

US-Pakistan Relations: The Need for a Strategic Vision

By Masood Ashraf Raja

As a former Pakistani military officer and as the editor of an academic journal on Pakistan, I often interact with Pakistanis from different walks of life. During my visit to Pakistan a few months ago, I had the privilege of engaging with ordinary Pakistanis, academics, and some very powerful old friends. Our conversations always centered on the US-Pakistan relations probably because of my connection to the US as an academic. I find it worthwhile to share some of my exchanges about the US-Pakistan relations, as these views are not normally covered by the mainstream US media.

In my conversations with my friends, relatives, and people from my village, one topic always came up: the US drone attacks within Pakistani territory. According to my sources, there were 118 drone strikes in 2010 claiming 1127 lives of which 680 are believed to be those of civilian bystanders. President Obama has continued these attacks as an “effective” tactics in the US mission in Afghanistan. But strategically, in symbolic terms, these attacks tend to damage the long-term US interests in Pakistan. The Pakistanis see these attacks under several symbolic registers:

- They see it as a mockery of Pakistani sovereignty, a perception that is further accentuated by the frequent deaths of civilians caught in the targeted areas. The drone attacks also make their own government and their military look weak and ineffectual, even though, as is suggested by the US media, the Pakistani government often coordinates these attacks with the US forces.
- The people also see it as a tactics that replicates the Israeli targeted killings of Hamas leaders, and thus the US tactics, somehow, is seen as part of larger Israeli conspiracy.

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One of the most interesting and probably the most apt question came from one of my ex soldiers, who asked: “Do American people know that a lot of civilians are getting killed by these drones?” And, he further asked, “If they know about it, do they object to it? Needless to say, I had no convincing answer to this pointed question.

In my conversations with my military friends, the war on terror was often the main topic. In terms of Pakistan’s military operations against Taliban, as of January 2011, Pakistan has lost 2740 soldiers while 8500 of them have been wounded in action. These figures are enough to counter any claims by the US media that Pakistan is not doing enough. In fact, it seems, that Pakistanis have sacrificed quite a lot in this unending war.

While almost all these officers were sure that they can tactically control the FATA and probably win the war, but they all also suggested that in order to really solve the problem of radicalization of youth, Pakistan will need a lot of international help. Some of the sectors that could, in their view, use this help include: education, health-care, and job creation. Pakistan, obviously, cannot transform its infrastructure in all these areas single-handedly and this is where the US aid is crucial to the long-term stability of Pakistan. During my visit to one of the defense-funded schools (Heavy Industries Taxila Education City) I was astounded to learn that the school was providing free education for two hundred students recruited from FATA. Imagine the impact these students would have on the economic and cultural life of their respective regions after they have had a chance to get a more cosmopolitan, modern education. Just a little bit of help from the US and other powers could drastically increase the number of such students whose lives would have a long-term impact on the future of Pakistan.

It seems, however, that when it comes Pakistan, the US is guided more by an arbitrary, short-term vision and lacks any long-term plan of developing a people-to-people relationship. The US handling of Raymond Davis’s trial in Pakistan is a case in point. It is sad to note that in this case the US has chosen to respond with the typical myopia that signifies its relations to Pakistan. In an attempt to pressure Pakistan into handing over Mr. Davis, the US state department, as per the reports here, has canceled high level meeting with the Pakistani government on Afghanistan, has threatened to reduce defense aid, education aid and has also decided to slow down the visa process for Pakistanis aspiring to travel to the US. While it is important for the US to insist upon defending the diplomatic immunity of its embassy staff, the measures threatened publicly do not help the US cause in any way. In material terms, these measure

would end up hurting Pakistan in the very areas where Pakistan needs US help, which would ultimately also hurt US interests in the region. In symbolic terms, these actions would also harden the popular views against the US and against the unequal relationship between the two countries.

Unless the US transforms its relations to Pakistan to that of equal partners and unless Pakistani national interests are foregrounded in this relationship, the chances of US success in the region would be seriously hampered. The US media, therefore, need to highlight the nature and importance of this relationship. Looking at the situation from a Pakistani perspective, instead of just a US-centered approach, would be a good start.