

Nov 04, 2016 by **Rob Asghar**

Should I Stay or Should I Go: Making Sense of an American “Invasion” ^[1]

Alex Rodriguez recently wrote an excellent page-one piece in the Los Angeles Times, examining broad distrust among Pakistanis regarding the United States' plans to expand its well-fortified embassy in Islamabad.

The Obama Administration coolly states that such an expansion—involving the acquisition of 18 acres nearby and a sharp increase in long-term embassy staffing—is necessary to administer a tripling of nonmilitary aid to Pakistan, to the tune of \$1.5 billion annually.

Those on the Pakistani street and in the halls of power aren't buying it. "That just doesn't sound plausible," former army chief Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg told the Times. "People can see the game that's being played."

In my previous CPD piece, I discussed a certain theatrical aspect of discourse in Pakistan, which I called a “drama queen” tendency. (Yes, yes, that was rude - but I study public diplomacy, I don't claim to practice it.) Fittingly, I received some loud rebuttals from fellow Pakistanis, one from a person who argued that the embassy expansion signaled America's commitment to “invading and occupying” Pakistan.

The Times article demonstrates that some top Obama Administration officials “get” many of the dynamics underlying Pakistani suspicion of the U.S. "One of the reasons that the Pakistanis have concerns about us is that we walked away from them twice," the article quoted Defense Secretary Robert Gates as saying. "I think it's going to take us some time to rebuild confidence with the Pakistani people that we are a long-term friend and ally of Pakistan."

Yet delivering aid in this manner is in effect like telling an abuse victim that the abuser, in order to make amends, is moving next door.

Granted, many Pakistanis are exaggerating America's past missteps in Pakistan while ignoring America's past generosity. Nevertheless, their actual perception is genuinely that of an abuse victim relative to America. Unless that perception is addressed more effectively, U.S. aid efforts will only blow up in our face.

The U.S. should go so far as to reconsider its aid expansion within the current climate. The increase in economic aid is quite generous, especially in an economic downturn. But it is hardly enough to turn a beleaguered, ethnically divided, poverty-stricken and corruption-riddled nation of 175 million into live-and-let live Sweden. Such aid would only be effective if it can actually convince Pakistanis that the U.S. has changed its ways. As Rodriguez's article shows, that's not the case yet.

This is a difficult matter for the administration to handle. A colleague in the State Department

mentioned to me that a long line of Pakistani officials routinely come to the administration, imploring them to provide material support. Such Pakistani officials insist that additional investment will both build Pakistan's infrastructure and prove to Pakistanis that the U.S. is a true friend.

Not quite. I was surprised when USAID officials in Washington told me recently that they must conceal their worthiest projects from ordinary Pakistanis, lest our aid workers become targets. Given how the aid-related expansion of the American embassy is arousing the ire of not just extremists but everyday Pakistanis, we can see how complicated it is to help someone without triggering new problems.

At a practical level, U.S. officials need to work with a cross-section of Pakistani political, civic and media leaders to address - if the aid is given - how to administer it in a way that doesn't increase animosity.

Is there some other way to administer the aid without an embassy expansion that makes many Pakistanis feel so "invaded"? Are key media figures there willing to spotlight American assistance in a way that makes such assistance worthwhile—or at least in a way that doesn't make our assistance look like a conspiracy against them?

Since two-thirds of Pakistanis see America as an "enemy," might it be better for us to disappear from the public scene there altogether rather than continuing to aggravate Pakistanis even while spending lavishly on them?

And among those who want America to get out, is there an element of bluffing going on? In other words, would they be even angrier if America engaged closely with Kabul and with Delhi while not engaging with Islamabad?

Until those sorts of issues are addressed more meaningfully, the U.S. may as well hang on to its wallet. And given that my [first post](#) for CPD argued that the U.S. should consider dismantling its embassy there altogether, I certainly have my doubts about a physical expansion at this time.
