

Nov 04, 2016 by **Rob Asghar**

Sorry About Osama: Can We Still Be Friends? ^[1]

My title for this piece is intentionally ambiguous, because the relationship between the United States and Pakistan is utterly ambiguous. It could refer to Washington leaders saying, “Sorry that we violated your sovereignty to kill Osama bin Laden, but we still want to be friends.” Or it could refer to Americans saying, “We know some of your conservatives are sad to lose Osama, but we still want want to be friends.”

Or it could refer to Islamabad saying, “Sorry that we weren’t particularly helpful in nabbing bin Laden and that you had to resort to shutting us out of the information loop, but we still want to be friends.”

And of course, there are other narratives emerging, because not everyone on either side even wants to be friends.

Americans (both inside and outside government) are furious that Pakistanis seemed to be intentionally overlooking the murderous devil in their midst, all while America has stepped up economic aid efforts substantially. And Pakistanis (both inside and outside government) are bothered that the U.S. seems to trample a sovereign nation like a practice field, all while cozying up to a rival to the west, India, that made a name for itself during the Cold War as a friend of the Eastern bloc.

So can the two sides be friends?

The simple answer is, no, not yet.

For one thing, Pakistan is not one entity. It is in a de facto civil war between moderates who favor the West and fundamentalists who believe the jihadists were a joint US-Pak invention that could still be useful in retaliating against a hostile India. Pakistan is a house divided, and Americans must adjust accordingly. Some want to pronounce a curse on the entire house, but that would be foolish given Pakistan’s nuclear capability and strategic importance.

Can that house be won over? Here, Washington’s own fickleness comes into play. It was only a few years ago that Colin Powell tried to assure Pakistanis that the US-Pak relationship was “not a temporary marriage of convenience,” but rather a “partnership for the long term.” Washington must do much more to convince the Pakistani people that it believes those fine words.

But it was also Powell who said of a nation that, when you break it, you buy it. And Washington did much to help break Pakistan, especially when it neglected the aftermath of the Afghan war and its impact on Pakistani economic and cultural life. The current aid levels do little to rectify the matter, and they also came with strings attached that enraged many

ordinary Pakistanis and elites alike.

Just the same, the pro-West moderates among the Pakistani citizenry must get over their constant-simmering rage against the perceived meddling of the United States, India and Israel. It requires their own steady steps into a maturity that they desperately need as an aspiring democracy.

Only then can each side begin to trust the other as a genuine friend.
