

**STEPHANIE FLAMENBAUM**E-mail: sflamenbaum@usip.org

Phone: 202.429.3849

MEGAN NEVILLEE-mail: mneville@usip.org

Phone: 202.429.3828

CONSTANTINO XAVIERE-mail: cxavier@brookings.edu

Phone: 202.797.6048

The Future of Pakistan

Summary

- Growing economic and political instability, rising support for extremism and increasing tensions in Pakistan's relationship with the United States currently threaten the country's prospects for a stable future.
- Domestic actors with the capacity to build consensus across Pakistan's fractured society must address the widening divergence of opinion among Pakistanis regarding responsibilities of the state and citizenry.
- Until Pakistan feels more secure within its perception of regional threats, Islamabad will likely resist enacting and implementing strict counter-terrorism policies.
- To improve and sustain the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, the U.S. needs to continuously signal its resolve to remain committed to the partnership, apply innovative diplomatic gestures to engage Islamabad, resist the temptation to oversee Pakistan's day to day domestic affairs and widen the policymaking lens to ensure a more holistic understanding of Pakistan and its neighbors.
- Despite incongruities between Pakistan and U.S. interests, the bilateral alliance is imperative to the U.S.'s regional and security interests, and remains a central aspect of both countries' calculus for the future.

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Introduction

In recent months, growing manifestation of extremist support in Pakistan, the devastation of the summer 2010 floods and the weakness of the political leadership have increased pessimism regarding Pakistan's future. On January 31, 2011, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the Brookings Institution co-hosted an event titled “The Future of Pakistan,” which brought together experts to analyze the country's future. The event built upon the “Bellagio Papers,” a collection of 15 scholarly essays examining factors and variables impacting Pakistan's future, produced as part of a Brookings Institution project, and supported by USIP and the Norwegian Peace Foundation. This Peace Brief summarizes the views of the event's 11 panelists, drawn in part from the analysis of the “Bellagio Papers.” The panelists discussed potential trajectories for Pakistan, and policy implications Pakistan and the United States should consider as Pakistan navigates this uncertain period.

Domestic Challenges and Prospects for Posterity

Heightened tensions in Pakistan's current sociopolitical environment have the potential to push the country further from achieving the economic or security-based indicators emphasized as

central to stabilizing not only Pakistan, but also South Asia as a whole. Panelists identified the following factors that need to be addressed by domestic and international actors.

Economy

Pakistan's economy is headed toward a fiscal crisis that threatens sociopolitical development and could fuel social unrest. Serious structural reforms, previously blocked by the country's economic elite, are needed to avoid crisis and renew confidence in Pakistan's economy. Without reforms, the international community is likely to become donor shy toward Pakistan. A withdrawal of aid could further compound economic challenges.

The country's youth bulge is another looming dilemma for Pakistan's weak economy, as projected economic growth rates cannot support demographic growth. High unemployment and heightened food insecurity will continue unless efforts are undertaken to address the economic factors behind these trends. In the short term, Pakistan needs to consider revising its taxation policies to increase domestic tax rates and better enforce collection. In the long term, Pakistan must adopt policies that help boost growth rates and reduce reliance on foreign aid.

Identity Crises

Pakistan is a fragmented society, divided along ethnic and sectarian lines, torn between moderate and extremist views, and politically destabilized by the power imbalance between its civilian and military leaders. From these divisions a complex notion of the nature of citizenship has emerged. Though in many ways Pakistan's factional politics represent a microcosm of Pakistani society's ideological and socioeconomic fissures, the country's political parties ultimately remain positioned to cultivate political and ideological reconciliation through their capacity to aggregate interests and build consensus.

Consensus building is necessary as the threat of "vigilante Islamism" rises in Pakistan.¹ These acts partially represent citizen mistrust of the civilian leadership's ability to govern effectively. The power and social influence held by political Islamist groups, however, is overemphasized by some domestic and external observers. Such assumptions disregard the reality that Islamist groups, while used by the state for political and strategic purposes, lack legitimate political power. State inculcation of religious radicalism, however, exists in a tenuous balance with civic identity and notions of the state. This was recently demonstrated by Pakistan's ideological swing toward increased conservatism and a growing acceptance of "vigilante Islamism." Acts of "vigilante Islamism" carried out to correct a perceived state-driven heterodoxy, such as the assassination of Salman Taseer, evidence a de-legitimization of the Pakistani state as it is currently defined.

Terrorism

There is considerable evidence to suggest that Pakistan uses domestic terrorist networks to help protect its strategic interests in India and Afghanistan. Internally, however, Pakistan faces threats from insurgent terrorist networks that aim to disrupt and destabilize. The Pakistan government and military must reconcile regional interests with domestic stability as promoting sponsored networks while fighting against others will likely prove unsustainable in the long term. The challenge of achieving this balance has led many to debate Pakistan's capacity to address militancy within its borders versus its willingness to do so. Critics regularly point to Pakistan's ability to make direct strategic gains against militant groups when pressured despite claims that security apparatuses cannot achieve what external demanders expect. The country's ability to engage on multiple fronts with militant groups, however, remains untested. Until Pakistan feels its regional

position can be secured and maintained without the use of state sponsored networks, is it unlikely that Pakistan will attempt to dismantle these and other militant networks.

Regional Threat Perception

Pakistan's current perception of regional threats merits attention in order to avoid potential Black Swan events. Pakistan's Indo-centric foreign policy stance has appeared to shift in recent months toward heightened concern over the widening internal threat of militancy, and by extension, how resolution of conflict in Afghanistan will impact the capacity of militant groups. Political resolution in Afghanistan subsequently may create collaboration opportunities for India and Pakistan to establish mutually beneficial regional relationships. A political process in Afghanistan will also impact the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. The July 2014 drawdown date's encouragement of old fears of U.S. abandonment also signals a changing balance of power in the region. This could affect efforts to address mutual security threats as U.S. priorities in the region change alongside the reduction of U.S. regional presence.

Considerations for U.S. Foreign Policy

A stable Pakistan is central to U.S. foreign policy in South Asia. Unfortunately for U.S. policymakers, the only reliable forecast is the uncertainty of Pakistan's future. While there is no "silver bullet" solution capable of reversing recent trends of increasing instability in Pakistan, the U.S. must try to implement policies to protect and strengthen its strategic partnership with Pakistan. Panelists made the following policy recommendations for Washington to consider as it identifies future options.

Signaling

In the short term, the U.S. has a unique opportunity to subtly redefine the U.S.-Pakistan relationship during the upcoming visits of President Zardari to the U.S. and President Obama to Pakistan.² These heads of state will undoubtedly discuss their common interests in combating terrorism and stabilizing South Asia. While these discussions should be substantive in addressing policy alignment, the symbolic potential of the visits should not be overlooked. The reception of each other's administration is an opportunity for both governments to reconfirm their commitment to the strategic partnership, both privately and publicly. The U.S. government should signal to the Pakistani and American public that the U.S.-Pakistan alliance is advantageous for both nations, and encourage the Pakistan government to do the same. Specifically, the U.S. administration could confer greater legitimacy on Pakistan's civilian government, and look for ways to work with Pakistani opposition, nongovernmental organizations and civil society.

A New Big Idea

As the policies and parameters that previous U.S. administrations used to define the U.S.-Pakistan relationship become ineffective, policymakers must not hesitate to introduce innovative approaches for engaging Islamabad. Since Pakistan's inception, U.S. policies have largely relied on monetary carrots to enlist cooperation. While a difficult pill for both Americans and Pakistanis to swallow, the strategic partnership must develop beyond a transactional relationship. Monetary aid alone cannot determine outcomes in Pakistan or alter its strategic outlook.

The civilian aid package sponsored by Senators John Kerry and Richard Lugar and Representative Howard Berman signifies a change in U.S. conventional wisdom that Pakistan's military elite is the sole guardian of stability. However, the drafters of the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Bill acknowledge

that despite their efforts, there were few substantive structures that could be implemented to amend the U.S.'s reliance on aid for defining its relationship with Pakistan. To restructure the primarily one dimensional alliance with Pakistan, the U.S. could recognize Pakistan as a nuclear-capable, key international and regional stakeholder. Pakistan has sought such recognition following the U.S.'s recent civilian nuclear deal with India. A similar vote of recognition for Pakistan could create space for communication to discuss alignment of American and Pakistani interests on topics including terrorism, Afghanistan and India. These efforts should not prevent communication to Islamabad that further civilian aid is contingent on its progress in long-term capacity building, both in terms of continued civilian power and economic reform.

U.S. Involvement in Pakistan's Domestic Stability

The U.S. and others with a vested interest in Pakistan's future must be open to the possibility that Pakistan will have to traverse tenuous periods of political and social unrest for stability to take root. The path toward political and economic stability may involve the formation and collapse of many coalition governments, which will undoubtedly appear chaotic to outsiders. The U.S. needs to reconsider policies that may directly or indirectly undermine the civilian democratic process. The U.S. has typically preferred quick solutions, bypassing the civilian establishment in the wake of growing political instability. This shortcut has led to costly consequences in the medium- and long-term and prolonged Pakistan's chronic civil-military imbalance. U.S. policies intersecting with Pakistan's domestic politics must be focused on long-term stability, and must allow Pakistan the space to define its own democratic narrative.

Regional Focus

The U.S. should be mindful of holistically considering the regional context in designing policies toward Pakistan. Key stakeholders in Pakistan live and operate according to various regional pressures. Yet, Washington's bureaucratic structure and conceptualization of South Asia often compartmentalize Pakistan issues in a manner that obscures the interconnected reality of the region. U.S. diplomatic, foreign policy and intelligence departments should consider reorganizing their South Asian bureaucratic structures to improve the regional coherence of their operations.

U.S. stabilization operations in Afghanistan would especially benefit from a more integrated approach to dealing with the areas key actors and developments. The importance of the India dimension in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre cannot be overemphasized. Pakistan and India's competition for leverage in Afghanistan may jeopardize U.S. stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. Therefore, U.S. efforts to substantially support the normalization of India-Pakistan relations would likely have propitious effects on U.S. operations in Afghanistan.

Thinking Back, Looking Forward

The constant amid the uncertainty about Pakistan's future course is affirmation of the importance of continued partnership between Pakistan and the U.S. Despite the aforementioned challenges, it is clear that solutions must and can be found to improve and sustain the bilateral relationship. The immense domestic political implications of Pakistan's current economic, political and security threats require urgent attention from domestic actors. Whether the military will forcefully intervene in the face of the divisive domestic debate generated by the Islamist threat depends on Pakistan's civilian politician's ability to mitigate the issue. Likewise, the potential for resolution of the Kashmir conflict will rely on relevant decision-makers seeking consensus on both sides of the border, a process which may facilitate dialogue on other regional challenges. Washington's role

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This report is based on views expressed by 11 panel chairs and panelists during the January 31, 2011 event, “The Future of Pakistan,” hosted by USIP’s Center for Conflict Management and the Brookings Institution. This Peace Brief was written by USIP program assistant Stephanie Flamenbaum and research assistant Megan Neville, and Constantino Xavier, a senior research assistant with the Brookings Institution’s 21st Century Defense Initiative.

as events in Pakistan unfold will require consensus on goals and means of achieving them. With consensus, the U.S. may prove able to support without defining solutions to these domestic challenges as the two countries work toward a mutually beneficial future.

Endnotes

1. The term “vigilante Islamism” refers to vigilante acts undertaken toward Islamist causes. As defined by Joshua T. White, “the permissibility of a nonstate actor to take unilateral action, through violence if necessary, to enforce the sharia apart from the hand of the state.” For more complete background on this term, visit <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/vigilante-islamism-in-pakistan>.
2. This event took place before the arrest of Raymond Davis in Pakistan. Subsequent to the arrest and growing diplomatic tensions between the U.S. and Pakistan, it is unclear whether or not these visits will take place.



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE

2301 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20037

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