Elusive hearts and minds
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IT is a well-known fact that America’s relations with Pakistan are double-edged at every level. Washington tries to strengthen the strategic partnership through dialogue, then lets Nato forces in ‘hot pursuit’ of militants cross the Pakistani border; showers aid on the military, yet cuts funding to units suspected of violating human rights; demands that the Pakistan Army target militants in North Waziristan, even while asking our politicians and generals to help negotiate with the Afghan Taliban.

It is not surprising, then, that the US remains double-minded about its policies on how best to engage with the Pakistani people. Although we have been led to believe that every American (at least those on Capitol Hill) is out to win our hearts and minds, there are many who increasingly question the US government’s obsession with making Pakistanis like their country.

The need for such questioning is clear. Washington sees bilateral foreign assistance as a way to sway public opinion and foster stability by earning the trust of elusive hearts and minds. But while the US has given Pakistan over $18bn in military and civilian aid since 2001, only 17 per cent of Pakistanis view the US favourably, according to a Pew Research Centre survey from June. These contradictory statistics suggest that the harder the US tries to improve its image by doling out bucketfuls of aid, the more suspicious of its motives Pakistanis become.

To their credit, some US policymakers are well aware of this conundrum, and are beginning to re-evaluate the logic of expecting aid to buy love (to be clear: US officials are not rethinking giving aid to Pakistan; rather, they are reconsidering their own expectations of what impact assistance will have on the Pakistani public). They argue that it would be more productive to stop worrying about incorrigible Pakistani hearts and minds, and instead focus on strengthening Pakistan’s economy and public institutions for the sake of long-term stability and progress.

The jury is by no means out on this subject. During October’s strategic dialogue, US special envoy Richard Holbrooke spoke in support of major, visible aid projects such as bridges that could win back the appreciation of the Pakistani people. He argued that US developmental aid is more effective when it simultaneously seeks to alter public opinion because local support helps politicians implement projects more successfully.

A new study by the World Bank’s Jishnu Das and Pomona College’s Tahir Andrabi titled In Aid We Trust: Hearts and Minds and the Pakistan Earthquake of 2005 reiterates that humanitarian aid can win local favour. The study shows that those Pakistanis who interacted with aid workers after the 2005 earthquake retained positive impressions and high levels of trust in westerners four years after that calamity. In light of such findings, US government officials conclude that the failure lies in public diplomacy rather than aid policies. Holbrooke recently admitted that the US is not accustomed to dealing with Pakistan’s newly empowered public institutions and freewheeling media. He thinks his government needs to work harder to explain its developmental goals to the Pakistani people, and the hearts and minds will come a-running. This logic probably prompted the recent announcement of 125 US-funded journalism internships as well as dozens of public administration internships for members of Pakistan’s information ministry.

But scepticism is rife. For example, the Centre for Global Development, a Washington-based think tank, responded to the Das-Andrabi study by highlighting the distinction between trust in individual westerners and trust in the US government and its policies — the former does not necessarily translate into the latter.
Andrew Wilder, a fellow at Tufts University’s Feinstein International Centre, also argues that aid can be counter-productive by generating grievances among receiving publics about delivery, distribution and implementation. He might just be on to something. Despite Washington’s magnanimity, a Pew survey in July found that over 50 per cent of Pakistanis believe the US gives little or no assistance here. Clearly, there is a disconnect between big dollar figures in news headlines and individual Pakistanis’ experiences of not directly benefiting from aid packages. If Pakistanis come to think of the US as an entity that breaks promises, its approval ratings could sink even further.

As the debate rages about the ability of aid to win hearts and minds, the US should clarify why Pakistani public opinion matters. Is this just an egotistical concern, whereby the US cannot abide by the fact that there are some people who, despite receiving its billions, continue to hate its guts? Or is this a genuine security concern that plays directly into America’s stated goal for this region (to guarantee that Pakistan and Afghanistan are not used as launching pads for attacks against the US) and presumes that people are more likely to bomb those they hate?

In the latter case, US policies face a difficult challenge. Developmental aid may just succeed in winning over average Pakistanis in coming years. But average souls pose fewer threats to US security. The danger is increasingly coming in the form of Faisal Shahzad and Farooque Ahmed, another Pakistani-born US citizen who was arrested this week for plotting to bomb Metro stations in Washington DC.

These Pakistanis are acutely aware of Washington’s schizophrenic policies in Pakistan that couple developmental aid and drone attacks. They are not likely to be won over by a sack of rice or a maternity ward. They are more interested in seeing the US alter its foreign policy with regard to drone attacks, relations with India, the conflicts in Kashmir and Palestine, and more. If it is Pakistanis like these the US aims to entice, it should focus less on winning hearts and minds and more on changing its policies.

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