

Caught in the Muddle: America's Pakistan Strategy

President Obama has placed Pakistan at the center of his administration's foreign policy agenda. Islamabad is a pivotal player in Afghanistan and its decisions will have much to do with whether and how U.S. forces can leave that country. Al Qaeda and linked militant groups have used Pakistan as a sanctuary and recruiting ground, with the Afghanistan–Pakistan border areas becoming, in President Obama's words, “the most dangerous place in the world.”¹ Recurrent tensions between India and Pakistan frustrate and complicate U.S. initiatives in the region, where nuclear proliferation, insurgency, terrorism, and grand strategic goals in Asia intersect.

Despite significant effort and expense, the strategy pursued by the Obama administration since the spring of 2009 has not delivered on its ambitious goals in Pakistan and the broader region. Pakistani security policy remains dominated by the military, the country's economic performance and political stability are both troubling, and the broader region has become even less secure. The United States risks becoming caught in a set of interlocking dependencies that undermine its influence—tightly linked to a troubled Karzai regime in Kabul, painfully reliant on the Pakistani army for logistics and intelligence, and reactive to an Indian security elite which expects to influence U.S. policy without providing much in return. Although there have been valuable initiatives on a

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variety of issues, U.S. policy toward Pakistan remains locked in an uncomfortable limbo awaiting further movement on U.S. commitments to Afghanistan, India–Pakistan relations, and domestic Pakistani politics. Washington faces a set of dilemmas: how to manage long-term goals when short-term imperatives undermine them, and how to navigate conflicting international objectives in the region. There are no easy solutions to these problems, but stasis is not a strategy.

It is unrealistic to expect a full escape from this muddle. Without setting clearer and more limited priorities, however, U.S. policy toward Pakistan and the broader region will face ever-smaller returns and ever-tighter constraints. First, the United States is subject to Pakistani leverage as long as Washington maintains massive combat forces in Afghanistan. A drawdown in U.S. forces will reduce this leverage, but the United States needs to ensure that it has other allies and options in Afghanistan that do not deliver Afghanistan into the hands of the Pakistani army. A contained, limited sphere of Pakistani influence is preferable to a return to the Pakistan-backed Taliban domination of the 1990s and early 2000s. This does not imply an actively hostile relationship with Pakistan's military, but instead requires accepting that there are divergent strategic interests that will continually need to be managed rather than solved.

Second, the focus of American development assistance within Pakistan should be to broadly engage democratic leaders and civil society as well as improve basic infrastructure and trade, not fruitlessly try to institutionalize political parties against the will of their leaders, fundamentally reshape Pakistani society, or place misguided faith in strategic communication and public diplomacy. The limits of U.S. influence within Pakistan's politics, economy, and society are profound.

Third, the United States should devote more attention to gaining clear strategic benefits from its involvement in India–Pakistan relations. In particular, movement on the Kashmir issue would make it easier to achieve U.S. goals in the region. Both states derive benefits from U.S. largesse, but are very careful to limit what they give in return. With U.S. resources stretched thin, one-way streets are not in Washington's best interests. Setting expectations for the rough outlines of a Kashmir settlement, even if it is not likely in the short run, should replace the silent paralysis of current policy.

The United States needs to step back from goals of reforming Pakistani society and forging regional harmony to instead seek strategic room to maneuver on a few key issues. U.S. interests in South Asia are important—a stable Pakistan, an Afghanistan largely free of al Qaeda, a friendly India—but Washington's involvement ultimately must be limited. The United States can achieve core goals with a mix of containment, diplomacy, and aid, while avoiding expansive, enervating commitments of dubious value.

The Obama Strategy

The outline of the Obama strategy toward Pakistan has been something of a moving target, but a few basic, interlinked, pillars seem to have endured.² President Obama has argued that the United States seeks to build “a partnership with Pakistan that is built on a foundation of mutual interest, mutual respect, and mutual trust.”³ At an abstract level, the core of this partnership strategy is focused on reducing the political weight of the army, improving governance and the economy, and embedding Pakistan in a more stable and secure region.⁴

The first pillar is the need for a rebalancing of the civil–military relationship within Pakistan. Pakistan’s army has politically dominated the country since the 1950s, even during periods of civilian rule. By emphasizing its support for civilian government while simultaneously building a more trusting relationship with the military, the United States seeks to create a stable civil–military relationship that will not cycle back and forth between regimes. At the same time, it is imperative to maintain a positive relationship with the military because of its ability to protect logistics flows into Afghanistan and provide intelligence about al Qaeda and Taliban operations. Military aid/training is one mechanism that can provide leverage over the Pakistani military establishment in a more positive manner than simply threatening the stick of sanctions. This delicate balancing act with the army has occurred against a history of serious dysfunction and volatility in military-to-military ties.

The second pillar is to focus on development and economic growth, combined with improved civilian governance, as a way of reducing the appeal of extremism. Aid, economic opportunity zones, and local capacity-building are means through which the Obama administration and allies in Congress hope to spur Pakistani growth.⁵ With the explicit assumption that support for militancy is often driven by unemployment and poor governance, the goal has been to generate good governance, which reduces the threat to the United States. Success in the economic agenda would also benefit civilian politicians, thus aiding the longer-term goal of stabilizing civil–military relations. Contributing to the institutionalization of political parties and the smoothness of the democratic political process are further aims of development aid and diplomacy. Engagement with civilians, from politicians to NGOs to the press, has been seen as essential to U.S. goals in the region.

The Obama strategy has not delivered on its ambitious goals in Pakistan.

The third goal is to bring Pakistan into greater alignment with the Afghan and Indian governments about the nature of threats and opportunities in South and Central Asia.⁶ At present, Pakistan sees India as a massive conventional threat from the east that also is trying to encircle it from the west, while the Karzai regime is believed to favor Pakistan's enemies within Afghanistan. Regional security tensions undermine stabilization and counterinsurgency efforts, and so the United States has pursued a concurrent "outside-in" effort to reduce international conflicts and thus improve internal Pakistani security.⁷ Ambassador Richard Holbrooke's role as Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan was initially intended to coordinate this regional initiative. Though the idea of managing the India–Pakistan relationship under Holbrooke soon died (largely due to a vociferously negative Indian reaction), his duties have continued to include facilitating Afghanistan–Pakistan issues, particularly responses to cross-border militancy.

This overall strategy aims to simultaneously pursue long-term goals—democracy and development in Pakistan as well as U.S. strategic partnerships with India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—and short-term imperatives such as the Afghanistan war effort and Pakistani economic growth. It is ambitious in its hopes for shaping Pakistan's society, politics, and economy while also calibrating international politics in the region. The overall result of this strategy has unfortunately been decidedly mixed.

Assessing the Pakistan Strategy

Washington remains in a tenuous position despite significant outlays of time and money. U.S. popularity in Pakistan remains low, the Pakistani army continues to march to its own drummer, civilian politicians have been unable to deliver growth and stability, and the region continues to defy easy solutions as Afghanistan becomes bloodier and India–Pakistan relations remain largely hostile.

The failures of the strategy require rethinking key premises underlying current policies. By examining where the goals of the administration have fallen short, it is easier to understand how to adjust policy in a way that leaves the United States with some degree of strategic initiative, rather than a paralyzing reliance on the good graces of local actors. There are no easy answers, but nearly two years after the launch of the Obama initiative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, enough time has passed to ask hard questions about the future of U.S. strategy toward Pakistan and the region. Simply put, is it worthwhile for the United States to become involved in trying to fundamentally change the interests of key political actors? Or would a more plausible strategy aim to simply manage and contain them?

Pakistan's Army

The Pakistani army is a powerful, cohesive, and strategic organization.⁸ Its decisionmaking is crucial to Pakistan's political future and to the trajectory of Afghanistan, where the army has the capacity to support or at least partially rein in major militant groups. The Obama strategy has had mixed results with the army. The army has certainly augmented its counterinsurgency drive against the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and associated groups which have directly challenged the writ of the Pakistani state. Although this Pakistani offensive seems to have more to do with the behavior of the TTP than U.S. persuasion, it has at least alleviated fears in Washington of some sort of Pakistani state collapse. Increased friction and obstacles to militant mobilization in northwestern Pakistan do not fundamentally change the strategic situation along the border, but they may help on the margin by restricting the autonomy of some elements of the Taliban. The military has also let the civilian government continue in office without launching a coup.

The negative on the balance sheet is also substantial, however. First, the Obama administration has continued to directly engage with the army as a strategic interlocutor, undermining the attempt to re-balance the military's role in politics.⁹ There are good reasons for this policy, most clearly the ability of the army to deliver intelligence, logistical support, and military operations which aid U.S. anti-Taliban and anti-al Qaeda efforts. Nevertheless, the continued dominance of the army in security policy perpetuates the severe institutional imbalances within the Pakistani polity.¹⁰ As the United States eyes the exits in Afghanistan, the army is likely to become even more powerful as an arbiter of Afghanistan's strategic fate. This will not enhance the goal of civil–military rebalancing. The continued willingness of the army to speak out on a variety of foreign policy issues, and to defy civilian initiatives, shows that the structural problems endure.

Second, the military establishment has been accused of continuing to protect elements of the Afghan Taliban, both in the south and the east. The Quetta Shura and Haqqani networks, which are on the frontline of the insurgency, are credibly believed to receive some degree of de facto protection from the Pakistani military.¹¹ This sanctuary allows these groups to effectively evade the escalation of counterinsurgency operations by the United States and its allies. The apparent game of hedging by the military establishment suggests that there is no strategic harmony between Islamabad and Washington; instead,

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the perceived national interests of the two states persistently conflict. Pakistan's threat perceptions, on issues from the Karzai administration to India, are simply very different than those of the United States. Platitudes about partnership cannot obscure these fundamental differences.

Third, the U.S. attempt to build military accountability into its aid initiatives triggered a backlash against the United States in Pakistan. The goal of the Kerry–

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Lugar–Berman Act is to provide Pakistan's civilian government with \$7.5 billion in aid over the next half decade. Distinctly, aid to the military will continue to flow as long as the military is not too aggressively involved in political intervention or nuclear proliferation. However, these different aid initiatives have been conflated by many in Pakistan into a strategy to weaken and control the military from afar.¹² Kerry–Lugar and related programs run into the deep structural contradiction at the heart of U.S. Pakistan

policy—efforts at accountability and monitoring can undermine closer cooperation because U.S. and Pakistani interests are not directly aligned.

Pakistan's Civilians

Although there have been some successes in the Obama administration's approach to the military, they have not been matched by significant success toward the rest of Pakistan—its political parties, civil society, public opinion, and economy. The goal of improving “people-to-people” relations is laudable, but the United States has an extremely limited civilian presence in Pakistan, and it faces an array of profound challenges in changing the nature of politics and the economy. Grand ambitions are unlikely to be achieved and any major successes will only be possible in the very long run.

Nevertheless, there have been some successes. In particular, U.S. engagement with civil-society groups is worth continuing, and support for democratic rule is generally more popular than backing a military dictator.¹³ The United States appears to be paying much more attention to the media and opposition parties than in the past, which is a positive step. Significant funding has been promised to a wide variety of development and governance projects, even if much of it remains undelivered to date.

Overall, however, the short-term results of the Obama strategy reveal just how difficult its goal will be to achieve. The performance of Pakistan's civilian regime has been underwhelming. President Asif Ali Zardari is seen as corrupt and incompetent, while Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani's government has come

under intense criticism for its inability to provide basic services or effectively respond to the massive summer 2010 floods. The opposition Pakistan Muslim League–N of Nawaz Sharif seeks political advantage on a variety of issues, but provides few indications of being a more capable future governing party. Smaller parties such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, Awami National Party, and Muttahida Qaumi Movement pursue their own more parochial goals. Although the judiciary has reestablished itself after the interregnum of former president Pervez Musharraf, it has also become involved in destabilizing confrontations with the civilian government.¹⁴ This political instability continues to hold open the possibility of even deeper military involvement in politics.

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Thus far, there has been little enduring change in mass public opinion toward the United States.¹⁵ The speeches and visits of various U.S. politicians and diplomats, as well as a variety of public diplomacy initiatives, have made essentially no difference. The United States is simply very unpopular in Pakistan. It is undeniably good to engage in a serious way with civil society and the opposition, but this should be a normal function of U.S. diplomacy rather than a “silver bullet” in changing mass perceptions.

Finally, Pakistan remains in dire macroeconomic straits. The country grew less than 3 percent in 2009, while rapid growth in food and oil prices cut into living standards. Taxation capacity, particularly among the wealthy, remains extremely low, and expanded revenue extraction is not in the interest of the political and economic elite. A troubled energy sector has caused recurrent rolling blackouts and brownouts in urban Pakistan which disrupt economic activity and signal the incapacity of the ruling government. Floods during the summer of 2010 were devastating, with approximately 20 percent of the country being swallowed up in flood waters.¹⁶ U.S. aid runs the risk of being used for triage and to advance the economic and political interests of Pakistani powerbrokers instead of shoring up the long-run fundamentals of the Pakistani economy.

Pakistan and the Region

Pakistan is enmeshed in an extremely complex regional environment. The goal of building stable relations among Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan seems increasingly distant. India–Pakistan relations remain hostile, and Afghan–Pakistani relations have shifted only to the extent that some members of the Karzai regime see Pakistan as growing more influential.¹⁷ U.S. policy toward Afghanistan hinges on its policy toward Pakistan, and vice versa, while Indian

relations with Afghanistan are intertwined with both Afghan–Pakistani and India–Pakistan relations. U.S. strategic influence is tightly constrained by these interlocking interests. Washington has situated itself in the middle in an effort to create alignments and to act as a regional coordinator. This position may hold more peril than promise since it lets the regional actors make demands on the United States.

There are several areas of concern in the region. First, Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan endures through both its current support for certain militant groups and its increased future importance as and when U.S. forces significantly

drawdown. A Pakistan that grows more powerful in southern and eastern Afghanistan will not be a state viewed with complacency by either Kabul or New Delhi. The prospect of a settlement regarding the Durand Line seems distant, and adjustments in Kabul toward Pakistan are largely tactical in response to shifting balances of power rather than any deep alignment of interests. This indicates a reduction of U.S. influence in Afghanistan and a likely increase in the power of the Pakistani security establish-

ment both in Afghanistan and domestically. The Holbrooke mission to facilitate and coordinate Afghanistan–Pakistan relations has borne little apparent fruit.

Second, India–Pakistan relations remain rocky in the wake of the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. A few diplomatic initiatives have come to nothing.¹⁸ Pakistani fears of Indian encirclement contribute to support for militancy in Afghanistan, while India understandably continues to view Pakistan as a hotbed of terrorism. The explosion of mass protest in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir has made Kashmir even more salient in the relationship, with some Indians seeing it as a Pakistan-supported plot while many Pakistanis see it as further proof that India should not control the Kashmir Valley. This tension holds U.S. policy hostage to future crises which occupy the attention of Indian and Pakistani elites and often require a difficult and time-consuming U.S. role in crisis management.

There is no clear next step in the Obama strategy. The United States seems unable to make any decisions about Pakistan without a clear idea of what it will be doing in Afghanistan. In turn, support for the Karzai regime hinges on the likely contours of future Pakistani policy. Fears of triggering an Indian backlash and undermining the Pakistani government make the United States passive in

The United States should set expectations for the rough outlines of a Kashmir settlement.

India–Pakistan relations. Put it all together, and the United States is currently locked in a highly reactive strategic stasis, with decisions in Washington waiting on Kabul, Islamabad, and New Delhi, against the backdrop of uncertainty about the future of the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan.

Charting a Future Course

This assessment is not uniformly bleak, but it is very worrisome. Though the situation facing the United States is admittedly difficult, the goals of the 2009–2010 Obama strategy appear to have been either excessively ambitious or an empty exercise in public relations. There are several clear priorities that can be pursued, while there are others that may simply need to be abandoned in favor of a focused strategic retrenchment.

The Army

The United States needs to strike a truly delicate balancing act with the Pakistani army in the coming years—restricting its ability to dominate Afghanistan and its interest in political intervention while maintaining some sort of cooperative relationship. These goals are in deep tension with one another. The United States seems likely to draw down its forces in Afghanistan over the next several years, opening even more space for Pakistan’s security services (and those of other regional players) to become involved in proxy competitions within Afghanistan. This presents a double challenge for U.S. policymakers—a continuing reliance on Pakistan for logistics and intelligence even as Islamabad becomes more aggressive in pursuit of its own perceived interests in Afghanistan, which are likely to conflict with those of the United States.¹⁹ There is simply no way of ignoring this clash of perceived interests. U.S. policymakers need to think through their response to Pakistan’s pursuit of influence in an Afghanistan after “the surge” in the coming years.

How can the United States manage its relationship with the military? First, it needs to offer consistent support for democratic rule even when unpopular, inefficient, or acting against U.S. interests. If the long-run goals are to triumph over immediate needs, this must be a priority. No tacit support for a military coup or intervention should be forthcoming from Washington. This pro-democracy stance should not take the form of backing particular politicians or parties, but instead it should emphasize respecting the democratic process regardless of specific candidates. Though it will trigger dismay from some sectors of Pakistani opinion, material aid and training should continue to be linked to military restraint in the political arena. On the other hand, tangible continued benefits should be offered to maintain some degree of cooperation against the Pakistani Taliban and al Qaeda.

Second, and as discussed more below, the United States should not let Afghanistan become a playground for Pakistan's military establishment. The goal of cutting the link between Pakistan and elements of the Afghan Taliban is extremely unlikely to succeed. In the face of this enduring alliance, maintaining U.S. proxies and allies in Afghanistan even after a troop reduction should be a priority.²⁰ Limited but potent uses of force, flows of guns and money, and diplomatic cover will remain tools of U.S. influence. Containing the effects of a U.S. drawdown will be messy and costly, but less so than a full-scale, indefinite U.S. state-building effort.²¹ Pakistan will certainly pursue a sphere of influence, but that sphere should be kept more limited than during the Taliban's near-conquest of the country and far less amenable to al Qaeda. The Pakistani army's history of making good decisions in its relationships with militant groups is uninspiring, and it therefore should not have a free hand in Afghanistan.²² The U.S. goal should be to shift the costs of a containment effort to allied Afghans.

The Civilians

The standard recommendation for U.S. policy toward Pakistan's civilian politics, society, and economy is "do more"—more aid, more public diplomacy, more engagement.²³ Such advice is unobjectionable but risks overstating the ability of the United States to intervene on its own terms or achieve its goals. Sweeping change will not come as a result of any U.S. policies. Put bluntly, the United States knows little about how to successfully reform political systems, reshape social norms, or trigger enduring economic growth. Fundamentally reforming Pakistan's politics and economy is an impossible goal for the United States. The

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scale of the challenge is such that only Pakistanis can seriously engage in it. Instead, the United States needs to focus on accomplishing a few things decently well. Even succeeding in these core tasks will require a huge amount of time and may have little effect on broad U.S. strategic interests.

First, when it comes to aid, the United States should focus on improving energy provision and other basic infrastructure, such as schools and roads, as well as providing humanitarian aid. A free-trade arrangement could contribute to growth in some sectors of the economy.²⁴ These are not grand ideas to transform Pakistan, but they provide direct benefits to the population instead of throwing money at a wide variety of poorly-monitored programs with unclear goals or effectiveness. Doing many things poorly is probably less helpful than focusing on a few things with at least some degree of (admittedly minimal)

success. An approach focused on basic priorities may fail, but it is worth moving beyond the notion that spreading the U.S. Agency for International Development all over Pakistan will address the structural roots of Pakistan's problems.²⁵

Such an effort will require accepting leakage and corruption. It is true that corruption is debilitating and alienates the citizenry, but eliminating, or even dramatically reducing, corruption in the short or even medium term is extremely difficult and quite unlikely. The cost of doing business may be unpleasant, yet if the United States is to achieve a few basic goals in Pakistan, it cannot expect to do so with perfectly clean hands.

It is certainly worth trying to use aid on other issues, but the ability of the United States, even in partnership with the Pakistani state, to create major changes is likely to be limited. It is often noted that the major Pakistani political parties are weakly institutionalized and highly personalized. Though this is true, no amount of training or capacity-building funding will change the situation as long as the key leaders of the Pakistan Peoples Party and PML-N retain powerful political incentives to keep these parties as they currently are.²⁶ Similarly, bureaucratic institutions such as the police will remain highly politicized as long as the political system creates incentives for politicians to manipulate the policing system to their benefit. Training and capacity-building programs are worth continuing to improve competence, but with little hope of rapid success. The United States has sufficient problems with its own education system that make it unlikely to be successful at triggering major reforms within Pakistan's. Pursuing these goals is reasonable, but given what we know about political development, they are unlikely to produce dramatic results. Policymakers should keep expectations for aid low.

Second, the United States needs to abandon a fixation on "strategic communication" and "public diplomacy" toward Pakistan.²⁷ There seems to be an assumption that if the narrative of U.S.-Pakistan relations were changed, so would Pakistani attitudes. This is extremely unlikely. "Branding" is a condescending and inadequate substitute for actual policy change and implementation. The interested public wants to see actual action, not new ads and statements. This is where credibly delivering on a few important issues, while tangibly backing the democratic project in Pakistan, might bear fruit. A profusion of friendly statements, advertising campaigns, and low-impact projects are no substitute for helping to construct core infrastructure, seriously engaging with the spectrum of political leaders rather than focusing on any "indispensable men," and avoiding the impression of micro-managing Pakistani politics.

The Region

South Asia presents numerous challenges for the United States and will continue to do so. Washington needs to brace itself for a long series of unexpected crises, ad hoc bargains, and unpleasant choices. Containment and management are more realistic and less costly than the transformative project envisioned by the Obama administration in 2009. The United States needs to pick and choose its spots: keeping Afghanistan from becoming a Pakistani playground, making India and Pakistan slightly less crisis-prone, and avoiding dependence on regional actors that limit U.S. room to maneuver.

First, Afghanistan's future will see a reduction in U.S. troop levels. There is little appetite for an indefinite large-footprint force presence, and the early results of the Afghanistan "surge" since December 2009 seem unpromising. A drawdown may involve bargaining with the Taliban or a continuing war with no end in sight. Either way, the United States should try to stop the Pakistani army from becoming the dominant kingmaker in Afghanistan. Pakistani hegemony would return the region to the 1990s, with the army riding high and free to act as it pleases in pursuit of ostensible strategic depth.²⁸ Such an outcome would enhance the army's domestic power in Pakistan and potentially create space for al Qaeda in Afghanistan. The United States can accept an inevitably high degree of Pakistani influence in Afghanistan, but should try to maintain proxies, allies, and assets that can counterbalance a rising tide of Pakistani intervention.²⁹ Liberal democracy and central state-building may not be necessary to achieve the core interest of keeping al Qaeda contained. Balancing Pakistan's allies will not be a pretty process, but there is no point in pretending that Washington and the Pakistani army have identical interests in Afghanistan. Containment may provide a basis for a more enduring settlement by persuading all sides that they cannot decisively win.

The toughest test of U.S. policy will therefore be trying to maintain a relationship with the Pakistani army even while engaged in a de facto proxy competition in Afghanistan. Continuing to back Pakistan's civilian leaders, while engaging in serious, if basic, aid projects in Pakistan are ways of maintaining support against expanding military hegemony. At the same time, military-to-military ties can be useful as a form of U.S. leverage, but one that should be used carefully and only over core interests. The U.S. and Pakistani security establishments are likely to continue their bizarre, uncomfortable relationship well into the future, publicly expressing a commitment to partnership and cooperation while battling for power and influence in the broader region. There is simply no way to credibly commit to an enduring partnership, making crises and recurrent tensions inevitable.³⁰

Second, it is widely accepted that a U.S. push to resolve the Kashmir dispute would create severe backlash in India, while Pakistan's political leadership is too

weak to push through a deal. This is true, but it is not an excuse for ignoring the issue. Hundreds have died in recurrent mass protests in Indian-administered Kashmir during the last three summers amidst a total breakdown of governance structures in the Kashmir Valley, a clear indication that India's strategy to normalize Kashmir has failed. The issue will not go away if left to New Delhi, and as long as it endures, it will enhance the political power of the Pakistani army while exacerbating regional tensions that undermine U.S. policymaking. Though the threat perceptions and political interests of the army are not solely driven by the Kashmir conflict, a reduction in tensions cannot hurt. A valuable U.S. role would be to quietly but persistently try to encourage an eventual deal around the basic contours of an agreement reportedly reached between India and Pakistan in 2007.³¹

The continuing unrest in Kashmir, even with the insurgency broken, should focus minds in New Delhi on alternative paths that could improve stability without imperiling national security.³² Against this backdrop, the United States could set a tone and establish expectations linked to the future course of the U.S.–India relationship. The United States could also signal that it would be willing to support a Pakistani government able and willing to make concessions. Progress on Kashmir would not magically solve the dilemmas of the region, but it would measurably make it easier for the United States to satisfy its interests.

No Way Out?

South Asia cannot be “solved” through a massive U.S. policy effort to harmonize regional interests while building an Afghan state and changing the politics, state, and society of Pakistan. Such an expansive project is highly unlikely to succeed. A more plausible strategy accepts the inability of the United States to shape many of the crucial dynamics in the region, while trying to nevertheless carve out a few areas of clear influence where specific objectives can be at least partially met. The goals advanced here—maintaining imperfect democratic regimes in Pakistan while bolstering basic infrastructure, keeping the Pakistani army from having free rein in Afghanistan after a U.S. drawdown, and forthrightly outlining expectations for progress on Kashmir—are ambitious enough on their own to occupy the efforts of U.S. policymakers indefinitely. Achieving any one of them would be a signal accomplishment.

The ultimate aim of U.S. policy in the region must be to avoid interlocking dependencies that leave the United States caught in a reactive stasis because of expansive commitments and implausible political projects. A strategic retrenchment would limit commitments in order to bring them into line with limited U.S. capabilities. Such a drawdown might even reduce Pakistani leverage over U.S. policy. In the face of this complex strategic situation, management,

containment, and bargaining should replace transformation, counterinsurgency, and harmonization as the watchwords of the U.S. role in Pakistan and South Asia.

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31. Steve Coll, "The Back Channel," *The New Yorker*, March 2, 2009, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/02/090302fa_fact_coll.
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