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After bin Laden, Still No Choice for U.S. with Pakistan

An Interview C. Christine Fair

By Graham Webster
May 26, 2011

The U.S.-Pakistan relationship has received renewed attention in both countries after U.S. Navy Seals raided a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, killing Osama bin Laden. C. Christine Fair, a National Asia Research Fellow, and Assistant Professor at Georgetown University, tells NBR that the increased attention does not necessarily mean that the fundamentals have changed. She argues that the relationship leaves few options for the United States, which needs Pakistani cooperation in Afghanistan. This interview was published on the NBR website: http://www.nbr.org.

How has the death of Osama bin Laden changed U.S.-Pakistan relations?

In the big picture, oddly, this event has changed little for enduring U.S. interests in Pakistan. Leave aside the fact that there is no evidence that the Pakistani government—civilian, military, intelligence, or otherwise—harbored bin Laden. In fact, Secretary of Defense Gates recently said he has seen evidence suggesting that Pakistan's military, intelligence, and certainly political leadership *did not* know.

Even if there were evidence of such complicity, the uncomfortable reality is that it would change little if anything regarding U.S. interests in Pakistan. The United States does not have any real options to "cut off" Pakistan, despite the obstreperous calls to do so from corners of Congress and the U.S. government. The United States needs Pakistan for ground lines of control through which the vast majority of supplies move from Pakistan's port city of Karachi through the length and width of Pakistan, before finally reaching U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

Washington was absolutely derelict in planning for the troop surge and did not stockpile any significant quantity of fuel and other critical war materiel, so it is completely beholden to Pakistan to ensure the resupply of U.S. troops, civilians, and allied partners. The Northern Distribution Network cannot carry the burden of supplying the large footprint of foreign forces in Afghanistan, and, for reasons that are obvious, coalition partners will not even entertain the possibility of using Iran's port in Chahbahar, which is very close to Afghanistan.

On top of that, though it may seem strange to say so to many readers, Osama bin Laden is not the long-term issue; it is the numerous security threats based in and emanating from Pakistan. Long after bin Laden has faded from recent memory, the United States will still have to contend with Pakistan's expanding nuclear program, ongoing terrorism based in Pakistan by groups like

Lashkar-e-Taiba among other Islamist terror groups, and ongoing fears, however unfounded, of the ability of internationally or regionally based militants to obtain nuclear weapons, nuclear know-how, or fissile material. These issues will not change because of bin Laden's demise.

But some things have changed. Since the death of bin Laden, there have been active debates in both countries about U.S.-Pakistan relations.

Let's be honest: after the Bush administration went its merciful way, the Obama administration has had no illusions about Pakistan. While President Bush thought Pakistan and then president Musharraf were indispensible, the Obama White House is more skeptical and practical. This administration came in saying that it would continue using drones but also committed to buttressing Pakistan's civilian institutions. It came in frustrated at Pakistan's continued support for the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's network, and terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, among others. And, of course, the administration came in with full knowledge that Pakistan was rapidly expanding its nuclear program.

Congress was already quite frustrated with the fact that, after $20 billion in aid and reimbursements, Pakistan continued to support U.S. enemies that are killing troops in Afghanistan. (Pakistanis counter that this "aid" is inadequate recompense for its losses and further that they have seen little of the funds pledged in the Kerry-Lugar-Berman bill. On the latter point, they are correct. The U.S. government has had numerous challenges from both the government of Pakistan and the U.S. bureaucracy that have precluded distribution of those funds.)

The bin Laden capture from a garrison town in shocking proximity to Pakistan's premier officer training academy in Abbottabad is yet another in a string of events that have exacerbated frustrations with Pakistan and fueled debates over the most appropriate course for policy toward Pakistan.

The Obama administration, like past administrations, has been willing to look the other way when it deems necessary. Notably, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton certified on March 18 that Pakistan was in compliance with all the security conditionalities in the Kerry-Lugar-Berman bill when all the evidence suggests that such certification was not appropriate.

For non-experts, what exactly was dubious about this certification?

The Kerry-Lugar-Berman legislation included conditionalities not for civilian aid but for military aid and security assistance. Those included things like continued cooperation in providing information about Pakistan's illicit nuclear proliferation networks, cessation of state support for the Afghan Taliban and other militant groups operating in the region, and cooperation with the Department of Treasury to tighten up Pakistan's terrorism laws. In short, Pakistan has done none of these things. The final conditionality was that the Pakistani military not materially interfere in the country's civilian processes. The last is the only one that is defensible.

This legislation requires the secretary of state to certify that Pakistan was in compliance with all those things during the past fiscal year. The State Department was grotesquely late in even beginning this assessment. When it finally did the assessment and subsequent certification on March 18, Hillary Clinton bizarrely averred that Pakistan was in compliance with all these conditionalities.

Simply put, Pakistan's record on terrorism *did not* merit such certification. That the State Department made this certification on March 18—while the bin Laden raid was being planned—is pretty shocking.

The department simply should have exercised the waiver option on national security grounds rather than making this bogus certification. This would have indicated to Pakistan that we did not believe they were in compliance, and thus they would continue to receive this assistance not as recompense for their cooperation with the United States but because giving this aid is in U.S. interests.

What do you think of the argument that picking a fight with Pakistan at that moment might have jeopardized the mission?

I take this point as valid. However, if the administration "did not want to pick a fight," by demurring from certifying and exercising the waiver option, it could have continued to do what it had been doing: delaying the completion of the certification process. Why was March 18 a magical date? The department could have continued to draw out the process. That said, the Government Accounting Office was getting vexed that the State Department had delayed the certification. However, I still believe the waiver option—exercised after the bin Laden raid—would have been the most prudent way to go.

Do you have a guess, then, as to why the administration went ahead with certification?

Ultimately, the United States has no option but to engage Pakistan and then engage some more. This administration knows this. President Obama is usually the smartest man in the room, and he understands long-term issues better than anyone else. His task will be to keep Congress on board, which will be difficult with elections looming, with an American public that is dubious that Pakistan is an ally, and with a dire need to bring our budget under control. If Obama prevails, the United States will find a way to make this impossible relationship keep working.

Incidentally, Pakistanis are having the same discussions among themselves. They debate whether the United States is a problematic ally or an outright enemy. They weigh whether to accept U.S. aid, because they resent the expectation that Pakistan should meet U.S. expectations. They fear the intentions of U.S. engagement, and they fear that ultimately the United States wants to deprive Pakistan of its nuclear weapons to render it more easily compelled by the United States, India, and any other country.

Yet the leaderships of both countries know that they need each other in ways that are both humiliating and difficult to explain to publics that are ever more outraged and appalled by the perfidy of the other.

What is happening in Congress? Will there be problems due to congressional cold feet or criticism?

This is a weird Congress: you have the Tea Party Caucus, Republicans, and Democrats, many of whom are really frustrated with Pakistan. They are frustrated for good reason, but, on the other hand, they should be frustrated as well with their own government, which has encouraged some of the most pernicious of Pakistan's policies. They did this by looking the other way, pursuing provocative strategic ties with India (especially the civilian-nuclear deal), and disregarding Pakistan's concerns in Afghanistan.

Ultimately, no country does what is not in its national security interests. And Pakistan will not let go of the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani Network**,** Hekmatyar, or Lashkar-e-Taiba because its utilization of and reliance on these groups is driven by external security concerns. The United States has been foolish to think it could buy Pakistan, because none of the assistance that Pakistan has received has materially changed Islamabad's strategic calculus. That is just a fact.

The United States has simply not devoted the political imagination and fortitude to strategically reframing its relationship with Pakistan. The relationship with Pakistan needs a "big idea" just as critically as India needed such a big idea. However, doing the latter enjoyed the support of think tank intellectuals and the White House, who were able to persuade Congress to change its laws to accommodate the new relationship with India—the culmination of which was the U.S.-India civilian nuclear deal.

Pakistan urgently needs a "big idea" that will help restructure the way it understands its security threats and potential role in the region. Without this, Pakistan will continue menacing the region.

Why does Pakistan view these militant groups as an asset?

These groups are the only asset that Pakistan has against India, be it in Afghanistan or be it in the security competition with India over the disposition of Kashmir. This might sound incomprehensible to a person who does not know Pakistan, but in a nutshell that is the situation.

Everything the United States has done with India has exacerbated Pakistan's concerns, making those groups all the more valuable. Take, for example, the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal. Washington does not care about the fact that India has been mistreating its Kashmiris. India can slaughter every Kashmiri it wants, and Washington will not care—or at least appear to do so publically—because India is a part of the U.S. strategic calculus to contain China. The United States was silent about the pogroms in Gujarat, the continued lack of justice for its Muslim victims, and the ongoing political popularity of the chief minister, Narendra Damodardas Modi, who oversaw the carnage.

To be clear, I don't think Pakistan has any defensible equities on these issues. They are internal Indian concerns. However, the militant groups that operate in and from Pakistan rely on a support base in Pakistan that *is* motivated by the way in which India treats its Muslims and the sustained belief that they are ill-treated and inadequately protected by law.

It would be wonderful if Pakistanis showed such concern for the welfare of their own religious minorities and cared less about the status of the same in India.

The lamentable reality is that U.S. policy toward India has made Pakistan's security calculus more paranoid, and the fact that India has been able to expand its presence in Afghanistan under the U.S. security umbrella has not made Islamabad any happier. Pakistan has no military, political, or diplomatic wherewithal to deal with India. Its only assets are these militant groups, or so Islamabad believes. I think Pakistan could pursue other choices, but those are the choices that it has made.

Moreover, Pakistanis have yet to realize that their state's reliance on terrorist groups operating in India has actually made it less and not more likely that Kashmiris and other Indian Muslims will have a better life. Equally shocking, many Pakistanis do not know that the vast majority of Kashmiris dislike and fear Pakistan's militant groups perhaps as much as they do Indian security forces. Pakistanis are similarly ignorant about the extent to which Afghans fear and loathe Pakistan for its long practice of supporting Islamist militant groups to control events in Afghanistan. Afghans ask why Pakistan cannot do what India does there: build schools, clinics, distribute food, and power plants. It is an excellent question.

This interview was conducted by Graham Webster, a Ph.D. student in political science at the University of Washington.