The Troubled U.S.-Pakistan Relationship

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Only two weeks after President Obama decided to expand the war in Afghanistan, there have been several news stories describing how the U.S. alliance with Pakistan, a relationship without which success in Afghanistan is difficult to imagine, is frayed. Reports that Islamabad does not see eye-to-eye on the war with the U.S. are unfortunate, but reports that U.S. officials in Pakistan are facing obstacles and even harassment make the prospect of success in Afghanistan seem even more distant.

Given Pakistan’s recent political history these ongoing tensions in the U.S. Pakistan relationship are not unexpected. These tensions are another reason why the decision to expand the war in Afghanistan raises so many concerns. While the election fraud, corruption and weakness of Hamid Karzai’s government in Kabul has rightfully drawn a lot of attention recently, it should be kept in mind that success in Afghanistan really depends on cooperation and competence from two very tenuous governments—those of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

This is, to a great extent, the nature of the conflict and the broader struggle against terrorism. If Pakistan and Afghanistan were governed by strong, competent regimes further U.S. involvement in the region would clearly not be necessary. If, as the Obama administration believes, the mission in Afghanistan is paramount to U.S. national security, then working with governments like those of Karzai and Asif Zardari, is unavoidable, and finding ways to work productively with those governments is essential.

Given the import of a good working relationship with the government of Pakistan, it is troubling that these reports are occurring after the decision to add more troops in Afghanistan. The Obama administration took a great deal of time this fall to make that decision. The period when the policy review was happening was the right time to explore what kind of commitments from, and relationships with, the Pakistani government could be expected. The Obama administration undoubtedly sought to resolve this, but at least in the first weeks since the West Point speech, the evidence suggests the administration was not as successful as they would have liked, or as they needed to be.

It is not possible to know whether the Obama administration thought they had done the work here or if they simply assumed Pakistani cooperation as they were planning the next phase of the war. It also doesn’t really matter, because it is apparent today both that Pakistani cooperation is a little tenuous and that this will make success considerably more elusive. The problems the U.S. is now encountering in Pakistan are another reminder of just how many things need to go right, many of which are largely out of the control of the U.S., for the war in Afghanistan to be successful and how few things need to go wrong for the U.S. be unsuccessful.