*Pakistani Public Attitudes to Fighting Terrorism and Perceptions of the United States*

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Introduction

While the U.S.-Pakistan relationship has been characterized by mistrust since its inception, Pakistani public perception of the U.S. has reached a critical low in the past several years. Pakistani public opinion of the United States is overwhelmingly negative, and remains ensnared by the U.S. war on terror, its partnership with India, and concerns over weak domestic governance. The post 9-11 period of bilateral relations provides a unique opportunity to examine the effect of American counterterrorism policies on the development of anti-Americanism within Pakistan. What are the key determinants of anti-Americanism in Pakistan; is there a compelling framework for understanding public opinion of the U.S. and its relationship to Pakistan’s turbulent socio-political dynamics?

This paper does not attempt to point to a specific cause, but instead surveys the development of relations since September 11th and identifies several possible determinants. First, I briefly examine the history of anti-Americanism in Pakistan since the birth of Pakistani state. I argue that hostility towards the U.S. initially developed as a political tactic used to consolidate political support and was exacerbated by several diplomatic rifts and a U.S. strategic abandonment of Pakistan. Within the post 9-11 period, I contend that the Musharraf regime’s cooperation with the U.S. further entrenched domestic concerns over American control over the ruling elite. Furthermore, CIA drone strikes within Pakistan have elevated concerns over domestic security and sovereignty and further cemented a negative perception of the United States.

In general, I argue that Pakistani public attitudes towards fighting terrorism and its negative perceptions of the U.S. are the result of two factors: its use as a diversionary nationalist political strategy as well as an abnormal bilateral relationship that has prioritized its members’ short-term strategic interests without developing continuity and a mutual vision.

Background: 1947-2001

Since as early as the 1950s, Pakistan’s military has been criticized for its close relationship with the United States. Indeed, when the U.S. Pakistan partnership was officially inaugurated with the passage of the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement in 1954, Islamists and right wing politicians denounced Pakistani entry into “America’s Cold War”. However, anti-Western sentiment only thoroughly diffused through the nation’s politics after the rise of Zulfikar Bhutto. General Ayub Khan’s foreign minister from 1963 to 1966, Bhutto was a self-identified “Yankee hater” with a strong suspicion of the West. After being ousted as foreign minister after the 1965 Kashmir war, Bhutto founded the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) – an “anti - Ayub political movement that espoused populist economic policies and an anti-U.S., anti-India foreign policy.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Bhutto found great success on the campaign trail blasting the Ayub regime for its acceptance of the Tashkent Agreement and its complicity with U.S. imperialism. Bhutto’s credentials as a democrat are tenuous, yet his intellectual legacy informs anti-Americanism among Pakistani intellectuals and liberals to this day. Ambassador Teresita Schaeffer, a U.S. Foreign Service officer stationed in Islamabad in the 1970s, noted that prior to Bhutto’s reign anti-American was not as “venomous” and widespread.[[2]](#endnote-2) Pakistani journalist Neha Ansari supports this view, noting that Bhutto “publically milked the idea that America ‘needed’ them”, despite being a “hardcore, interest oriented transaction relationship on both sides.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Anti-Americanism was further ingrained within Pakistani politics through the rest of the Cold War, spreading beyond the Pakistani elite and adopting a religious tone as well. Bhutto’s successor, General Zia ul-Haq, fully introduced Islamic principles into Pakistani politics. A devout Sunni, Zia pursued a policy of Islamization during his rule: he funneled resources to extreme Islamist groups, revised public school textbooks, and greatly increased the number of seminaries throughout Pakistan. While the general hoped his campaign would create a unifying Pakistani national identity, it unfortunately resulted in violent sectarian clashes. Following the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, Pakistan also “lost its frontline relationship” as key state needed to maintain U.S. policy in the region and the U.S. turned a blind eye to Pakistani issues afterwards.[[4]](#endnote-4) The U.S. did not independently stimulate the rise of the violent militant activity - extreme jihadi organizations formed of Pashtun Afghans, Sindhu insurgents, and other ethnic groups already existed prior to U.S. involvement. The ISI directly financed groups such as Hizb-e-Islami, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen through the 1980s and 1990s to sustain a potential proxy conflict in Kashmir. Nevertheless, Pakistan believes both U.S. abandonment of Pakistan in the 1980s and its subsequent counter-terror operations against militant groups in the 2000s as an example of pursuing narrow self-interest.[[5]](#endnote-5) As one Pakistani official noted, the U.S. “left Pakistan to deal with the Frankenstein of the Mujahideen” and a massive refugee crisis, only to punish it for its relationship with such groups decades later in the war on terror. Zia’s Islamization, combined with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, broadened anti-Americanism by “cultivating jihad in a small, hardened group of Pakistanis, Afghans, and foreign fighters… [and reinforcing] ties between the Pakistani state and Islamist militants.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Beyond religion, distrust of the U.S. became a nationalist affair due to the U.S.’s relations with India. Pakistan had always viewed U.S. support of India as zero-sum with its relationship with Washington. Following the 1965 war with India, Washington not only did not come to Pakistan’s defense since it was perceived as the aggressor, but also left management of postwar negotiations to Moscow, whose close relationship with India biased the outcome. Despite the Nixon administration’s decision to tilt in Pakistan’s favor during the next major Indo-Pakistan war in 1971, it won little credit with Pakistan as “Washington had clearly taken the minimum steps necessary to maintain its relationship with Beijing.”[[7]](#endnote-7) The 1985 Pressler Amendment, a response to Pakistan’s nuclear program which resulted deep sanctions and cuts in aid to Pakistan, was further perceived as another example of U.S. strategic abandonment and mistrust. Thus, as the Cold War drew to a close, the U.S. had no true allies within the Pakistani public. Bhutto’s ideology and the U.S. support for Pakistani autocrats had irritated liberals, the rise of religious extremism created a demographic with callous opposition to the U.S., and even many Pakistani military and officials were skeptical that a partnership with the U.S. was in their best interest. These variables had a deep historical impact and are the frame within which post 9-11 policy occurred.

Post 9-11: The Musharraf Regime and Early War on Terror

In the days succeeding the September 11th attacks, General Pervez Musharraf quickly cast Pakistan as an ally of the United States. While Pakistan refused to turn over several high level al Qaeda operatives, it nevertheless provided considerable assistance to the United States. The country offered unprecedented access airspace, ports, and ground lines of control. Musharraf described his support to U.S. officials as “unstinting” and as a genuine effort to transform Pakistan’s relationship with the U.S. into a true partnership.[[8]](#endnote-8) At home, however, Musharraf’s tone was rather resigned:

They want to isolate us, get us declared a terrorist state ... In this situation if we make¶ the wrong decisions it can be very bad for us. Our critical concerns are our sovereignty, second our economy, third our strategic assets (nuclear and missiles), and forth our¶ Kashmir cause. All four will be harmed if we make the wrong decision. When we make these decisions they must be according to Islam.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The aim of Musharraf’s speech was not to announce a momentous shift in policy, but to convince the Pakistani public that it was the only option to preserve its sovereignty and counter Indian advantages in a new era.

U.S. support for Musharraf reignited domestic social tensions along several historical fault lines and structured Pakistani politics in a way that fomented further anti-Americanism. First, liberals and religious leaders criticized the U.S. partnership with Musharraf as continued support for Pakistan’s autocracy. The relationship between the U.S. and Pakistani military was “once again prioritized over the dictates and imperatives of Pakistani civil society.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Musharraf experienced political fallout in the subsequent 2002 elections, particularly from religious coalitions. An anti-U.S. campaign was the centerpiece of the MMA coalition, whose supporters were convinced that the American bombing of Afghanistan and the threat of war against Iraq was directed as suppressing Muslims. Even as Musharraf amended the constitution to keep himself in power, this outburst of anti-Americanism actually supported his short-term political interests. The rise of the Jamaat-i-Islami party into parliamentary politics had moderated its views and provided a convenient outlet for political frustration. While the central party behind the MMA had little to do recent violence among Islamic sects, only a decade earlier it was a pioneer of promoting jihad in Afghanistan and Kashmir. As an Economist article written at the time explained:

the MMA….betokens moderation. Or maybe, its adversaries hope, an eventual falling out. Their rising stake in democratic politics could tame them further. This is what General Musharraf counts on when he declares that Pakistan will remain a key member of the coalition against terror. If the United States attacks Iraq, the MMA can express Pakistan's rage from the podium, making it less likely that people will do so with guns.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Despite winning only a tenth of the popular vote, the domestic political climate in 2002-2003 was indicative of the larger structure of Pakistani public attitudes towards fighting terrorism at the time. Anti-Americanism provided a political purpose for Pakistan’s fledgling political parties without providing a direct security threat to Musharraf’s regime, at least in the short term – yet another example of anti-Americanism serving a short-term political purpose.

Of course, this political strategy had inherent contradictions and could not continue as the war on terror drew on past 2004, as the general population began to associate increasingly visible violence with the U.S.’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with Musharraf. The Pakistani military began extensive campaigns in the Federally Administered Tribal Regions in 2004.[[12]](#endnote-12) Yet Pakistani’s military was poorly prepared for guerilla warfare and were met with fierce resistance. Peace deals, rendered over the course of 2006-2007, only conserved the legitimacy and safe havens of militant groups. Taliban assassination campaigns throughout the country created further concerns over stability throughout Pakistan. The fact that Pakistan had drawn somewhat arbitrary distinctions between militant groups, allowing some to recruit and raise funds for the purpose of a potential proxy war with Kashmir, only created additional confusion.[[13]](#endnote-13) The Pakistani military itself was torn, unwilling to take a firm, stance against extremists as it distanced itself from Washington’s war. Meanwhile the U.S., focusing its intelligence and military resource on Iraq, could not pivot and dedicate more resources to address the situation. The Red Mosque incident, in which Musharraf ruthlessly crushed an uprising in the center of the normally calm Islamabad, ignited anger throughout the political spectrum. As war on terror continued, the most salient political feature of the Musharraf regime became its continued cooperation with the U.S. in a rapidly destabilizing environment. Other factors during this period, such an increasingly close U.S.-India relationship that was signaled by the culmination of a new nuclear deal in 2005, only further alienated Pakistanis.[[14]](#endnote-14) Just as in the Cold War, it seemed as if the U.S. was pursuing its regional interests without concern for Pakistan.

Drones Strikes and the New Face of Anti-Americanism

Following the fall of the Musharraf regime and assassination of Benazir Bhutto, it seemed as if “nearly every Pakistani blamed the Bush Administration for something”. Some believed it had propped up a dictator for too long, others criticized it for its role in the ensuing political crisis, while others argued Bush had abandoned Musharraf and was untrustworthy. The Obama administration’s lesson from Musharraf’s downfall was that it had become too dependent on a dictator, and overhauled its policies towards Pakistan. Turning a new page, the “Kerry Lugar Berman Bill,” proposed in 2009, was a U.S. offer of assistance targeting Pakistan’s developmental needs, but it failed to improve Pakistani perceptions of the United States. Politicians in the National Assembly lambasted U.S. conditions on the aid and the Raymond Davis incident, in which a U.S. government official who killed two men in Lahore was found to be a CIA operative, only added to earlier suspicions that aid officials would act as spies.[[15]](#endnote-15)

While Kerry-Lugar-Berman was proposed immediately in the Obama administration as a way to improve America’s relationship with Pakistan, it became clear that the White House never appeared to care much about the aid program to Pakistan anyways. Drone strikes were the centerpiece of Obama’s new strategy to combat terrorism. The U.S. had only carried out eight drone strikes under the Bush administration, but in the first year under Obama’s leadership executed over 30 attacks. While most discussion of anti-Americanism is couched in terms of missile attacks “radicalizing” new elements of the Pakistani population, it has recently become clear that the political picture is much more complicated.[[16]](#endnote-16) Civilian casualties continue to be a concern for Pakistanis, but have rapidly decreased since 2010.[[17]](#endnote-17) Furthermore, many suspected terrorists have moved into more populated areas of Baluchistan where the Pakistani government does not allow U.S. drone operations. A 2013 poll of tribal leaders and residents reported that 52% of respondents believed strikes were accurate and that 60% believed they weakened militant groups.[[18]](#endnote-18) Personal interviews have affirmed that many of these individuals “see individual drone strikes as preferable to the artillery barrages of the Pakistani military.” One North Waziristan elder was noted as “No one dares tell the real picture...Drone attacks are killing the militants who are killing innocent people.”

This is not to say drone strikes have support within the population – over 95% of Pakistani’s who have heard of the phenomenon of drone strikes are opposed to them.[[19]](#endnote-19) Rather, it suggests that concerns over sovereignty and rule of law dominate discussions of U.S. counter-terrorism policy. For example, famous cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan, often speaks of national “honor” and “respect” when criticizing U.S. drone policy.[[20]](#endnote-20) Beyond provoking nationalist rallies concerned with Pakistan’s sovereignty, drone strikes also anger secular, educated Pakistani who might temper their negative perceptions of the U.S. war on terror. Pakistani academic Madiha Afzal has argued that the American drone program alienates moderate and liberal sects of Pakistani society.[[21]](#endnote-21) Individuals in the education, tourism, and business communities “form the heart of civil society in Pakistan” and are incensed by U.S. counterrorism operations.[[22]](#endnote-22) While the 2013 survey suggests that at least a portion of the population agrees on the need to suppress militant activity, a larger framework for cooperation or understanding of relations is lacking. The U.S. continues to pursue its narrow self-interest in Pakistan and demands more action from the military against the Afghan Taliban and terrorists in North Waziristan. The Obama administration is also once again sending mixed signals regarding its commitment to Afghan stability beyond 2014 and future operations on Pakistani soil, adding further tension upon the future of the relationship. The U.S. is currently unilaterally chasing its counter-terror goals in the Middle East without concern for its long-term relationship with Pakistan

Conclusion

Public perceptions of the United States and attitudes towards fighting terrorism can be traced back to the beginning of bilateral relations. However, critically high levels of anti-Americanism cannot be ignored. While much of this is the result of nationalism sparked by domestic political variables, it is also the direct result of a consistent lack of vision in the U.S. Pakistan relationship. The Musharraf regimes’ cooperation in the war on terror helped the U.S. launch the war in Afghanistan, but eventually created further instability and placed Washington on the side of an unpopular dictator. Warming relations with India and a transactional relationship with the Pakistani military have further convinced generals and civil servants that their contempt for the U.S. is rightly placed. While the Pakistan government currently implicitly permits U.S. drone strikes in certain areas, the U.S. lacks a long-term plan in Afghanistan or the war on terror that will allow U.S.-Pakistani relations to return to normal. The U.S. must recognize that its short-term pursuit of its self-interests may be at expense of a more productive, long-term relationship with Pakistan if it is to truly reverse anti-Americanism within the country.

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