

A Pakistani Strategic Shift?

Prepared statement by

Daniel S. Markey, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow for India, Pakistan, and South Asia

Council on Foreign Relations

Before the

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, House Committee on
Foreign Affairs

Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, House Committee on Foreign Affairs

United States House of Representatives

1st Session, 113th Congress

Hearing on “After the Withdrawal: The Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Part I)”

Chairman Chabot, Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Members Faleomavaega and Deutsch, and members of the subcommittees, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I would like to submit my written testimony for the record.¹

The United States and Pakistan spent most of 2011 and at least half of 2012 lurching from crisis to crisis, their relationship teetering at the edge of an abyss. In recent months, however, moves by Islamabad have raised hopes in Washington that Pakistan might be navigating a “strategic shift” that would restart normal, workmanlike cooperation and, more important, would allow America to escape from its war in Afghanistan.

Anyone who has watched the U.S.-Pakistan relationship over the past decade will know that U.S. officials have long craved a real, honest-to-goodness shift in Pakistan’s mindset, which would see Islamabad abandon its dangerous use of terrorism as a tool of statecraft; patch up its relations with India in the east and Afghanistan in the west; and build a more prosperous, democratic, and moderate society. In pursuit of these ends, the Obama and Bush Administrations have courted Pakistan with various combinations of diplomacy and cash.

More than once since 9/11, the sincere American desire to see Pakistan change its ways has led U.S. officials to interpret Islamabad’s tactical pirouettes as evidence of a strategic about-face. As a consequence, the United States took more generous approaches than were warranted and then felt frustrated and betrayed when the inadequacies of Islamabad’s “strategic shifts” came to light.

Washington need not commit these errors again. India’s recent dealings with Pakistan suggest the path toward a smarter approach.

Skeptics will conclude that Pakistan, over and over, has played the United States for a fool. They will find this latest round of “strategic shift” talk especially galling. Haven’t we been down this path before? Haven’t we showered Islamabad with billions of dollars in aid only to discover Osama bin Laden, not in a cave, but in a high-walled compound near Pakistan’s most prestigious military academy? Didn’t Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, tell us in 2011 that Pakistan used the terrorist Haqqani Network as a “veritable arm” of its intelligence service? We needn’t play the game again only to learn, again, that Pakistan is wedded to much the same strategy as it has followed since 1947, when in its first war with India it sent irregular Pashtun tribal forces into Kashmir to wrest that territory from New Delhi’s control.

The skeptics make important points. Tangible evidence of Pakistan’s latest strategic shift is thus far extremely limited, just as in past episodes. Yet when it comes to official statements and diplomatic outreach, there is little doubt that Pakistan is up to something different this time.

On the rhetorical side of the ledger, Pakistan’s army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, kicked off speculation about a strategic shift with his Independence Day speech on August 14, 2012. At the center of the speech was an extended argument about the threat that domestic extremism and terrorism pose to Pakistan. After defining extremists as those who seek to force their beliefs upon others, and terrorists as extremists who resort to violence, Kayani concluded: “The war against extremism and terrorism is not only

¹This testimony originally appeared January 10, 2013 as an article in *The American Interest* under the title “Is This Time Different?”

the Army's war, but that of the whole nation." Many Pakistanis interpreted Kayani's emphasis on this conflict inside Pakistan as a telling sign of the army's redefined priorities (particularly as it came on a day normally reserved for commemorating the sacrifices of Pakistan's wars with neighboring India).

Since August, other top Pakistani officials have echoed Kayani's remarks, and have also taken pains to speak about Afghanistan in more constructive ways. In response to allegations that Pakistan continues to use Taliban insurgents to project influence into Afghanistan, Pakistani officials have started to argue that anxiety, not ambition, drives their regional policies. Looking ahead to the 2014 drawdown of U.S. and NATO/ISAF forces in Afghanistan, Islamabad claims it has every interest in a stable, peaceful, sovereign, and independent Afghanistan. Some officials add that Afghanistan need not even be friendly to Pakistan, so long as it is not unfriendly. It is hard to see any daylight between Washington and Islamabad when Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar observes that, "The best possible scenario that we can think of for 2014 is that as elections take place and as transition takes place in Afghanistan, all Afghan groups are able to demonstrate their strength, their will through the election process, not through violence. And that is a future that we must be working toward."

To be sure, Pakistani leaders have made similar points in the past. But there should be no mistaking the fact that Islamabad now intends to convince American audiences that core U.S. and Pakistani interests can be brought into alignment. Considering how terrible relations between Islamabad and Washington got over the course of 2011 and early 2012, such olive branches are especially striking. They come alongside Islamabad's energized diplomatic outreach to Washington, Kabul, and New Delhi.

With Washington, Islamabad has restarted several dialogues that had crashed to a halt in 2011. Senior U.S. officials who were turned away from Pakistan less than a year ago have recently chaired working groups on issues like energy and defense cooperation. Trilateral "core group" meetings (U.S.-Pakistan-Afghanistan) have opened the door to a new round of negotiations with Taliban insurgents. In particular, Pakistan has released at least 18 Taliban prisoners and offered safe passage so that they, and perhaps others, might participate in talks with other Afghan counterparts. Over the course of 2012, senior Pakistani and Afghan delegations met more than twenty times. President Hamid Karzai, among other Afghan officials, has welcomed these moves and expressed his appreciation for Pakistan's newfound, more constructive approach.

Pakistan renewed its outreach to India well before its latest moves with Afghanistan and the United States. At least by official Indian accounts, Pakistan's latest diplomatic surge resulted from the fraying of relations between Islamabad and Washington in 2011. Eager to remove at least one problem from its overcrowded agenda, Pakistan re-opened and energized talks with India, starting with trade and cross-border economic ties. In November 2011, the two agreed to extend Most Favored Nation status to one another. Other Indo-Pakistani discussions have opened the door to less onerous travel restrictions for businessmen and may pave the way for the full resumption of a wildly popular series of India-Pakistan cricket matches.

U.S. officials initially saw Islamabad's overtures to New Delhi as marginal diversions—or at best silver linings—in the context of Pakistan's generally frustrating behavior. Yet the longer the era of good feeling persists, the greater the hope that the normalization process might take on a life of its own.

Let's Not Get Carried Away

Islamabad's friendly words and constructive diplomacy should be taken seriously, but what Pakistan has not done may ultimately prove to be more revealing than what it has.

To put it differently, over the past 18 months Washington's strategy has shifted more than Islamabad's. In September 2011, when Admiral Mullen criticized the ISI's links to the Haqqani Network, many in Washington (and in Pakistan, for that matter) assumed that the United States had finally decided to hold Islamabad's feet to the fire, had finally determined that Islamabad would pay a price for aiding and abetting terrorist groups with American blood on their hands. Perhaps that was Mullen's intention, but the Obama Administration backpedaled from his statement and the episode had no discernible effect on Pakistan's policies.

Similarly, a year later Obama Administration officials, including Secretary of Defense Panetta, publicly voiced doubts about whether Pakistan's army would follow through on its frequent hints and strike the Haqqani Network's home base of North Waziristan, a step Washington had sought for years. Panetta anticipated that the military campaign would take place, but expressed concern that it might not target the Haqqanis. He suggested that Pakistan's army might instead attack only the homegrown insurgents (the so-called Pakistani Taliban) that had taken up arms against Islamabad. As of this writing, not only has Pakistan failed to go after the Haqqanis, but no major North Waziristan campaign of any type has materialized.

Indeed, Pakistan has held its line on the Haqqanis and North Waziristan while the United States has shifted its expectations and focus. Under heavy congressional pressure, the Obama Administration designated the Haqqanis a Foreign Terrorist Organization in September 2012. Otherwise, Washington appears to have pulled away from pressure tactics with Islamabad.

Whereas U.S. officials had hoped to see Islamabad put the screws to Afghan insurgents on Pakistani soil, now Washington appears willing to settle for Pakistani-facilitated peace talks with those same insurgents. Yes, Pakistan has released Afghan Taliban prisoners and participated in conversations with U.S. and Afghan officials about reconciliation. This could be called a "strategic shift", but, crucially, most of the shifting has come on Washington's side, where there is now more acceptance of Pakistan's influence over the peace process than ever before.

Pakistan's basic position on counter-terror cooperation with the United States is also unchanged. Publicly, the civilian government remains opposed to the American use of drones. Privately, as far as is possible to discern, Pakistan's leaders tacitly accept the drones but prefer to limit U.S. operations to remote parts of the country well beyond the range of journalists and most of the Pakistani public. As a consequence, Washington directs strikes only within designated "boxes" of territory along the Afghan border.

Pakistan's intelligence agency remains opposed to covert U.S. operations on Pakistani soil and has clamped down on U.S. visa applications. Some of this is understandable given Pakistan's history of territorial insecurity. Pakistanis vigilantly guard their sovereignty, and Islamabad has suffered the political blowback of high profile incidents like the 2011 Raymond Davis affair, when a CIA contractor shot dead two Pakistanis in Lahore. Pakistan could make itself even less helpful on the counter-terror front by cutting ISI-CIA

cooperation entirely. But Pakistan could also do a great deal more, and its dealings with the United States still fall far short of being full, transparent, or friendly.

Moreover, in many parts of Pakistan Kayani's admirable rhetoric on the need to curb extremism has had no discernible consequence. A number of Pakistan's most renowned extremists (including Hafiz Saeed, the founder of the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attacks, among many other horrific acts of violence) have united under the banner of the "Defence of Pakistan Council" to rally support for an anti-American, anti-Indian, Islamist vision of Pakistan's future. So long as these groups direct their vitriol outward, they appear immune from state sanction. This holds true in spite of Washington's April 2012 offer of a \$10 million reward for information leading to Hafiz Saeed's capture.

From India's perspective, Pakistan's inaction on Saeed is part and parcel of a broader problem. Pakistan has done next to nothing to bring the perpetrators of the 2008 Mumbai attacks to justice. Pakistani officials cite the limits of their judicial system and an assortment of legal/technical barriers as reasons for slow progress, but Indians believe the true story is much simpler: Pakistan refuses to cut its longstanding support to Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) or its affiliates. On this score, the Indians are right. Pakistan banned LeT in 2002, but the group simply renamed itself and went back to work. Pakistan has also taken steps to limit infiltration into India by LeT and other terrorist groups, but none of these steps have put the anti-Indian terrorists out of business.

Nor has Islamabad coupled its diplomatic outreach to New Delhi with other measures on the military front that would signal a genuine strategic shift. For instance, Pakistan is building tactical (very small, short range) nuclear warheads and delivery systems. These weapons are intended to deter an Indian invasion that Pakistani military planners fear might come the next time Pakistan-based terrorists strike India. Pakistan's tactical nuclear program is worrisome because it threatens to introduce nuclear weapons at an earlier stage in any future Indo-Pakistani war. Even worse, if the Pakistanis believe they can deter Indian punishment, they might be more willing to give a green light to new terrorist provocations in the first place. From India's perspective, Pakistan looks like it is using its nuclear program to keep sub-conventional military options (terrorism) open. This is hardly a recipe for normalizing the relationship, and hardly a strategic shift.

India's Experience

India's leaders appreciate that Pakistan has not really come around to view the relationship in fundamentally new terms. And yet New Delhi is still ready to talk and to explore areas where its interests overlap with Islamabad's. There are three reasons why.

First, India lacks serious alternatives to negotiations with Pakistan. Since partition in 1947, India has repeatedly tried and failed to wall itself off from its neighbor. Today India is by far the greater power, but smart Indian policymakers understand that military tools cannot subdue Pakistan without threatening India's prosperity and, if nuclear weapons are taken into account, India's very existence. Any punishment India can deliver to Pakistan would come at a prohibitively high price, if only because it would disrupt and jeopardize business activity and economic growth. For India, desperate to help hundreds of millions of its citizens escape from grinding poverty, such disruptions would be especially painful.

Moreover, as Pakistani domestic troubles mount, New Delhi recognizes that Pakistan's weaknesses are more threatening than its strengths. Fearing refugee flows, loose nuclear weapons and the rise of militant Islamists, India has an interest in making sure that Pakistan does not fall apart at the seams. Indian diplomacy offers Pakistan more space to get its house in order.

Second, even if Islamabad never intends to change its ways, India can still achieve temporary gains from a diplomatic process. Bilateral talks are valuable simply by helping to ward off Indo-Pakistani war for a matter of months or years. The ruling Indian National Congress party will score political points if India sees peace through its next election cycle. And India's economy will benefit from freer trade with Pakistan as long as it lasts; even impermanent deals can be worthwhile.

Third, it is conceivable that the diplomatic process of normalization will contribute to a virtuous cycle. If diplomacy enables Pakistani businessmen to get richer from their investments in India, they will be more likely to whisper words of restraint in the ears of their nation's politicians and generals, and their Indian counterparts would do the same on the other side of the border. In general, as Indian and Pakistani economies become more integrated, war gets more costly and the constituencies for peace gain power.

Economic integration also has the potential to change Pakistan's political and economic trajectory by creating jobs for young men and women who might otherwise turn to violence; by encouraging investment in infrastructure and technology that will make industry more competitive on the global market and forestall the flight of capital and talent; and by loosening the repressive hold of feudal elites who will face a world in which educating their peasants will be more profitable than keeping them down. The latest Indo-Pakistani diplomatic effort is nowhere near achieving any of these goals, but the longer it lasts the more space it creates for bottom-up peacemaking of all types.

India is therefore a willing partner in Pakistan's diplomatic outreach. Yet New Delhi has been careful only to meet Islamabad halfway in their dealings. Holding a firm line has been a political necessity for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who cannot afford to look weak in front of his domestic audience. Politics aside, the Indian commitment to a diplomatic principle of tit-for-tat is also a sound strategy that enables New Delhi to make the most of whatever Islamabad puts on the table. If talks yield incremental progress, great; but if diplomacy breaks down or India suffers another terrorist attack, India's leaders cannot be blamed for being overly generous.

Playing tit-for-tat has also enabled New Delhi to tie specific demands to specific deliverables. For instance, Prime Minister Singh has repeatedly put off travel to Pakistan—a trip that would redound to Islamabad's advantage—until tangible progress is made in prosecuting the Pakistan-based plotters of the Mumbai attack. India's diplomacy also de-links the various issues it faces with Pakistan. As a consequence, disappointing progress on the counter-terror front has not blocked worthy efforts to improve trade ties.

Follow India's Approach

With some modification, an Indian-style approach to Pakistan comprised of tit-for-tat and de-linkage could also work for the United States. Where Pakistan is forthcoming, as it now appears to be with Afghan peace talks, the United States should seize opportunities and pocket gains as they come. Where Pakistan

disappoints, as it continues to do on military operations in North Waziristan, the United States should withhold favors. Frustration along one front (such as Pakistan's inaction on LeT or its continuing support of the Haqqani Network) should not necessarily hold others (like U.S. investments in infrastructure and education) hostage.

President Obama began his first term with ambitious rhetoric about the need to move away from what members of his national security team called a "transactional" relationship with Pakistan. By ramping up civilian aid to Pakistan, opening a range of diplomatic dialogues, and intensifying efforts at military and intelligence cooperation, Washington aimed to transform Pakistani attitudes about the nature of the relationship, to strengthen Pakistan's capacity for constructive cooperation and, by extension, to make it more likely that Islamabad would choose policies favorable to the United States.

Owing to the near-collapse of U.S.-Pakistan relations in 2011, however, the White House has in many respects already retreated to a tit-for-tat, de-linked approach to Pakistan. Over the past year, the Obama administration has grown increasingly sophisticated in its ability to calibrate the flow of military assistance to Pakistan in response to Islamabad's actions. Washington suspended military aid when Islamabad closed NATO supply routes to Afghanistan, then resumed it when the routes re-opened. All the while, most of Washington's development aid for Pakistan flowed undisturbed by the drama over supply routes and other security matters. Behind closed doors (not least on Capitol Hill), the Obama Administration has had to argue the merits of de-linking civilian aid, weighing its value in promoting Pakistani stability against Islamabad's unhelpful and irresponsible behavior on so many fronts.

Full and public candor about such decisions may be politically and diplomatically impossible. Publicly, U.S. diplomats should welcome Pakistan's constructive moves and the prospect of more to come without exaggerating or imputing a strategic shift that has yet to materialize. At the same time, in order to sustain and defend a tit-for-tat, de-linked approach, the Obama Administration should be honest with itself and, when appropriate, with congressional leaders about the tradeoffs the United States is making and those it would be willing to make down the line.

Washington should consider, for instance, whether it would halt its support to Pakistan's F-16 fighter jet program if Pakistan's next army chief puts his foot down and demands an end to the U.S. drone campaign; if he accepts drones but expands Pakistan's support to LeT and the Haqqani Network; or if he threatens nuclear war with India. Unless the Obama Administration knows which of its payoffs (or sanctions) are tied to which actions by Pakistan, it will have a hard time calibrating its responses to Pakistan's behavior, explaining those decisions to officials inside the U.S. government charged with implementing them, and justifying them to members of Congress who foot the bill.

Aside from the need for candor, these examples also highlight the first of several important differences between the situations faced by Washington and New Delhi. Unlike India, the United States sends billions of dollars of assistance to Pakistan. Since money is fungible, a dollar Washington sends to help build roads or dams frees up a dollar in the Pakistani budget that can be devoted to building tactical nuclear warheads. This makes de-linkage harder. Washington will be better off if it directs its assistance to specific projects in Pakistan rather than deliver general budget support or funneling cash into programs that the Pakistani government would choose to fund even if Washington did not.

Second, New Delhi has only come to accept its present approach toward Pakistan after decades of frustration and bloodletting. Washington need not exhaust itself further before adopting a similar strategy, but then again, the United States is far more powerful than India, and thus has a greater capability to isolate (or assist) Pakistan through military, diplomatic, and economic means. By following India's example and accepting a world in which Pakistan continues to pursue policies inimical to American interests, Washington also accepts an unnecessarily constrained vision of U.S. power and influence.

No one can argue with the fact that the ambitious approach of the early Obama years has failed. Questions should be asked, however, about whether that failure was a consequence of the strategy itself, its inadequate implementation, or inappropriate expectations for how long it might take to work. Should 18 months of intense U.S. diplomacy and a few billion dollars have upended Pakistan's decades-long approach to managing its affairs at home and abroad? Could any bilateral relationship have withstood a crisis-packed year like 2011? Probably not.

This does not mean that the United States can (or should) now return to the "transformational approach" favored in 2009, but it does suggest that U.S. policymakers have more tools at their disposal than their Indian counterparts, and that Washington need not retreat to New Delhi's level of ambition. In particular, the United States should not give up on long-term projects designed to promote political and economic development in Pakistan just because they have not yet transformed Pakistan for the better. Patience will be a virtue; the slow and steady application of U.S. power through coercion and inducement has the potential to yield success where shock therapy has not.

Third, India faces the prospect of an infinite future of living next-door to Pakistan. U.S. dealings with Pakistan, on the other hand, are framed by the endgame of the war in Afghanistan and increasingly by timetables for NATO's military drawdown. It is fashionable now in Washington to suggest that with fewer forces in Afghanistan, the United States will depend less on Pakistan (and in particular, its supply routes), and therefore will have more leverage in its future negotiations with Islamabad. And it is true that Washington will retain influence in South Asia even as its military presence wanes.

That said, reductions in resources, manpower and senior-level attention devoted to Pakistan's region cannot help but make it harder for Washington to coerce or cajole Islamabad. By this logic, the period between now and 2014 would be the best time for the United States to use all of the tools at its disposal to bring about a shift in Pakistan's strategy. Given how hard this task has been in the past, only a highly coercive, integrated approach of diplomatic, military and economic coercion could conceivably hope to turn the tide. Yet squeezing Islamabad would be risky for Washington, and as a practical matter Obama Administration officials appear to have no stomach for it at this stage.

As a second best solution, the United States should ratchet up its attacks on groups like the Haqqani Network and Lashkar-e-Taiba in ways that go well beyond what India can do, whether by way of drone strikes, attacking financial flows, or other military and covert operations. To the extent that Washington can demonstrate its commitment to destroying these groups and to depriving Pakistan of any reason to view them as useful proxies in Afghanistan or India, it should make every effort to do so. In addition, Washington should devise longer-term, post-2014 plans for addressing these sorts of threats after the United States has pulled the lion's share of its forces out of Afghanistan. Washington had better not take its eye off the ball in

Pakistan as it did throughout much of the 1990s as the terrorist threat metastasized. History shows that there is no way for the United States to escape the threats posed by South Asia, at least not for long.

Risks and Tough Choices

Policymakers who take up the reins in the Obama Administration's second term should recognize that a posture of tit-for-tat and de-linkage comes with other risks as well. For instance, Afghan negotiations with the Taliban hold hope, but the American desire to see a quick settlement could lead U.S. policymakers into concessions easily exploited by Pakistan-backed insurgents who have no interest in severing ties with international terrorists or accepting central tenets of the Afghan constitution. A fig leaf settlement may well permit NATO to head home, but it could also set the stage for renewed Afghan civil war and the return of terrorist safe havens to Afghan soil.

In addition, over the coming year Pakistan's leadership will be playing a complicated political game at home. National elections and the scheduled retirements of the army chief and the supreme court's chief justice by the end of 2013 all raise the specter of instability and crisis. In similar historical circumstances, Pakistan's military has asserted its influence in extra-constitutional ways. A narrowly conceived strategy of de-linkage could require Washington to overlook such trespasses if the generals simultaneously deliver progress in Afghan peace talks or cooperation in counter-terror operations. Knowing this, Pakistan's generals would have that much less reason to fear any negative consequences from political interference, at least with respect to relations with Washington.

All of this is to suggest that even if the United States steals a page from India's playbook and calibrates its response to Pakistan's new policy initiatives, Washington will be forced to make a series of gut-wrenching decisions about its priorities. A candid acceptance of that reality would, however, be far better than falling into the well-worn pattern of hoping that Pakistan has embarked upon a true "strategic shift", interpreting Islamabad's tactical moves as evidence of a new mindset, and generously rewarding Islamabad in the hope of encouraging and accelerating change—only to lament our naivety if Pakistan fails to deliver.