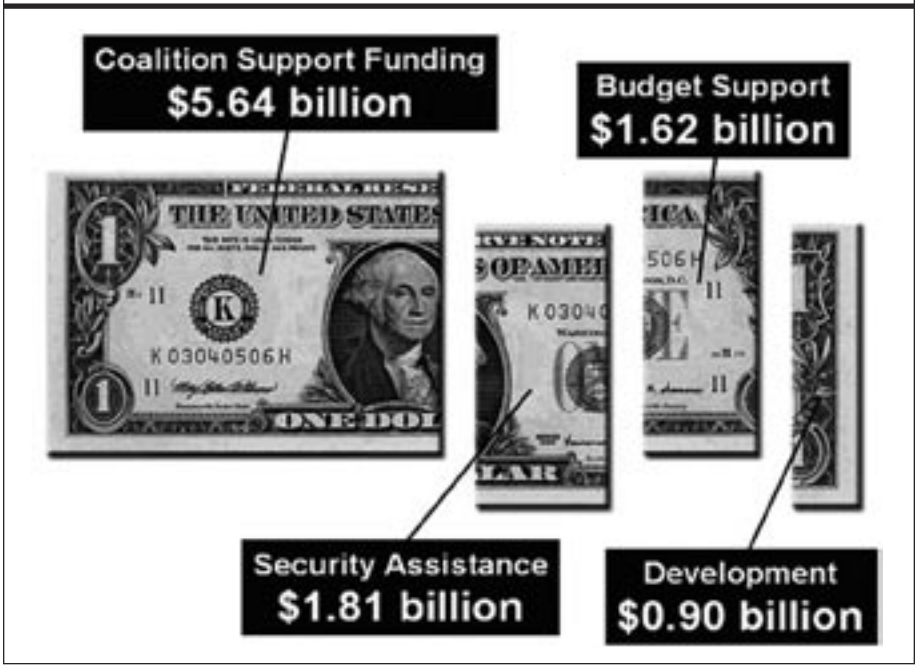
Although the nonclassified assistance numbers are public, not all are easily accessible, even within the U.S. government. Like blind men groping at different parts of an elephant, the various departments and agencies of the U.S. government see limited pieces of the assistance budget. Those whom one would imagine to see the full picture at the embassy still may not have access to all of the defense money.[21] Perhaps more surprisingly, not everyone at the National Security Council or the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) or in Congress may have access to full accountings of what the U.S. government is spending in Pakistan, as it is disaggregated by sectors and accounts. This raises the question of how one goes about making strategic decisions about a country whose future is vital to U.S. interests without seeing the full scale of the assistance involved.

Less than 10 percent of U.S. assistance goes toward development or humanitarian purposes.

There are four main categories of assistance. The majority of the $10 billion, 57 percent, has gone toward Coalition Support Funds, money intended to reimburse U.S. partners for their assistance in the war on terrorism. Roughly 18 percent, or $1.8 billion, has gone toward security assistance. The Pakistanis have spent the majority of this money on purchases of major weapons systems. Another 16 percent has gone toward budget support as direct cash transfers to the government of Pakistan with few real accountability mechanisms built in. This leaves less than 10 percent for development and humanitarian assistance, including the U.S. response to the October 2005 earthquake. Education, which has been the showcase of USAID programming in Pakistan and which the 9/11 Commission report argues ought to be central to U.S. engagement in Pakistan because of its potential to play a moderating influence, comes in at only $64 million per year for more than 55 million school-aged children, or $1.16 per child per year.

The details of this assistance raise several concerns. Coalition Support Funds, which account for the majority of U.S. assistance to Pakistan, are given to 20 nations, but Pakistan is by far the largest recipient.[22] Officially, the money is reimbursement for food, fuel, clothing, ammunition, billeting, and medical expenses. The Pakistani government regularly provides receipts to U.S. Central Command, which shares oversight duties with the Pentagon's comptroller, the Department of State, and OMB. The real level of scrutiny is uncertain. U.S. military officials in Islamabad, for instance, have recommended changing the

Figure I: U.S. Assistance to Pakistan Since 9/11



program to pay for specific objectives planned and executed rather than paying for whatever Pakistan bills.[23] The support funds are now being doled out at a rate of as much as $100 million per month, raising the question of whether the money is provided on the condition of counterterrorism performance or as political and military support more broadly constituted.[24]

The vast majority of security assistance money ($1.8 billion, or 18 percent of total assistance) has gone toward foreign military financing, although other parts go toward other types of "train and equip" or counternarcotics programs.[25] Although foreign military financing is often justified to Congress as playing a critical role in the war on terrorism, in reality the weapons systems are often prestige items to help Pakistan in the event of war with India.[26] When high-ranking Pakistani officials visit the U.S. secretary of defense, they are more likely to hand him a wish list of hardware than have a discussion about strategy.[27] Looking at the total approved U.S. weapons sales, including weapons purchased without the benefit of direct U.S. assistance, Pakistan has spent $8.4 billion between 2002 and 2006. Most of this has been spent on weapons such as F-16s and other aircraft, anti-ship Harpoon Block II missiles, and antimissile defense systems. Few of these weapons are likely to provide much help in rooting out al Qaeda or the Taliban.

Clearly, the weapons are intended to reward Pakistan, bring it more closely into the U.S. orbit, and satisfy its security concerns vis-à-vis India. If winning

the war on terrorism is about relationships, the Bush administration has made material items the basis of these relationships. Military training, on the other hand, which brings young Pakistani officers to the United States and which has been ramped up since the September 11 attacks, includes only 157 officers that were scheduled to be trained in 2006.[28] At a time when U.S. policy is almost completely reliant on the Pakistani military, there may be important facets of this institution the U.S. government does not know or cannot access or that may be anti-Western in their orientation.

U.S. assistance has remarkably little emphasis on long-term domestic Pakistani stability.

Pakistan is one of four countries that receive budget support (16 percent of total U.S. foreign assistance) from the United States; Israel, Egypt, and Jordan are the others. The official purpose of a direct cash transfer to Pakistan is to help that country pay off its debt so it can spend more on its social sector. As Pakistan's debt burden has been eased since the September 11 attacks, its economy has realized five straight years of dramatic growth, almost 7 percent annually. Yet, there is little accountability in how Pakistan spends U.S. money. Whereas the Egyptians have conditions placed on their budget support, no specific numbers or benchmarks exist for Pakistan beyond vaguely worded "shared objectives."[29] Contrast this with the budget support provided to Pakistan by the World Bank, whose contribution is contingent on the Pakistani government meeting specific performance goals related to privatization and macroeconomic stability. When the government has failed to comply, this aid has been cut off. The seemingly unconditional nature of U.S. budget support, on the other hand, is a sign that economic goals have in many ways been subordinated to U.S. political and military goals.

Development assistance to Pakistan accounts for 9 percent of the total reported U.S. foreign assistance budget. Throughout much of 2006, Director of Foreign Assistance and USAID administrator Randall Tobias has been developing a process to generate greater transparency and consistency and to better align strategy and resources in the delivery of foreign aid. Pakistan was the first place he visited, and it has been designated a "fast track," or high-priority, country.[30] Despite hopes and fears within the foreign aid community that Tobias's framework would radically change the way business is carried out, early indications are that, for Pakistan at least, very little will actually change in the short term.[31] The USAID mission remains small, and restrictions on travel and local partners are severe. Although a new development initiative in the Afghan border regions has been launched within the past year, for the most part U.S. development assistance is not well targeted to the main drivers of conflict, instability

and extremism in Pakistan, but instead is comprised of a generic mix of primary education and literacy, basic health, food aid, and democracy and governance assistance mainly focused on the upcoming elections.

Asking the Right Questions

This brief breakdown reveals a U.S. assistance budget heavily weighted toward short-term military cooperation with remarkably little emphasis on long-term domestic stability. Billions of U.S. dollars are provided without an overall perspective or any real sense of objective aside from support to Pakistan's military.

This absence of a long-term strategy is especially disconcerting considering how tenuous the premise of U.S. policy—Musharraf as the guarantor of stability in Pakistan—actually is. It has become something of a parlor game in Washington to discuss the likelihood of future crisis scenarios for Pakistan, most involving the demise of Musharraf.[32] Considering how dangerous a Pakistan meltdown could be for U.S. interests, the perceived lack of viable policy alternatives is truly alarming. Given the scale of U.S. assistance and Pakistan's importance to current and future U.S. national security interests, the Bush administration and the new Democratic-majority Congress should ask tough questions regarding U.S. policy in the region.

First and most critically, what are U.S. taxpayers getting for their $10 billion? Are they safer because of it? Are U.S. troops in Afghanistan better able to complete their mission? Are Pakistanis and their government more likely to turn away from extremist ideologies and orient themselves toward the West on account of our aid? Is U.S. money ineffective or even counterproductive, potentially sowing the seeds of a future crisis? To some extent, these judgments are political, colored by personal ideology and outlook. Some might argue that the United States should cut assistance to Pakistan, whereas others would argue that the United States should give more. Whatever the recommendation, a clear accounting by the Bush administration of what U.S. money is expected to achieve would provide a better understanding of what would constitute a successful or a failed policy.

Second, Washington policymakers should ponder a question that is almost always overlooked: what are the Pakistanis getting for our $10 billion? Are they safer? Is their government more capable of handling their toughest problems, for instance, relations between provinces and the Punjabi center or the country's growing energy needs? Do U.S. money and policies reinforce or subvert the rule of law? Are there more good jobs for Pakistanis and better-educated people to fill those jobs? If Pakistan needs Musharraf to have a "George Washington moment"—taking off his uniform and eventually walking away from power—has U.S. money encouraged it?

Pakistanis' views of the United States and their willingness to share our values are shaped not only by external events such as the war in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also by how we spend our money in Pakistan. Despite such generosity, most Pakistanis do not believe the United States is on their side.[33] When the U.S. government urges military action in the tribal areas and seeks to close madrassas or calls for curriculum reform, the perception in Pakistan is that the United States has a problem with Islam. Most Pakistanis do not perceive the Taliban as a threat to their national interests, but as a potential asset if the United States were to walk away from Afghanistan again, providing "strategic depth" to prevent an Indian-friendly regime on their Western border. Despite the talk of a long-term commitment to Pakistan and support for democracy and education, these words ring hollow outside the fortress-like U.S. embassy compound in Islamabad.

Third, U.S. policymakers should be asking who else is giving support to Pakistan and what influence their money is having. Given Islamabad's displeasure with the recent U.S.-Indian nuclear deal and its consideration of Beijing as an "all-weather friend," U.S. officials ought to look more closely at the full nature of China's military and economic support to Pakistan. Washington should also investigate how much money is being channeled to Pakistan from the Persian Gulf through Islamic charities and for what purposes. This is broader than merely disturbing terrorist financing; it goes to the heart of the battle of ideas being waged. What might the United States learn from the way these charities operate and deliver assistance? Even though Pakistan now constitutes the largest Fulbright program, bringing Pakistanis to the United States on educational grants, U.S. diplomacy requires a new narrative that has the potential to inspire rather than threaten the Muslim world.

Answering these difficult questions is vital to implementing a successful policy in Pakistan. Unfortunately, there seems to be little political will in Washington or in Islamabad to ask or answer them and risk altering agreements reached at the highest levels. The default setting is to stay the course, at least until the next crisis erupts. U.S. officials are constrained by the risk-averse nature of bureaucracies and by officials personally invested in the present course. Once set, no one ends up driving the strategy, and no one wants to admit heading in the wrong direction.

Moreover, structural constraints in the way in which money is allocated and dispersed in the U.S. budget makes it difficult to change course or to be flexible.[34] Money is appropriated and programmed with existing authorities and accounts, making it difficult to shift money according to the needs on the ground. U.S. bureaucracies are greatly reluctant to go back to Congress and ask for authorities to move money around on account of the perception that lawmakers will not look fondly on such requests (which is often true). Each

department and agency is responsible for a different tool in the toolbox, none wants to give its tool up, and each lacks the ability to work as a component of an integrated strategy.

To break out of this policy stalemate, the United States needs a broader circle of decisionmakers debating what constitutes the U.S. national interest in Pakistan and what options Washington has there. More information should be put in the public domain. Congress should hold hearings to explore these questions. The Bush administration and Congress should instruct the intelligence community to produce a national intelligence estimate on Pakistan's stability and on U.S. influence in the country and should release a version of this report to the public. The Government Accountability Office should report on whether or not U.S. money being spent in Pakistan is achieving its goals. Is the priority to steer India and Pakistan away from the nuclear precipice, to keep nukes out of the hands of terrorists, to rebuild Afghanistan, to hunt down al Qaeda, or to support Pakistan's long-term stability and prosperity? Arguing that support to Musharraf accomplishes all of these goals obscures the key question of what Washington wants in the first place and only reaffirms U.S. dependency on a man who might be gone tomorrow.

The United States must develop a better understanding of how Pakistan is changing.

The United States also must develop a better understanding of how Pakistan is changing. With more than one-half of Pakistan's population under the age of 15, today's certainties are unlikely to be tomorrow's. Pakistan experts may agree on the reliability and capability of Pakistan's military, but the U.S. government knows relatively little about the lower reaches of the military and intelligence services, let alone the business community and Islamist parties. Who is likely to be the next Musharraf? Will this new leader emerge from the military and adopt an "enlightened" form of Islam or something more akin to what has emerged in Palestine or Iran? Billions in military hardware and supplies are unlikely to diminish the deep cynicism toward the U.S. war on terrorism within Pakistan's security establishment and Pakistani society at large.

The current U.S. approach toward Pakistan is more about buying time than about adjusting means to goals. With the new Congress and the 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign already under way, Americans deserve a more serious public debate on what the United States is trying to do with Pakistan and how it is trying to do it. This requires leadership from the top at a time of competing priorities in Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and elsewhere, as well as flexibility in how to interpret the nature of the U.S. commitment to Pakistan. A successful U.S.-Pakistani relationship is critical to Afghanistan's reconstruc-

tion, regional stability, nuclear nonproliferation, U.S. engagement with the entire Muslim world, and Americans' safety at home. Plan A has forestalled disaster for five-plus years, but there is no Plan B, and the costs of crisis in Pakistan are too great to live without workable options.

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