

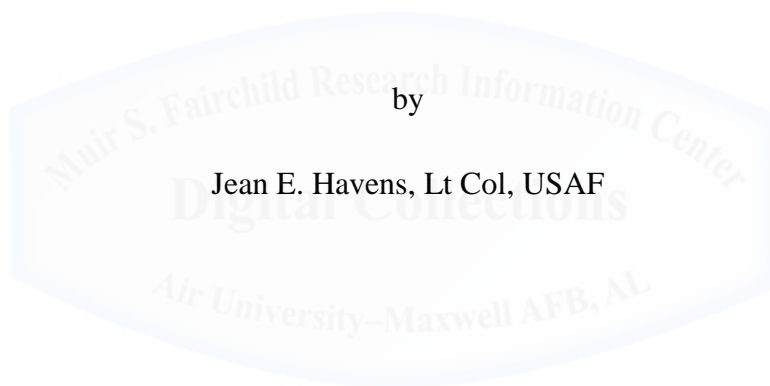
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US AID TO PAKISTAN:
DOES IT MATTER AND CAN IT AFFECT PUBLIC OPINION?

by

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Biography

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Abstract

This paper will evaluate and assess the effectiveness of US assistance and aid to Pakistan as an instrument of US policy in the region. At a time when the US budget is under increasing scrutiny, some questions rightly are directed at foreign aid and whether it is productive. With Pakistan being one of the largest recipients of US assistance, detailed examination is indeed warranted as to how effectively aid is carrying out US objectives.

Following an introductory session, this paper focuses on US national politico-strategic objectives and US military objectives in Pakistan as compared with Pakistan objectives; the record of recent US humanitarian aid and security assistance to Pakistan and a review of the effects of this aid on Pakistani opinion; and recommendations for applying this aid in the future to better affect public opinion and thus more successfully achieve US objectives.

Five recommendations for a more effective US aid program are presented in the report. First and foremost is the requirement for high level diplomatic engagement to better communicate US partnership and policies with Pakistan. US senior leaders should continue diplomatic efforts to strengthen the relations between the two countries in light of recent negative events. Also important at the highest level is for US diplomats to acknowledge that an India threat is Pakistan's primary concern and encourage future India-Pakistan dialogue. Additionally, US diplomats should emphasize a message of co-investment when it comes to the war on terror so as not to create Pakistan dependency on US aid. Other recommendations include developing a strategic communication plan to the Pakistan public regarding US policies and aid intent, prioritizing sustainable and meaningful aid projects, ensuring accountability in the aid program, and more direct interaction with the Pakistani people.

Introduction

The US-Pakistan relationship has been a turbulent one over the past several decades based on changing political settings. Currently it is a strategically important relationship especially for affecting stability in Afghanistan and attempting to suppress terrorist activity in the region and world. The United States has been careful to bolster relations with Pakistan via billions of dollars in humanitarian aid, assistance programs, and diplomatic efforts. While the aid may create some amount of positive rapport between the two countries, the affiliation continues to suffer from fallout of recent events such as *WikiLeaks*, the Osama Bin Laden raid, and the November 2011 Salala border attack incident. Despite the vast amounts of assistance, Pakistan public opinion of the United States continues to be one of the lowest in the world. Especially in light of the US domestic budget constraints, the current focus of US aid to Pakistan should be reviewed in detail to assess its effectiveness.

There are some that argue the United States should not give any aid to a country which may support (directly or indirectly) terrorist groups within its borders and region. However, if it is indeed in line with US national security objectives to give aid to Pakistan, is the current aid program effective towards these aims? In considering US objectives in Pakistan, does a dismal Pakistani public opinion of the United States actually matter or is it irrelevant in the overall aim? If Pakistani opinion does matter, is it malleable considering the long history of ingrained mistrust and vast cultural differences between the two countries which might render any combination of aid ineffective in positively influencing opinions? This paper will address these questions to conclude that aid and assistance to Pakistan is in line with US national security objectives, that favorable Pakistani opinion of the United States does matter to these objectives, and that these opinions can be changed for the better in time and with concerted effort.

National Strategic and Military Objectives

US National Security Strategy (2010) Objectives Relative to Pakistan

US national security interests are inextricably linked with Pakistan; it is mentioned numerous times in the 2010 National Security Strategy with respect to proliferation of nuclear weapons to violent extremists and other states. The frontline of this fight is in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the focus is on applying pressure on the extremist groups as well as strengthening the security, prosperity, and capacity of the two states.¹ The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) echoes these objectives; the military partnership is “focused urgently on confronting Al Qaeda and its allies, and America’s interest in Pakistan’s security and prosperity will endure long after the campaign ends.”² Also again mentioned is ensuring Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal and technology is protected from other state and non-state actors. There is no question that the security, prosperity, and capacity of Pakistan is indeed a national security interest of the United States in confronting extremist groups linked to terrorism as well as weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation concerns.

Narratives from *Obama’s Wars* indicate just how crucial Pakistan was to the US high level strategy reviews and that the view of many officials in the current administration is that Pakistan is the key player in fighting terrorism. As evidence to this the administration increased training and equipment assistance to Pakistan and US military leaders put great effort into meeting with the Pakistani military leaders and improving trust between the two countries. However, Pakistani public opinion of the US had already suffered due to lack of engagement in recent years. Secretary Clinton noted that the history of the US abandoning the region after the Cold War still permeated the public, and there was no effort (in 2009) in countering negative US propaganda from the Pakistani media.³ Even within the high level strategy review talks there

were questions about whether more civilian assistance for Pakistani infrastructure, energy and agriculture, along with media outreach, would do anything to improve the US image in the eyes of the Pakistani public. President Obama concluded one strategy review session in 2009 by simply saying he wanted to improve the US image in Pakistan.⁴

Despite the rocky road of US-Pakistan relations in the past 2 years, government relations seem to be picking up as of summer 2012 with a reopening of the supply routes into Afghanistan as well as meetings between the two countries to consider new joint military and intelligence operations. It is probably the best time since the 2010 flood relief for the United States to pick up on any positive momentum.

Pakistan's National Objectives and Centers of Gravity

Pakistan's primary security threat is its age old rival India. Pakistan's strategic interests in Afghanistan involve ensuring there is limited Indian influence there. In the words of General Kayani, the Chief of Army Staff of the Pakistan Army, "we want strategic depth in Afghanistan but do not wish to control it."⁵ A free and prosperous Afghanistan, subject to minimal Indian influence, is advantageous to the stability and prosperity of Pakistan. Pakistan sees the Taliban as hedge against Indian encroachment in Afghanistan. "The role of the Taliban in the future Afghan system is not of real concern but whether their establishment serves the needs of Pakistan's geo-strategic ambitions is of concern. As for the Taliban, they are a means to an end and not the end itself."⁶ Can the United States work with this issue and consider reconciliation/negotiations between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Taliban? That of course is the focus of many other studies not central to this paper.

Domestic national concerns of Pakistan are many; a dismal economy, unstable and

corrupt government, infrastructure issues, and internal terrorism issues are but a few to mention. This is where foreign assistance can play a role.

Intersection of US and Pakistan Objectives

Despite having very different top priorities there are areas where the security objectives of the two countries overlap. The two countries must work within these mutual interests. The United States must continue to provide security assistance efforts to allow Pakistan to strengthen its own capabilities to target extremists within its borders.⁷ In concert with this effort, the United States must also focus on a long-term strategic partnership with Pakistan strengthening internal civilian and security challenges there.

Richard Friedman, President of the National Strategy Forum, interestingly describes this process of revamping the relationship: “The need for U.S. introspective self-bashing is a relatively easy first step towards rehabilitation and progress. The second phase involves complementary strategy: understanding the strategic objectives of friend and foe, and incorporating these findings into the establishment of U.S. strategic objectives and a national security strategy.”⁸

In acknowledgement of Pakistan’s primary concern with India, the United States has limited capability but must at least consider and pay attention to this issue to improve overall US-Pakistan mutual understanding. Such areas to explore could be a civil nuclear deal, such as the one with India, which would serve as a political symbol as well as improve Pakistan’s deficient electrical grid. Other areas could be water rights and cultural and educational exchanges. Realistically, the United States probably has little ability to influence the Kashmir issue except to encourage dialogue between the two rivals.⁹

The current administration does seem to understand that terror is not necessarily Pakistan's major concern, but rather it is focused primarily on an Indian threat. President Obama noted the potential for straightforward talks with India on why a stable Pakistan is crucial; he also considered if there were ways to funnel US aid directly to the recipients, recognizing the Pakistani government corruption issue. Might there be ways to utilize local civilian sector distributors while still allowing the government to maintain overall control and credibility?¹⁰

In concert with US defense related efforts, (former) Secretary of State Clinton published the Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy in February 2010.¹¹ The strategy notes a window of opportunity to better the relations between the United States and Pakistan and seeks to better Pakistan's economic, political, and security challenges that threaten its stability. The strategy emphasizes enhanced bilateral engagement at the foreign minister level as well as assistance to Pakistani individuals and communities against extremism, namely women and youth. Secretary Clinton also underscores the importance of a new communications effort involving programs that will empower Pakistanis to discredit extremist propaganda and increase support for the Pakistani government's efforts to roll back the insurgency. Additionally she indicates the United States will work aggressively to alter misperceptions regarding US policy. This strategy is ultimately connected to the mutual interest of the two countries in eliminating terrorist safe havens within the Pakistan borders and does indeed indicate that the US State Department is concerned about positively influencing Pakistan public opinion.

Why Does Opinion Matter?

There are intersections between US and Pakistan security objectives, and aid can matter in this intersection. However, one cannot expect a country to simply *like* another country for providing nice things if other actions cause irritation or distrust among the two. Does it matter if

the Pakistani public opinion is unfavorable to the United States? Yes it matters. First, especially in a country where many terrorists are born, converted, trained, recruited, activated, etc., a positive or at least non-negative outlook of US image may quell some of the root causes of radical terrorism. If the US image and intent can be improved and justified, and counter the negative message of radicals, this might sway youths in Pakistan from joining the terror side. Second, an unfavorable opinion of the United States makes the aid less effective or even counterproductive. The Pakistan government cannot successfully implement actions supporting the United States if its people stand vehemently against US policies, thus fueling fires for the very thing we are trying to quell.

Overview: Current U.S. Military and Nonmilitary Assistance

Since 9/11, both military and nonmilitary assistance to Pakistan has drastically increased. US annual bilateral aid in total went from \$5.3 million in 2000 to \$798 million in 2002 to more than \$4.4 billion in 2010. Humanitarian assistance aid was about four percent of the overall amount. Economic aid was 28 percent. More than two-thirds of the \$20.73 billion in total appropriated assistance over the past eight fiscal years has gone to security-related aid. The bulk of that assistance was in the form of “Coalition Support Funds” to reimburse Pakistan for military operations conducted against militant groups along its border.”¹²

From 2010 onward, the United States made a sizable, long-term commitment of economic assistance, \$7.5 billion in US civilian assistance over five years, with objective of helping Pakistan address immediate energy, water, and related economic crises, thereby deepening the partnership with the Pakistani people and decreasing the appeal of extremists.¹³ This assistance is also meant to support economic and democratic reforms toward long-term

Pakistani stability and progress and to help Pakistan build on its successes against militant extremists within its borders.

Recent US Aid Programs in Pakistan and Public Opinion

This analysis has so far shown that there is indeed an intersection of US and Pakistan security objectives and that US aid towards these objectives is appropriate. An argument has also been made that favorable Pakistani public opinion of the United States is an important link towards making the aid more effective. The next logical step in the analysis is to consider the controlling factors in Pakistani public opinion of the United States, and how has aid affected this opinion in the past.

One report (Wilder, 2008) ¹⁴ following the Pakistan earthquake disaster in 2005 which killed over 70,000 and left over 2.8 million homeless indicated that there was near unanimous sentiment by local population that the relief organizations responded for humanitarian reasons rather than to promote hidden political, cultural, or religious agendas. There was also a strong perception that aid workers were generally culturally sensitive. Thus Wilder concluded that the lack of association to hidden agendas coupled with cultural awareness contributes favorably to public opinion. The Wilder study also concluded that “the feast or famine of (US) aid has undermined the effectiveness of US development assistance to Pakistan...and has also contributed to an image in Pakistan of the US as a ‘fair-weather friend’ whose aid programmes have much more to do with buying or renting influence, especially with the Pakistan military, and promoting US security interests, rather than helping Pakistanis.” Thus Wilder is basically saying that a known link between development aid and US security interests can cause unfavorable opinion. While this may be true, it lacks consideration of the fact that every country’s budget is finite, and the United States cannot endlessly provide aid. US aid must be

ties to its security interests, and this aim should not be completely hidden. However, perhaps there is a more subtle way to get the message across so as not to defeat the objective.

Another report (Guardian Development Network, 2010)¹⁵ looked at Pakistan national public opinion and showed it doubled from 23 percent approval in May 2005 to 46 percent in November 2006 after the earthquake. Some media outlets headlined this effect as "Chinook diplomacy" and as one of the "most significant hearts and minds successes so far in the Muslim world." However, the ratings shortly plummeted to 26 percent six months later. The lesson drawn in this study was that humanitarian aid can improve US public opinion across Pakistan for a brief time, but those improvements might not be sustained.

An additional study (Das and Andrabi, 2010)¹⁶ surveyed over 28,000 households to provide first hand research on the effect of foreign aid on public opinion after the 2005 Pakistan earthquake. They concluded that even four years after the disaster the humanitarian assistance still left a positive imprint on local attitudes, and this opinion was strongest nearest to the fault line. In other words, where the aid workers had been most involved in and around the people was where the positive image remained strongest despite concurrent negative reports of American in the media and with the overwhelming Pakistani opinion of Americans being negative. "The results provide a compelling case that trust in foreigners is malleable, responds to direct humanitarian actions by foreigners, and is not a deep-rooted function of local preferences." The group noted that these results suggest that it was boots-on-the-ground rather than media images or financial aid to the government that mattered. The study concluded that policy responses by foreign governments and actions taken by international NGOs can indeed win hearts and minds and rebuild trust between Pakistan and the West. The group does acknowledge that their particular study does not answer whether or not this leads to greater support for US or

western policies in the region; rather it shows that “attitudes towards foreigners of people in the earthquake zone are not rooted in deeply held, difficult to move preferences.”¹⁷

Guardian Development Network (GDN) further counters the Das and Andrabi conclusions and this author tends to agree: “While these findings are powerful, the weakness in the authors' conclusion is that trusting western people is not the same as trusting US policy and motives. A villager closest to the earthquake fault line might trust an American or Western relief worker who comes to his or her village, for instance, but may still vehemently object to US drone strikes and oppose military action in the Fata region. Yet the survey questions did not ask whether the villagers trusted American policy – an omission that significantly limits the policy implications of the study.”¹⁸ GDN reiterates the opinion of Wilder that the deep-seated hostility towards Washington will not change if people suspect that humanitarian aid has a hidden agenda. Finally, GDN says “the only way for the US to win hearts and minds is to explicitly set out to make real, meaningful change in the welfare of Pakistani people, with clear objectives for results – and then to actually achieve it.”¹⁹

A broader study (Wike, 2012)²⁰ compared public opinion after natural disasters in Japan, Indonesia, and Pakistan from national level Pew Global Attitudes Project surveys. In Japan, public opinion of the United States was already quite high at 66 percent favorable in 2010 but rose to 85 percent after the humanitarian aid response from their 2011 tsunami. In Indonesia public opinion of the United States was quite high at 61 percent favorable, fell dramatically to 15 percent in 2003 after the Iraq War, rose to 38 percent after tsunami assistance in late 2004, and rose even more to 63 percent in 2009 after President Obama took office (he lived in Jakarta for several years as a child). In Pakistan, public opinion of the United States was a dismal 10 percent favorable in 2002, rose to 27 percent favorable after the 2005 earthquake assistance,

slipped back down to 15 percent in 2007, and further to 11 percent in 2011 despite providing nearly \$600 million in disaster relief following the summer 2010 floods that directly affected as many as 20 million Pakistanis (Figure 1). Surprisingly a subsequent Pew survey in May 2011 found no significant change in overall ratings for the US (still grimly low however) after the Bin Laden raid.

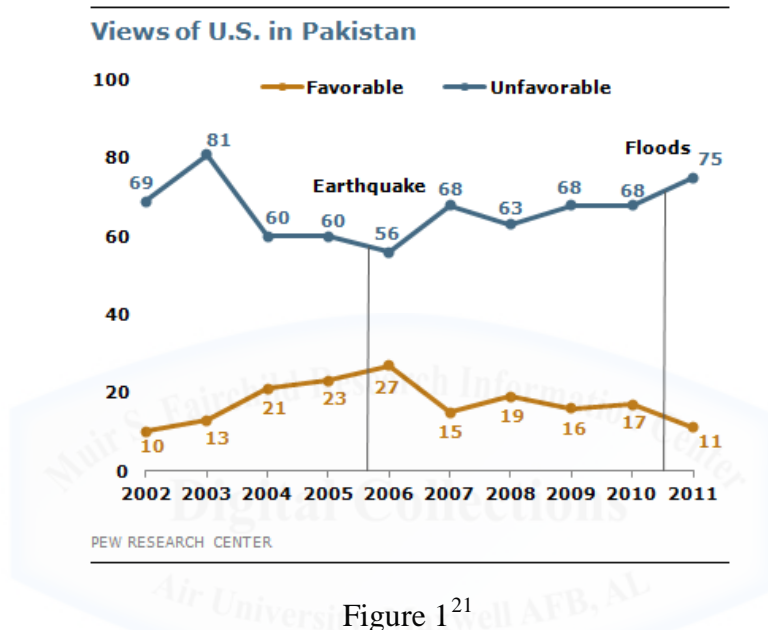


Figure 1²¹

Wike concluded that there was no image bump in Pakistan following the 2010 flood assistance due to the fact that “distrust of American motives and opposition to key elements of US foreign policy may run too deep in Pakistan for humanitarian efforts to have a significant impact over the long term. American anti-terrorism efforts are viewed with suspicion, the drone campaign and the war next door in Afghanistan are widely opposed, and while President Obama receives significantly higher ratings than his predecessor across much of the globe, this is not the case in Pakistan, where Obama gets essentially the same low marks assigned to former President George W. Bush during his tenure.”²² The overall lesson from this study was that disaster relief efforts are more likely to have an effect on public attitudes in countries where there is at least a

reservoir of goodwill toward the United States. It will be more difficult in nations such as Pakistan where counteracting issues and deeply held suspicions drive intense anti-Americanism.

The studies above apply only to humanitarian aid – conditions involving disaster response and life or death situations. As mentioned earlier humanitarian assistance has encompassed only about four percent of total US aid to Pakistan in the past 10 years. No specific studies are available that surveyed Pakistani public opinion after single non-disaster related aid relief efforts or after certain military security assistance programs. However, the Pew national surveys of Pakistani public opinion and lessons learned from the previous humanitarian examples do indicate opinion is malleable and do shed some light on a path that might lead to more aid effectiveness.

Recommendations

A central theme revealed in the discussion above is that aid to Pakistan, Pakistani public opinion of the United States, and fighting terrorism are closely linked. A weak area in one of the three arms will ultimately limit US progress towards its national security objectives. The aid does indeed matter in the overall fight on terrorism. However, the current aid program needs reforms and refocus. Based on the preceding analysis as well as the author's recent two-year experience working at the US Embassy Islamabad, five main recommendations are presented to improve Pakistani public opinion of the United States and to make the US aid program more effective.

Continued High-Level Diplomatic Engagement to Communicate Partnership/Policy

First and foremost, US senior leaders should continue diplomatic efforts to strengthen the relations between the two countries in light of recent negative events. US diplomats should acknowledge that an India threat is Pakistan's primary concern and encourage future India-Pakistan dialogue. US diplomats should send a message of co-investment when it comes to the

war on terror so as not to create Pakistan dependency on US aid. One report (Epstein, Kronstadt 2012) recommends aid reforms that would require Pakistani co-investment in all civilian aid projects except disaster relief, independent third parties for project evaluations, and partnering with local civil society organizations to improve indigenous citizen watchdog efforts through the life of a program.²³

In order for Pakistan public opinion about the United States to positively change, the major irritants about US policy must be publicly addressed. The drone strike program is one such issue and probably a root cause of terrorism in the region. At the very least on this issue, the United States and Pakistan should work to counter inaccurate media reports of collateral damage. More than likely, however, this will require much additional messaging effort to assuage the Pakistan public that its government is not a US puppet and that it is fighting terrorism on its own behalf as well as for the international community.

Strategic Communications to the Public to Positively Frame Policies and Aid Intent

US aid should be applied in concert with strategic communications and diplomacy about US policy and intent in order to improve Pakistani public opinion and to ultimately be more effective. “America’s sense of purpose with Pakistan and its deeds should be communicated, not only to leading English and Urdu media, but also to Punjabi, Sindhi, and Baluchi regional media and to the local press so that rural areas are informed where populations are literate and/or have some access to communication technology.”²⁴

The United States must publish timely messages relating to current military and political events and prompt disclosure of U.S. perspectives, thus responding to allegations more thoroughly and effectively. Negative media attacks must be offset by positive communications. Social media outlets can and must be utilized particularly to reach Pakistani youth. Religious

leaders in Pakistan should be engaged to convey positive messages. These figures who are highly respected can perhaps most successfully influence opinions and communicate messages in urban areas as well as deep into rural areas and to illiterate citizens alike.

Some studies recommend branding aid items with a US logo to ensure the local population knows the source of the assistance. However, in many cases the local workers have been against this idea due to security concerns. If the US objective with the aid is to make the communities more stable, then a logo should not be necessary in all cases. In fact it might prove more beneficial in some areas if the local people understood it was their own government supplying the aid, along with an understanding of Pakistan/US partnership in the overall goal of society improvement for the ultimate objective of fighting terrorism.

Pick and Prioritize Sustainable, Meaningful Aid Projects

The United States should invest in aid programs that can be sustained long term in priority areas that will truly make a difference in the Pakistani communities. There should be less military aid; there should be more joint military efforts and or exercises stressing partnership. There should be more development aid but with a coherent focus versus a smorgasbord approach; priorities should be set with Pakistan community leaders on what makes the most difference to communities. One study (Cookman, Katulis, Wadhams 2011) concluded that the current aid program is “a mile wide and an inch deep” and that the United States needs to focus on “effectiveness and sustainability of assistance not speed of disbursement” (not including disaster response.)²⁵

Ensure Accountability in the Aid Process

Once a strategic aid program is codified, actually getting the aid to where it needs to be while maintaining Pakistan government credibility also deserves much attention. Accountability

for the aid is crucial. Due to corruption or inefficiencies this has not always happened in the past and aid money or items may or may not have reached their intended target audience. One report suggested that money be directed either to investment projects with US oversight, sent directly to private Pakistan contractors for infrastructure projects, or overseen by third-party international organizations. This report also indicated that there is currently a sense of skepticism in mainstream Pakistan about where US financial aid as well as aid from non-government organizations (NGOs) ultimately goes.²⁶ There should be a public message of overall Pakistani control of the aid programs of course, but localized oversight responsibilities could be delegated to semi-third party actors to prevent corruption from affecting the process. Speed of dispersal does matter in cases of disaster response, especially in light of the fact that some Pakistan radical Islamic groups have moved quickly to provide aid in these cases. Some studies have indicated public resentment of the government generated by inadequate flood response which could erode overall support for the military's campaign against the militants.²⁷

Another angle to consider for improving aid accountability is again along the lines of a third party concept. One study (De Cordier 2008) offered the idea that Western-based Muslim organizations could act as an intermediary between the Pakistan Muslim populations and the establishment providing the aid.²⁸ This idea might help both the accountability issue as well as the strategic communications effort. A US/Western Muslim aid intermediary might offer value during the immediate future when public opinion still perceives US aid as tied to unpopular political agendas. Larger organizations like Islamic Relief Worldwide already enjoy significant recognition within the international aid community. "Western-based Muslim aid organizations will not replace Western and international organizations. Yet there is certainly ground for an expansion of their role because of the impact of the global political climate in the field, and

because of social realities on the ground that cannot always be effectively managed by dominant development approaches.”²⁹ The Muslim intermediaries might also go a long way in getting a more trusted message across to the Pakistan public about US intentions with the aid.

More Personal, Direct Interaction with Pakistani People

The power of direct human interaction is irreplaceable. Considering military-only efforts, increased direct exchanges (like Red Flag or in-country direct advisory efforts) may do more to sway opinions within the military than additional hardware assistance. Non-military contact, however, will do more to sway the overall public opinion. Despite security concerns, and even with the third party intermediary idea, US personnel should find a way to have more direct interaction with the Pakistani people and communities during aid projects and other venues versus simply interacting with the leaders. This does not suggest an increase in US military presence, but rather a presence with a face other than military. One idea for non-military increased interaction includes journalist exchanges, which might also allow for furthered efforts with the Pakistan media to counter falsehoods and conspiracy theories about US policies and assistance. Another idea could be bolstering the US-Pakistan sister cities programs as a way of getting to know each other: getting connected and staying connected. According to the Sister Cities International website, the United States has only three sister cities in Pakistan (Hyderabad, Lahore, and Karachi) so there is much room for expansion in this venue especially to such a strategically important partner country. Exchanges of Pakistani community infrastructure experts as well as youth to US sister cities and vice versa could go a long way in bolstering relationships.

Embassy personnel should get out as much as possible among Pakistani people, join sports teams, and volunteer at schools. Some US diplomats at the embassies and consulates

rarely venture outside the well-bunkered structures and do not have much interaction with mainstream Pakistan society. This is complicated due to the current security situation, but not impossible. Until the Pakistani people get to know the US people either through better diplomatic engagement, more intense media outreach, or with more direct interaction, the relationship will continue to be strained.

Conclusion

This analysis has examined US aid to Pakistan and shown that it is indeed relevant to US national security objectives. The aid programs seek to improve the security, prosperity, and capacity within Pakistan as well as to help improve relations between the two countries. This report has also argued that Pakistan public opinion of the United States is significant in the overall effectiveness of the aid. Aid to Pakistan, Pakistan public opinion of the United States, and fighting terrorism are closely linked and must work in concert to successfully progress towards the overall US security objectives.

With some reform and refocus, aid can indeed have a favorable effect on public opinion toward the United States. After reviewing studies related to US aid and public opinion, five main recommendations were made to improve the overall effectiveness of the aid program. These recommendations include high level diplomatic engagement to communicate partnership, strategic communications to the public to better frame US policies and aid intent, picking and prioritizing sustainable and meaningful aid projects, streamlining the aid process for better accountability, and more direct interaction with the Pakistani people during the aid programs and other instances. The question of whether aid can positively influence Pakistan public opinion of the United States is inextricably linked with US policy, strategic communications, and diplomacy. It can be accomplished. It will take time, money, and patience.

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