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Research Report

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SWP Comments, No. 16/2011

Provided in Cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

Suggested Citation: Wagner, Christian (2011) : A missed opportunity for Islamabad: Pakistan-American relations after the Abbottabad raid, SWP Comments, No. 16/2011, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256154>

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A Missed Opportunity for Islamabad

Pakistan-American Relations after the Abbottabad Raid

Christian Wagner

The killing of Osama bin Laden by U.S. special forces on 2 May 2011 subjects the tense relationship between Pakistan and the United States to yet another stress test. At least in theory, presenting the raid as a joint success would have offered the chance to fundamentally improve bilateral relations, putting Pakistan in a position to reap immense political, military and economic rewards. Conversely, the way this opportunity was missed reveals just how dreadful the relationship has become and raises questions about where Pakistan's foreign policy is heading and what attitude it will adopt towards stabilisation in Afghanistan.

Osama bin Laden declared war on Pakistan and the government of then President Pervez Musharraf in September 2007, and the Pakistani army has been fighting the Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, TTP) and al-Qaeda in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas since 2003. After TTP leader Baitullah Mehsud was killed in a U.S. drone attack in August 2009 the TTP and al-Qaeda stepped up their cooperation. The Pakistani military now has more than 140,000 troops in the tribal areas and has lost more soldiers in fighting there than the international community in Afghanistan. The TTP and al-Qaeda have been responsible for a series of attacks on civilian and military installations including the army headquarters in Rawalpindi in October 2009 and the naval base in Karachi in May 2011.

In light of these severe losses it is astonishing that Pakistan's military leadership denied any connection with the success of the operation against bin Laden, even though isolated statements from both sides point in that direction. For a number of reasons, the killing of bin Laden will further strain U.S.-Pakistani relations.

A Damaged International Reputation

The revelation that Osama bin Laden was able to live for years undetected in Abbottabad is a severe blow to Pakistan's international image. It is not the first time that the Pakistani security forces have disappointed the United States and the international community in a matter of global security. The nuclear proliferation of the

Khan network that was uncovered in 2003/2004 provoked similar questions about their incompetence or complicity.

In the depths of severe economic crisis, exacerbated by the destruction of the 2010 floods, Pakistan is heavily dependent on massive international support. In return for major loans, the IMF demands far-reaching economic reforms including an expansion of the tax base. The international community has no interest in seeing further economic deterioration or political destabilisation. Washington's support at the IMF in return for such a huge anti-terrorism success would have been timely indeed.

Regional and Bilateral Aspects

Apparent Pakistani participation in the operation would have lent greater weight to its calls for a say in any political solution in Afghanistan. The army leadership would have enhanced its credibility as a partner in the "war on terror", and would have been able to hold off American demands for military action against the Haqqani group in North Waziristan without having to fundamentally change its policy of toleration of the Afghan Taliban. It would also have given a real boost to longstanding Pakistani demands for the United States to upgrade the country's strategic position vis-à-vis India and clearly improved Pakistan's position against the India lobby in the U.S. Congress.

A concerted approach would have dramatically improved bilateral relations with the United States literally "over night". The long years of mistrust engendered by the duplicity of the Pakistani security forces – as partner of the United States and protector of the Afghan Taliban – would have been pushed into the background. The Pakistani government's position in negotiations with Washington over bilateral economic and military aid would have been considerably strengthened. Even after bin Laden's death the fight against al-Qaeda and the TTP in the tribal areas will continue: Pakistan would have been able to

add weight to its demand to stop the drone attacks and would have gained leverage on the question of acquiring unarmed American drones of its own.

Domestic Repercussions

Any (apparent) assistance in the killing of the "public enemy number one" would have represented an enormous success for Pakistan's security forces, which have been suffering severe losses at the hands of the TTP and al-Qaeda in the tribal areas. And it would have provided a welcome opportunity to move against the network of militant groups that they themselves created and nourished over the decades, but that have since escaped the control of the intelligence services and in some cases turned their fire against the Pakistani state. It would have been relatively easy to hide the shame of admitting such a national intelligence failure behind the triumph of their effectiveness.

Of course any suggestion that Pakistani security forces had been involved in the Abbottabad raid would have triggered domestic political protests. But demonstrations by Islamist parties would probably have remained within limits, given that more than 90 percent of Pakistanis voted for non-religious parties in the 2008 elections. Respect for bin Laden, who was more popular than President Musharraf in 2007, has evaporated. And anyway, however the raid is presented the army must expect revenge attacks by militant groups.

The night of 2 May 2011 thus opened a fleeting opportunity for fundamental improvement in U.S.-Pakistani relations. The first public announcement by President Obama left room for the interpretation that Pakistan had made an important contribution to the success of the operation. Indeed, in his initial response Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani proclaimed the killing as a Pakistani success too. But this interpretation did not hold in Pakistan. The first foreign ministry press release suggested that it had been a purely American

operation. Although the army declaration of 5 May admitted that the intelligence services had failed, it reserved its strongest criticism for the violation of national sovereignty and demanded the withdrawal of American military advisors. This criticism reappeared in the joint declaration of both houses of parliament after they had been informed by the army and intelligence services (which made no specific mention of the name of bin Laden). Here, at the latest, the chance to realign bilateral relations with the United States was missed.

Conversely, the episode demonstrates how dreadful Pakistani-American relations have become. Not even the clear prospect of improvements in credibility, reputation and economic and military support was sufficient to bring about a change in diplomatic stance.

The different courses of the debate in the two countries expose deep differences. For the United States and large parts of the international community, the most important question is how the world's most-wanted terrorist was able to live unnoticed for years in the middle of a Pakistani garrison town. For Pakistan the public discussion revolves around the violation of national sovereignty.

The controversy over the Abbottabad raid fits seamlessly into the bilateral bickering of recent months. In the army there is growing scepticism towards the United States among the eleven Corps Commanders, always with an eye to Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan, which are intimately bound up with the conflict with India. Although General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, Chief of Army Staff, has very recently shifted away from ideas of strategic depth in Afghanistan in his public statements, toleration and support of Afghan resistance groups in the tribal areas remains the central bone of contention in Pakistani-American relations.

Pakistan and the United States are waging two different wars in the tribal areas. While the United States is fighting all militant groups, Pakistan targets above all the

Pakistani Taliban (TTP, founded 2007) and al-Qaeda. Unlike the United States, Pakistan tolerates Afghan Taliban groups like those of Mullah Omar and the Haqqani network or warlords like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his Hezb-i-Islami, which the generals use to pursue their strategic interests in Afghanistan.

In the background there is a desire to expand diplomatic leverage in advance of a political solution in Afghanistan. Indeed, Prime Minister Gilani's first foreign trip after the raid was to China, while President Asif Ali Zardari went to Russia. Equally, support for militant anti-Indian groups like Lashkar-e-Toiba is being maintained despite repeatedly American demands for firmer action.

Missed Opportunity or Moment of Truth?

While the killing of bin Laden offered a chance to fundamentally improve bilateral relations between Pakistan and the United States, the Pakistani response reveals unbridgeable differences.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Pakistan at the end of May 2011 was able to clear only a few of the many stumbling blocks. Although both sides stressed their determination to continue the fight against al-Qaeda, reduced intelligence cooperation and the withdrawal of U.S. military advisors will probably benefit above all Pakistan's allies in the Afghan Taliban.

In the short to medium term, mutual interdependency will dictate that cooperation continues. Pakistan needs Washington's economic and military support in the fight against terrorism. Since 2002 about \$14 billion has flowed into the country in military aid along with more than \$6 billion for economic and civilian cooperation. The United States, in turn, depends on Pakistan for supplying its forces in Afghanistan. Even more important for the United States strategically is the security of the Pakistani nuclear programme.

In the medium to long term, however, the events of May 2 will perhaps be just another milestone in a transformation of Pakistani foreign policy driven by various factors. Firstly, increasing numbers of officers who joined the army during the military dictatorship of Zia-ul Haq (1977–1988) are rising to leadership positions. Militarily, politically and ideologically they are steeped in the conflicts of the 1990s in Kashmir and Afghanistan, when Pakistan was subjected to a series of sanctions by the United States and the international community. This generation of officers is noticeably less predisposed to the West. Secondly, opinion surveys show that Pakistani society has become more conservative (even if the wish for more religion should not be equated with Talibanisation). Thirdly, a strong current of anti-Americanism is often politically instrumentalised and supplies a justification for the government to turn more strongly towards states like China. But for the emergence of a moderate and democratic Pakistan Beijing is unlikely to prove a better partner.

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ISSN 1861-1761

Translation by Meredith Dale

(English version of
SWP-Aktuell 28/2011)