

Nov 04, 2016 by **Rob Asghar**

A PD Challenge on the Pakistani Side ^[1]

Given that President Bush told journalists this summer that Pakistan will be the next American president's biggest foreign policy challenge, let's take a moment to consider the public-diplomacy issues for both sides now that the U.S. has a new President-elect.

Pakistan faces a significant PD challenge of its own: convincing the nations of the West that it is not a treacherous pseudo-ally. Just try the obligatory Google search of "Pakistan" + "double-game" – the 22,000 hits will demonstrate, as *Newsweek* does here, that much of the West's political leadership believes Pakistan is secretly supporting jihadists while taking Western aid that is supposed to be used to crush those same jihadists.

Council of Foreign Relations analyst and former State Department official Daniel Markey has shown rare nuance in explaining the Pakistani dilemma, in which. Pakistani leaders' efforts to ally with the U.S. are thwarted by forces within the powerful Pakistan military, who invest in jihadists due to their own certainty that the U.S. has not been and will not be a reliable ally.

As such, improving matters in Pakistan will involve a certain heightened commitment to PD on the part of the U.S. In the latter days of the Bush Administration, one encouraging effort in this area involves the Department of Homeland Security. DHS has begun to hold roundtables with Muslim and Sikh university students and community leaders – including one such meeting this week at USC – to hear from such groups about how to collaborate on crucial areas of common interest. This will certainly help the United States, not just in its relations with its Muslim-American citizens, but with Muslims in Pakistan and other hot spots.

For their part, Pakistani leaders should learn about and begin to appreciate the culture of candor that drives Western society. Speaking generally, Americans are a candor-based culture, whereas many non-Western cultures are honor-based cultures. In the U.S., "straight talk" is a supreme virtue. Americans despise "B.S." They will warmly forgive a person's failures or flaws if he confesses to them, and then takes responsibility to redeem them.

By contrast, many Arab and South-Asian and Eastern cultures believe that communication is a vehicle by which you assure everyone that things are okay – especially when they're not. The notion of admitting problems is as nutty as the idea of seeing a therapist -- it would be tantamount to admitting that you are a failure who cannot be trusted. "Getting to the truth" isn't an obsession of people or institutions. (That's one reason why my Pakistani-American parents nearly had coronaries when I informed them I wanted to be a journalist; they felt I should let someone else type up the latest propaganda from the government, while I focused on a more honorable profession like medicine or engineering).

When rumors go out that the officials within Pakistani army's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) may once again be linked to an act of terrorism, Pakistanis fully expect their leaders to offer up a defense

that amounts to, "Oh, things are fine. Nothing to see here."

Yet Pakistanis need to begin to understand that they would make more friends in the West – and seem less duplicitous – if they would confess more openly to the media that they have problems – within ISI and elsewhere, – that they are attempting to address.

After 9/11, my late father insisted to all who would listen that jihadists represented no more than 0.1% of the Pakistani population. He held to that view till his death this summer. Yet he also built a school in his hometown village that he felt could reduce the grave threat of young children turning to extremism. He never sweated the seeming contradiction; for him, he felt he had to reassure outsiders about his motherland, while trying to fix up that ailing motherland. That's what you do in an honor-based culture: You keep up appearances, while doing what you can.

Westerners can certainly appreciate this; after all, the distinction between an honor-based culture and a candor-based culture is just a generalization. John McCain emphasized throughout his presidential campaign that American troops will only come home when the U.S. has achieved "victory with honor," a sentiment that resonates with many Americans. Of course, McCain lost- a sign that honor isn't as big a vote-getter here as in some places. If Pakistani officials can begin to factor this into how they communicate with the Western world, trust can grow.
