

Summary of February 16, 2010 U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue in Doha, Qatar

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On February 15-16, 2010, Brookings (Steve Cohen and myself) organized a conference on U.S.-Pakistan strategic relations in Doha, supported by Washington's National Defense University as well as the Government of Qatar. The Pakistani participants for the meeting included a range of journalists, academics, retired military officers, and former diplomats (see attached list for the full list of participants). The American group included a range of scholars with varying degrees of direct government policymaking experience on South Asia issues, from a variety of think tanks and political persuasions; one Afghan was also present. Discussions were held under Chatham House rules. While the Pakistanis had many criticisms and complaints about American policy, the overall tenor of the meeting suggested a growing amount of common purpose between the two countries. Several participants on both sides noted that this was one of the most productive U.S.-Pakistan meetings they had ever participated in.

Of course Pakistani colleagues also had serious concerns and issues. In fairness to them, and in the interest of not deluding ourselves into believing that all will be easy from this point onward, several of their common concerns should be registered. For starters, they still doubt our real commitment to the region, having heard President Obama's December 1 speech in which he promised the beginning of a U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan by July 2011, and having watched us leave the region behind on several previous occasions. Some Pakistani participants professed confusion about U.S. policy toward the Afghan Taliban. They claimed that it was often difficult to determine whether we were more interested in fighting the Taliban or reconciling with them. They also told us not to feel too charitable about the U.S. aid packages we offer them, estimating that in their eyes the U.S.-led Afghan campaign has cost them more than it has helped them, in financial and other terms. Some also questioned whether we did enough to seal off escape routes into Afghanistan when they pursued extremists in the FATA in recent months.

Many of the Pakistani participants were dubious about Afghans' ability to really forge a cohesive country out of their disparate tribes and sectarian groups. And they can resent the pressure from Washington for them to always "do more" in their own internal struggles against extremists, doubting that we really understand counterinsurgency operations so much better than they do, and emphasizing that they must consolidate their recent progress in places like the Swat Valley and South Waziristan before taking their campaign to other places such as North Waziristan. They also remind us not to worry too much about their own commitment—after all, whatever the stakes for us in Pakistan, that country's stability is even more important to Pakistanis themselves, and they will hardly fail to take the situation seriously, as proven by the sacrifices of many hundreds of Pakistani troops who have lost their lives combating internal extremism in recent years. These were their viewpoints and statements.

While the other Americans and I sometimes disagreed with certain Pakistani perspectives, and underscored that for the most part we consider President Obama quite committed to the theater, it must be said that a number of these Pakistani arguments were made rather persuasively.

Differences aside, there is more common purpose in Islamabad and Washington today, as reflected not only in unofficial or “Track II” dialogues like ours but government policymaking. On U.S.-Pakistan cooperation, consider these points:

- Most importantly, Pakistanis clearly prefer a long-term partnership with the United States to going it alone. They are wary of our intentions and motives, to be sure, and they remain jaded by past experiences when short-term U.S.-Pakistani cooperation often was followed by what they perceived as abandonment. But the clear preference was for a real sustained mutual commitment to work together. As one Pakistani put it, “If you aren’t serious, you might as well get out now so we can get on with things. But if you are serious, we can find a way to work together.”
- The question is, what would we be committed to cooperate on? U.S. and Afghan interests overlap only partially so this is a difficult matter to resolve.
- Pakistanis took pride in explaining their counterinsurgency techniques that have led to major progress against their own extremists. Their military leadership, whatever its flaws, has a real patriotism and professional pride about the nation’s armed forces, even while acknowledging their weaknesses. For example, they know that they need more civilian capacity to carry out what we would call “build” operations after they conduct the “clear and hold” parts of the counter-Taliban campaigns.
- That said, Pakistanis are capable of disagreeing amongst themselves about matters of state policy, and even former military leaders are willing to criticize current Pakistani military operations with an eye towards improving them—echoing the debates one hears within the US military about such things, and displaying a healthy intellectual openness.
- Pakistanis acknowledge that we Americans are doing a better job these days limiting civilian casualties in drone strikes on their territory, again displaying a welcome realism.
- Our interlocutors also respect the quality of U.S. strategic leadership now being directed towards their region, complimenting General Petraeus and General McChrystal among others for many of their ideas.
- The degree of anger and mistrust of Indian motives and actions in Afghanistan is still present, but there did not seem to be unrealistic expectations within our group of Pakistani colleagues for the dialogue that somehow the United States can be peeled away from its strengthening strategic relationship with India. That said, the Pakistanis represented primarily moderate perspectives; it also must be recognized given sensitivities on both sides that the tenor and even the content of private conversations can differ somewhat from public statements and of course from government views.

Several issues could be pursued in a follow-up meeting, should that prove possible. They would include ongoing discussion of military operations in Afghanistan as well as Pakistan, ongoing discussion of the politics of Pakistan as well as the United States (with a particular eye on how these trends affect the country’s overlapping interests in South Asia), tracking of the degree to which Pakistan is increasing its civilian capacity for the “build” phase of counterinsurgency operations, discussion of the role of India in Afghanistan and throughout the region, and U.S. economic policy towards South Asia including not only aid but trade issues.

PAKISTANI PARTICIPANTS

Junaid Ahmad (Faculty of Law and Policy, Lahore University of Management Studies)
Cyril Almeida (editor and columnist, Dawn)
Shahzad Aslam Chaudhry (Retired Air Vice Marshal, Former Ambassador, Columnist for Daily Times)
Mohammed Asad Durrani (Retired Lt. General, Former Director ISI, Former Ambassador, Former Commandant of National Defense University, Islamabad)
Shafqat Kakakhel (Former Ambassador and Assistant Secretary General/Deputy Director for UNEP)
Talat Masood (Retired Lt. General and head of the WAH ordnance factory)
Shaukat Qadir (Retired Brigadier, Columnist for Daily Times of Pakistan)

U.S. PARTICIPANTS

Hady Amr (Brookings Doha Center)
Stephen Cohen (Brookings Foreign Policy)
William Galston (Brookings Government Studies)
Shadi Hamid (Brookings Doha)
Frederick Kagan (American Enterprise Institute)
David Lamm (U.S. National Defense University)
Michael O'Hanlon (Brookings Foreign Policy)
Ashley Tellis (Carnegie Endowment)
Marvin Weinbaum (Middle East Institute)
Joshua White (Johns Hopkins and Institute for Global Engagement)

OTHERS

| Shuja Nawaz (Pakistani in U.S., Director of the South Asia program at the Atlantic Council of United States)
Moeed Yusuf (Pakistani, head of Pakistan Pugwash, now Director of Pakistan studies at the U.S. Institute of Peace)
Hassina Sherjan (Afghan, Aid Afghanistan for Education and Boumi)