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Fixing Pakistan's Civil–Military Imbalance: A Dangerous Temptation

Summary

- Out of the proposed alternatives for dealing with Pakistan discussed in Washington, one that seems to have gained some traction calls for aggressively playing up Pakistan's civil-military divide by propping up civilians while dealing harshly with the military and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).
- While normatively attractive, the approach to deal with Pakistan as two Pakistans is unworkable. It grossly exaggerates the U.S.'s capacity to affect institutional change in Pakistan and fundamentally misunderstands what underpins the civil-military dynamic.
- In reality, any attempt by the U.S. to actively exploit this internal disconnect is likely to end up strengthening right wing rhetoric in Pakistan, provide more space for security-centric policies, and further alienate the Pakistani people from the U.S.
- A more prudent approach would be one that limits itself to targeted interventions in areas truly at the heart of the civil-military dichotomy and that would resonate positively with the Pakistani people: by continuing to help improve civilian governance performance and by providing regional security assurances to Pakistan.

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The New Thinking on Pakistan

As the mistrust in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship deepens, Washington's frustration with Islamabad has also grown. Over the past few months, influential voices have begun to recommend that the U.S. take a more aggressive approach to Pakistan by playing up Pakistan's civil-military divide: prop up civilians while dealing harshly with the military and its spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Specifically, views range from moving to a more hostile “containment” approach that would box in the Pakistan military; to seeing “progressive” civilians as partners and declaring the military as an adversary; to labeling specific members of the military and ISI found to be involved in supporting militants as “terrorists.”¹

The premise for this view is that the Pakistani military and intelligence apparatus is undermining U.S. interests in Afghanistan and that it has held civilian governments—who otherwise would be amenable to reversing Pakistan's traditional strategic paradigm—hostage to its own agenda. Underlying this is the implicit belief that if the strength of the military is undercut and if the civilians are able to take charge in letter and spirit, resulting revisions in Pakistani threat perceptions and national priorities would overlap more neatly with U.S. interests.

The approach is attractive as it hones in on what is arguably one of Pakistan's binding constraints: the civil-military imbalance. It also correctly identifies the need to reverse Pakistan's strategic paradigm and the military's control over it. The problem, however, is that this approach is unworkable. The temptation to see the U.S. play a proactive role to tilt Pakistan's civil-military divide in favor of civilians and to assume that this will necessarily produce positive results reflects a misconception of Pakistan's civil-military dynamic. In reality, any attempt by the U.S. to actively exploit this internal disconnect is likely to end up strengthening right wing rhetoric in Pakistan, create more space for security-centric policies, and further alienate the Pakistani people from the U.S.

Why the U.S. Can't Do it

For any strategy to work, it must have a minimal degree of resonance with the Pakistani people, and even more importantly, with the desired partners, most notably the civilian political elite. The temptation to conceptualize Pakistan as *two Pakistans*—that is, to devise a Pakistan policy based on a neat division between civilian and military elites—misses this benchmark. For one, the majority of Pakistanis do not see a clear good versus bad division between the civilians and the military. Surprising as it may be for Western audiences, the military ranks far higher than the political elite in terms of the trust people place in them.² Moreover, while the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis support democratic dispensations over military rule, they tend to draw a distinction between elected and democratic governments; they are much more concerned about the output—read performance—than the process of democracy. Poor governance discredits governments fairly quickly, after which even those backing them are seen as part of the problem and often find themselves maligned as a result. Interestingly, the relatively greater trust Pakistanis place in the military has traditionally meant that civilian politicians get blamed and discredited more readily than the military for the country's governance woes even though the military's political meddling has contributed immensely to the problem itself. This explains why U.S. support even to elected governments rings hollow to most Pakistani ears if the leadership of the time is discredited internally. This is certainly the case today. The point here is not to say that civilian governments should not be supported but to challenge the assumption that a policy so obviously driven to undercut the military would necessarily elicit support from the majority of Pakistanis.

Next, the supposition that Pakistani civilian authorities would welcome U.S. support to push back the military underestimates just how caustic "brand USA" has become in Pakistan. While the mainstream political parties would like to see the military cut to size in terms of its political clout—and civilian and military elites have a history of requesting help from the U.S. in shaping the domestic political environment—the political enclave can no longer afford to be associated with any visible U.S. involvement in such an effort. For one, the U.S. is not seen as trustworthy by most across the political spectrum. Moreover, an obvious U.S. association will quickly set into motion nationalistic forces as they seek to discredit those political parties choosing to welcome a U.S. role. As enmeshed as anti-U.S. sentiment has become with extremist rhetoric in Pakistan, the outcome would likely be a successful campaign by the ultra right to malign the civilians in question for trying to undermine the military, and the state apparatus as a whole for failing to keep this 'questionable outsider' from meddling in domestic affairs. The masses would be further galvanized on an anti-U.S., pro-nationalist agenda.

Furthermore, such a policy disregards the reality that genuinely popular parties like Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf have a fair chance of finding their way into the corridors of power, but will neither be overly hospitable towards the U.S., nor inimical to the military's security outlook. It is unclear how a U.S. policy that is blatantly antithetical to the military will work in this scenario.

Third, drawing a clear distinction between the civilians and the military in terms of national security outlook is also assumptive. While there is no doubt that Pakistan's military-driven national security policy lies at the heart of many of the problems that beset the country today, this should not imply that the civilian bureaucracy and much of the political elite necessarily align with the U.S. outlook. The fact is that the foreign policy community—civilian and military included—see their country's strategic interests differently than the U.S. would hope. For instance, the civilian counterparts are as perturbed as the military at Washington's "do more" mantra. The rather hawkish terms of the recently-concluded Pakistani parliamentary review are a good indication of the civilian mood toward the U.S. Pakistan's present outlook toward Afghanistan also elicits broad support within the civilian foreign policy community. Even more clearly, there is virtually no dissent among civilian politicians and bureaucratic ranks that China ought to remain Pakistan's top ally, on the view that Pakistan's stand on Kashmir has greater merit than India's, on the need to reach out to Iran for energy collaboration, and on retaining a nuclear weapons capability. Civilian politicians, especially those belonging to central and southern Punjab, are also not enthused about going after militants based in their constituencies. Moreover, to expect any civilian government to go along with an effort to blacklist individuals or parts of the security apparatus—read ISI—is naïve at best. Finally, even though the Pakistani position on India has softened considerably, a U.S. regional strategy that sees India as the principal counterterrorism partner, as approaches like "containment" of Pakistan have proposed, would only reinforce Pakistani expectations of U.S. behavior and bring civilians closer to the military's traditional position.

Fourth, none of the proponents of the *two Pakistans* approach seem to have addressed how the Pakistan military is likely to respond to such a shift in policy, raising several basic questions. For instance, why would the military not respond to a cut in U.S. security assistance by simply demanding a larger share of the domestically available resources from the government? Also, would the military not compensate by reaching out even more proactively to traditional partners like China and Saudi Arabia? Would declining resources coupled with a closer U.S.-India security engagement not force the military to rely even more heavily on the country's nuclear capability to buffer against India? Finally, why would the military not choose to take a more nationalistic line and manipulate public sentiment to rally greater domestic support behind it? Not to forget, the Pakistan military faced extreme domestic anger last year for having failed to respond to the U.S. incursion to kill Osama bin Laden. The way to rectify this would be to portray, if not actually demonstrate, its resolve and readiness to do so under this scenario.

A Wiser Approach: Less, Not More

As demonstrated here, any hope that Washington can positively affect Pakistan's civil-military imbalance by playing on this internal divide grossly exaggerates its capacity and fundamentally misunderstands the local context. The goal of attaining civilian supremacy in Pakistan may be better served if the U.S. takes a more passive approach and only assists with targeted interventions in areas that lie at the heart of the civil-military dichotomy and that would resonate positively with the Pakistani people.

It must be understood that ultimately, a permanent transformation in the civil-military imbalance is most likely to be driven by organic institutional processes originating within Pakistan. This process is already taking shape. The rise of the independent media, judicial activism, and an increasingly active parliament have already begun to squeeze the military's space for political maneuvering and its influence on foreign policy in profound ways.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This report focuses on one of the central debates on Pakistan in Washington: how to deal with this troubled and troubling ally in the months and years ahead. While views are divided, the rising frustrations with Pakistan have led many to lose patience and seek a stern response from the U.S. The author, USIP's South Asia adviser, addresses a misconception regarding Pakistan's civil-military relationship and the potential for the U.S. to make this the basis of engagement with Pakistan. The views expressed in the report are based on the author's own research on the subject and multiple conversations with relevant Pakistani interlocutors; they do not represent the views of USIP, which does not take positions on policy issues. This report advances USIP's goal of generating a better understanding of Pakistani institutional and conflict dynamics and of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship.



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These changes provide a significant opening for the civilians to usurp their rightful space but they are not likely to prove sufficient. Two other developments are needed to permanently loosen the military's hold and move toward a consolidated democratic system: improved civilian governance performance and regional security assurances to Pakistan.

Were civilian governance outputs to improve in an environment where the military is already on the back foot, the military's space for political overreach would constrict more. Until this happens, however, the opportunity to disrupt the system will remain open; traditionally, prolonged discontent with civilian rulers in Pakistan has tended to lessen opposition to forced disruptions—meaning, coups.

Equally, South Asia's regional calculus must change such that Pakistan feels reassured about its security. The military's domestic policy clout is directly linked to the problematic picture of regional security as are much of its troubling policy choices. Neither will transform completely unless this South Asian Gordian knot loosens. Principally, forward movement implies transformational gains on the Pakistan-India front.

Even here, the U.S. capacity to affect change is modest. Its policy interventions must be targeted toward addressing those governance bottlenecks where its involvement will not be seen negatively by most Pakistanis (energy, water, access to markets, etc.) and at demonstrating through tangible policy actions that a close India-U.S. partnership will not come at the expense of or indifference to Pakistan's key security concerns. Beyond this, it would be prudent to adopt a "do no harm" approach; a good start would be to discard any *two Pakistans*-based strategy.

Notes

1. This line of thinking is most clearly reflected in Bruce Riedel, "A New Policy Pakistan Policy: Containment," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/15/opinion/a-new-pakistan-policy-containment.html?_r=1; and "Should Pakistan be Engaged or Contained," *CNN/American Enterprise Institute*, November 7, 2011, <http://www.aei.org/article/should-pakistan-be-engaged-or-contained/>. A number of others have also supported this view in varying degrees.
2. Virtually all polling data available for the past decade proves this trend. The sentiment held even after some major embarrassments for the military in the past year. See for instance, Gallup's July 2011 poll results: "Pakistanis Still Rate Military Tops among national Institutions," *Gallup World*, July 29, 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/148709/pakistanis-rate-military-tops-among-national-institutions.aspx>. The trend was also confirmed in a recent off-the-record discussion at USIP where leading pollsters working in Pakistan presented recent data from the ground. See USIP's blog post on the meeting at <http://www.usip.org/publications/the-us-pakistan-relationship-three-pollsters-views>.