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## US-Pakistan Strategic Partnership and Afghanistan

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# THE US -PAK STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AND AFGHANISTAN

By Lt. Gen. (ret.) Hamid Khan

On May 2, 2011, the U.S. Navy SEAL operation in Pakistan, with total disregard to her sovereignty<sup>1</sup>, resulted in the killing of Osama bin Laden. Though this was a great success in the 'War on Terror,' it has become a great setback to the already dampened relations between the two countries, despite years of strategic partnership.

Pakistanis question why the government or military was not on board for this operation. Had the Pakistani military responded, this could have been catastrophic, leading to casualties on both sides. Such an unnecessary standoff between two allies could have not only jeopardized the entire operation and adversely affected the war; it would have worked in favor of the militants.

The commonly quoted reason for not informing Pakistani authorities was due to the trust deficit which led the U.S. to believe that there was a possibility of the target being forewarned. This trust deficit has been discussed for some time, but never forcefully pursued. It must not be forgotten that in the past, numerous Al Qaeda operatives have been arrested or killed in Pakistan through shared intelligence; the likes of Abu Zubaida, Khalid Shiekh Ramzi offer just a few examples. Also, in my opinion and experience, there has been no difference of opinion on the strategy against Al Qaeda between the two allies as both see them as a threat to international peace and therefore are operating against them with impunity.

Pakistan must then ask another question: was the information not shared with Pakistan so as not to share credit of operating against the most wanted man in the world (this is typical of intelligence agencies worldwide)? Or, was it done to discredit and embarrass the Pakistani military and government? Even if this is inadvertent, an ally stands discredited and embarrassed in the eyes of the population. Degrading, discrediting and embarrassing the Pakistan military is the aim of Indian Cold Start Doctrine; here it comes from an ally.

This incident has impinged badly on U.S.-Pakistan relations, with the anti-American sentiments soaring to new heights. Even in the army, young officers and men are questioning this relationship publicly and in the presence of their commanders. This has never happened before. The only other time the army was so demoralized, angered, and embarrassed was after the fall of Dacca.<sup>2</sup> Credit is due to the leadership of Gen. Kayani to have handled it so well; otherwise, serious cracks could have occurred in the rank and file of the Pakistan military.

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<sup>1</sup> Osama was equally guilty of violating the sovereignty through his illegal presence in Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup> 1971 war

The parliament also displayed its anger, and ordered an inquiry into the intelligence and air defence failure; the military leadership also had to give an in camera briefing to address the query. At a broader level, the parliament has demanded a review of Pakistan-U.S. relations to the extent of realigning the foreign policy and the role of Pakistan military in the 'War on Terror.'

On the other end, U.S. policymakers are rubbing salt in the wound by making statements of collusions or complacency and of aid cuts, which is not helping in any way. Relations are at the lowest ebb. Hawks on both sides are taking strong positions, which are not helping in any way to normalize relations between the two countries.

In my opinion, both sides need to be rational in choosing the future course. The war on terror is neither won nor over and therefore both sides are dependent on each other. U.S.-Pakistan relations on the strategic plane are on solid foundation; it is the operational level differences which are impinging on the relationship and need to be addressed.

Most importantly, the trust deficit needs to be addressed and pursued aggressively; issues that are creating this mistrust must be discussed and resolved. This needs to be done both at the strategic and operational level. How each side fights the war need not become a contentious issue as long as the aims are common and working to achieve the desired results. Therefore, if we mutually resolve the trust deficit, it will help put other things in place.

The U.S., in its role as senior partner, needs to take the lead in defusing the situation. Threats of stopping aid will not help as Pakistan in the past has survived sanctions. In fact, if anything, the perception in Pakistan is that sanctions would help in standing on our own feet. The U.S. congressional vote in favor of continued aid is a good step; however, the strings seem unnecessary. On the other hand, talk of denying logistical corridors to U.S. troops through Pakistan may not be based on ground realities and does not help the war or the partnership. The U.S. is looking for alternative routes through Central Asia that are neither economical nor sustainable. In other words, we are both dependent on each other and, therefore, rationality is needed.

The Pakistani public has always viewed this relationship as issue-based, as in the past, which explains the perception that as the U.S. drawdown of troops and eventual withdrawal from Afghanistan nears, the U.S. will look for reasons to end its support of Pakistan. Therefore, there is a need for this relationship to be seen as broad-based with a Pakistani role post-withdrawal. I must add that Pakistani people in the earthquake areas still remember the U.S. Chinook support; therefore, let me say that Pakistanis are not ungrateful people. A sincere effort will surely help.

This brings me to the question of the U.S. drawdown of troops by 2012 and pull back by 2014 from Afghanistan: are the environments conducive enough? Are the militants on the run? Is Karzai's government in firm control? Is economic activity picking up? Is law and order under control? And, finally, are the Afghan forces in a position to take over control?

In my opinion, most of these conditions are not met as of today. It probably is assumed that

they will be met by 2014. It has to be more than assumptions because it is not just internal dynamics, but external interests.

First, the clash of external interests needs to be addressed; for instance, Pakistan would like to see a stable and peaceful Afghanistan as any instability there has a natural spillover in Pakistan. Secondly, Pakistan is interested in energy resources from Central Asia and whether it is possible if / when there is peace in Afghanistan. However, there are others who would like to have these resources exploited in their terms. Therefore, other stakeholders like Russia, Iran, China, India, and the U.S. all have their interests. It is essential to achieve a convergence, which will help in stopping external forces from meddling, and thereby make it easier to control the situation. This needs to be achieved by holding a summit for all the stake holders to achieve a consensus, and, therefore, must be first step which should be taken immediately.

The next question is whether a dialogue with the Taliban will be viewed as prerequisite for achieving the conducive environments; if so, presently, these talks are going nowhere. In my opinion, since the U.S. announced its withdrawal date, the Taliban are not likely to get into any serious dialogue. They would rather conserve their energies for after the withdrawal, when they will flex their muscles.

Therefore, these dialogues must be handled by experts who have the knowledge of jirgas, the basic ingredient to tire the other side in order to get the maximum concessions. These elements need to be convinced to become “mainstreamed,” even if needed special concessions may need to be granted. Parallel to talks with the Taliban, there should be an effort to regain the confidence of the Pathan majority by offering equal opportunities and a role in the future.

Now, I would like to address the topic of Afghan forces. According to estimates, the Afghan army will have a strength of 210,000, and a police force of 85,000 trained by 2014. Also, the Afghan air force is likely to get 200 aircrafts/helicopters by 2016.

Are these figures achievable? Will they be sufficiently trained? Remember, their training is not conducted by regulars but by contractors. What about their rank structure? Would they have gained sufficient experience in their respective ranks and therefore be in a position to take on the militants solo? To my military mind, it will be a tall order.

Also, the existing desertion rate is very high compared to any other professional force. This is likely to increase after the withdrawal of international forces. Also, these forces have an ethnic deficiency; the bulk is Tajiks or Northern Alliance with very less Pakhtun representation, which most likely will result in ethnic disharmony and will fuel the war. It would be prudent if this gets addressed in the coming years.

More importantly, the high cost to maintain these forces. Will the U.S. Congress commit such funds after the troops' withdrawal? The Afghan economy is nowhere near ready to support such expenditures. Therefore, the U.S. will have to stand committed to these costs.

At present, President Hamid Karzai has little hold over the country despite the fact that he is in his second term. Therefore, will it be fair to assume that he would have strengthened his hold by 2014, and will be in a position to handle the law and order situations and be accepted by the militants? I think this is highly unlikely. Maybe an alternative who is more charismatic be identified to take over from him come next elections.

The current economic situation, development, and reconstruction will not be visible unless they are geared up in the coming years.

These analyses are essential to understand if the situation is ripe or will be ripe by 2014 so that a withdrawal of international forces could occur., Although it is understandable that the troops cannot be there forever, leaving without bringing sufficient stability could result in a vacuum which may get filled by militants who had been kept at bay so far. Therefore, all the good work would have been wasted.

Any instability after the departure of international forces will have serious ramifications for Pakistan. There will be spillover, refugees once again, it will affect law and order in Pakistan. And, lastly, if the Islamists take over, they would surely export its ideology to Pakistan with readily available sympathizers, thereby terrorizing the moderate majority. Who knows, they may try to export their ideology throughout the region.