

Fear and Self Loathing in South Asia

Written by John Still

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JOHN STILL, JUN 24 2011



CIA director Leon Panetta is currently engaged in the latest round of talks in Islamabad, arriving the day after the head of the Pakistani Army, General Ashfaq Kayani, attempted to win back some respect from the Pakistani population by urging the US to divert some of its \$3 billion a year aid to 'help the common man' while also forcefully re-asserting Pakistan's sovereignty. These concerns would be heartening if they were not so transparent. Kayani's concern for the 'common man' must have been conspicuously absent when arming his 500,000 man army with American aid, last month showing off a low yield nuclear capability that represents not only the most recent misuse of Western taxpayer's money, but a weapon entirely incapable of combating the militant groups who murder dozens of innocent Pakistani 'common men and women' almost every day. Kayani's actions embody the Pakistani military's ever more frantic state of paranoia and insecurity, and that despite rising domestic instability, corruption and sectarian violence they remain ready and able to fight India.

Kayani's statement would also have been more admirable had it not been forced out of a man whose organisation was choosing between admitting either incompetence or duplicity after the Abbotabad raid that killed Osama bin Laden. Worse still the US was forced to conduct this raid secretly, out of fear that the Pakistani Intelligence Service, the ISI, might 'tip off' bin Laden and his associates. Subsequent actions have shown this was no idle fear on the part of the US; after sharing intelligence with the ISI on the precise location of insurgent bomb factories in North and South Waziristan in a 'trust building' exercise conducted after the Abbotabad raid, the factories were mysteriously found empty when Pakistani military units moved in on 4th June.

Similarly, Kayani's claims based on sovereignty might be a little more valid if Pakistan had not lost control over much of the North West Frontier Province or Baluchistan, or if Pakistan openly admitted that harbouring terrorist groups, however repugnant, is within its rights as a sovereign state. Kayani has been humiliated into 'pleading for respect' from a largely anti-American Pakistani public because he is unwilling to assert himself more forcefully against unpopular US raids, drone strikes and CIA operations, lest Western aid suddenly dry up.

Could anything else be more self defeating than begging for respect in this context? While imploring the Pakistani public to not blame the army, Kayani's recent rhetoric is filled with a sense of shame and self loathing. Desperate for aid from a country he hates, Kayani is forced into claiming to have been "betrayed by the United States" even having the nerve to call for "a reassessment of Pakistan's relationship with the US in the wake of recent events" (rather than the other way round).

The US-Pakistani relationship is so dysfunctional that both sides find themselves in an unenviable position. The US is actively funding and aiding a state who uses that money to train and direct militant groups, some of which desire nothing more than to die whilst killing ISAF servicemen and women in Afghanistan or while attacking Western civilians on their own soil. The Pakistani military finds itself combating militant groups which despise its continuing alliance with the US, but are unable to break the alliance as it desires the aid that the West provides to combat India.

Additionally, Pakistan needs to keep Afghanistan weak, with a pliant pro-Pakistani government that will allow Afghani territory to be used both as a training ground for a broad range of militant groups, some of whom the Pakistani military and intelligence service hope they can direct towards Indian interests, as well as a trade route giving Pakistan a more open, direct land link to the mineral, oil and gas wealth of the Central Asian Republics.

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The West needs Afghanistan strong, so that its territory will not be host to these militant groups which the Pakistani military and intelligence service believe they can control. Western aims are directly opposed and yet the West continues to act as though they can be reconciled, continually pouring in aid and sacrificing the lives of Pakistani, Afghani and Western soldiers and civilians while ignoring warnings that they are fighting a war in the wrong country.

The West must accept some responsibility for this dysfunctional relationship. Pakistan has been both lauded as trusted friend and demonised as a nuclear pariah in the past, often in quick succession. Depending on the level of involvement in the region the West has applied and lifted sanctions and concentrated aid on the military dimension at the expense of Pakistan's vast social, economic and political problems.

A third of Pakistanis currently do not have access to clean drinking water while nearly half lack access to proper sanitation. In 2009 the Pakistani government spent under half a per cent of its GDP on health services, just under one per cent of GDP on electricity subsidies, and two per cent on education. The gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow, with the average Member of Parliament worth \$900,000 in 2009, at the same time the GDP per capita stood at \$2400, with a quarter of the population forced to live under the poverty line.

This should not be a surprise to anyone in a country where, in 2001, less than one per cent of the population paid income tax. Attempts at tax reform have seemingly come to nothing; in 2010 1.9 million people paid some form of tax, which after allowing for widespread corruption, theft and mismanagement translated into miniscule benefits for a country of 180 million people. Similar levels of revenue are collected in 2011, as a weak and divided government dare not challenge Pakistan's rich and powerful elite classes with reform. Pakistan now gets less than 10 per cent of its GDP through tax revenue, one of the lowest rates in the world.

A rapidly expanding population will place further demands on a faltering infrastructure. Planning for this eventuality has been minimal. A poor system of education, inadequate health care and a growing energy shortfall mean that future generations of Pakistanis face a problematic future. The current energy crisis means that even those living in Karachi are expected to go without electricity for four hours a day, every day. In April 2010 the government cut the power supply to the Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre for two and a half hours due to unpaid bills, miraculously none of those on life support on intensive care died as a result. Without being able to supply a major city like Karachi there is little chance that surrounding areas will have their needs met when the population expands.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani military continues to involve itself in the economy. While the military was allocated 17.5 per cent of the national budget in 2007 it also contributed three per cent of Pakistani GDP. It owns sugar mills, chemical plants, a gas company, more than 800 educational institutions and more than 100 hospitals. While the military argues it contributes to the economy and the welfare of Pakistani people through these efforts, half of the profits from these enterprises are used to pay army pensions. This private enterprise is also stunting growth in the private sector which would create jobs as well as tax revenue better able to benefit the Pakistani people.

Ignoring these problems while solely funding the military has made Pakistan one of the most anti-American places on earth. Pakistan's behaviour is blatantly deceitful, but is based on the legitimate belief that the West will be gone shortly after 2014, leaving Pakistan to face militant groups who have taken offense at the close Pakistani-US relationship and a growing Indian presence in Afghanistan. In this fearful, paranoid environment the social, economic and political concerns of the Pakistani people will continue to be sidelined as sectarian violence and poverty tighten their grip.

Targeted economic assistance may go further than pouring in endless amounts of military aid in helping the common man or woman in Pakistan. Opening up US and EU markets to Pakistani textiles would be a helpful first step. Further aid should be given but made contingent on demonstrable steps towards reforming the tax system, combating corruption, promoting transparency and abandoning militancy. This may go some way to improving the lives of the Pakistani people over the next decade while wrestling power away from fearful and self loathing military leaders like Kayani.

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where a shorter version of this article was published.

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John Still is an intelligence analyst for a large corporate organisation. He is focused on security and political issues, including terrorism, civil unrest and organised crime in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. His research interests include organisational learning, with a specific focus on isomorphism and hierarchy.