US-Pakistan Relations: Common and Clashing Interests

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The last calendar year was by far the most tumultuous in a decade of tense and mistrustful relations between Pakistan and the United States. It began with CIA contractor Raymond Davis shooting and killing two Pakistanis in broad daylight in Lahore, then only worsened in May when Osama bin Laden was found and killed in a US raid at a compound near the Pakistan Military Academy in Abbottabad (an episode that severely angered Pakistanis and embarrassed the Army, which was domestically seen as unable to secure the homeland against foreign intrusion and internationally suspected of providing refuge to America’s worst enemy). Tensions escalated further as the US began pressuring Pakistan to attack the Haqqani Network (HN), a Taliban group with safe havens in North Waziristan. Pakistan refused, and crisis hit when the HN launched a twenty-two hour assault on the US Embassy and NATO headquarters in Kabul. An infuriated Admiral Mike Mullen, outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, lashed out against Pakistan, saying the HN was a “veritable arm” of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. Weeks of diplomatic efforts finally thawed relations, but just as the situation stabilized, a NATO attack on a Pakistani checkpoint in Salala in late November threw the relationship into a tailspin. Twenty-four Pakistani soldiers died in the two-hour assault. Pakistan was furious, immediately suspending NATO supply lines and boycotting the Bonn conference on Afghanistan held in early December.

The crises of 2011 prompted debates in both countries over how to move forward. In Washington, several administration officials and members of Congress have argued for sidelining Pakistan and giving India a larger stake in Afghanistan. Others insist that it is important to tread carefully and that Pakistan cannot just be dumped. In Pakistan, many are arguing for complete disengagement while others are pushing for new rules of engagement.

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