

Nov 04, 2016 by **Rob Asghar**

Listening to Pakistan: The West's Premier PD Challenge ^[1]

My brother and I, accompanied by his brother-in-law, were driving to the posh and overpriced Dynasty Chinese restaurant in Islamabad's Marriott hotel recently. Yet the tightwad in me convinced them that we could enjoy ourselves just as much by going to one of the many cheaper Chinese local restaurants. Soon after we heard the Marriott explosion a few miles away, it became clear we had saved more than money.

According to some reports, the 1,500 lbs. or more in explosives may have been retrieved from mines left behind by the Soviets when American-funded jihadists drove them from Afghanistan.

If they came from such a source, it would represent a perfect -- and perfectly awful -- symmetry. Many ordinary Pakistanis and wealthy and intellectual elites alike believe that their nation's cooperation with the United States in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan has left it bankrupt and bloodied.

A new poll from the BBC shows that Pakistanis, among the citizenries of 23 Eastern and Western nations surveyed, give the highest rate of approval for Al Qaeda. And Pakistan is one of only two nations, alongside Egypt, to give a more positive than negative appraisal of Al Qaeda.

Overrun by Afghan refugees, and squeezed between its mortal enemy India and a pro-Indian Afghan regime, Pakistan is never sure whether it should trust the West or trust the jihadists who are willing to hold its regional rivals at bay.

Given Pakistanis' tolerance for the West's most famous current enemy, seven years into the war on terror, the West must make a choice – either to use more hard power in Pakistan, or to use more soft power. It's similar to Machiavelli's advice that threatening figures must either be crushed or cajoled. Either approach would be more effective than the current regimen of military aid accompanied by condescending lectures. At the public diplomacy level, it seems we are overdue to make an effort to understand (and then honestly address) its hopes and grievances for the first time.

Two images or narratives define Pakistanis' relations with the West:

First, hell hath no fury like a scorned ally. Pakistanis feel they gained nothing for aligning with America during the Cold War while India aligned with the Soviets. Today Washington seeks nuclear cooperation with India; yet Pakistanis remember the damaging sanctions that Washington imposed on Pakistan in recent years for merely seeking to match India's nuclear capacity. Being rejected as a lover is one thing; being jilted for your greatest rival is more than

ordinary countries can take.

Second, Pakistanis see the West as the plush, gated community adjacent to Pakistan's barrio. Some dramatic break-ins from barrio residents compel the gated residents to demand that the barrio clean itself up immediately. The barrio residents wearily argue that they cannot fix matters so easily – and besides, they are more exposed, daily, to the threat of their own worst citizens than are their neighbors in the gated community.

Pakistanis wince when told that their country has misspent a “whopping” \$10 billion that the U.S. has given it since 9/11 to fight terror. Washington has paid KBR, the erstwhile Halliburton subsidiary, some \$20 billion to support the war effort in Iraq, as part of the overall half-trillion dollar effort there. While Pakistan starves, its government and citizenry shrug off accusations that some American military aid was funneled into other areas. As one Pakistani telecommunications executive (who spent many years as an executive in California and Texas) observed, China is quite visible in that nation as a sponsor of dams and roads that benefit ordinary citizens; the U.S. and the larger West are not.

When you punch the militants – even “half-heartedly” – they punch back wholeheartedly; the Marriott bombing, called by some “Pakistan's 9/11,” is evidence. Indeed, Pakistan's military has already lost 1,000 lives fighting jihadists, in a campaign that has reportedly driven 300,000 angry tribal area residents off to Pakistani city centers, where they impose their anger upon fellow Pakistanis.

Pakistanis also glower when told that their military is allowing jihadists to freely move across the Pak-Afghan border. When a powerful United States cannot police its own southern border, they ask, how can Pakistan be expected to police a far more anarchic area that lacks fencing or natural obstacles? If the border is so easy to manage, Pakistanis say that they are doing nothing to keep NATO forces from policing it from the other side.

U.S. presidential candidate Barack Obama infuriates many Pakistanis with his tougher-than-thought threats to increase the U.S. raids which accidentally kill many civilians in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier and which outrage the greater populace. Yet at least he and running mate Joe Biden have acknowledged that more soft power is needed, including real economic aid.

“Most Pakistanis wouldn't care if America went up in smoke,” declared one wealthy Pakistani with substantial business ties in England and the West.

It reminds us that the anti-Western sentiment of Pakistan is both real and growing, which means that any further investment of Western time and money would be wasted under our current approach. Again, to be blunt, we may need to decide either to bomb them into dust... or to begin to listen to them and engage them at the level of their own urgent concerns. At present, we in the West are merely a half-baked mess, neither tough nor tender.

Let us hope that we can begin to practice soft power and other forms of public diplomacy well enough that trust can be built to find an effective partnership to confront the angry tribesmen who now menace that nation and the world.
