Resolving the Pakistan-U.S. Prisoner’s Dilemma
By Atia Ali Kazmi

The U.S. raid to kill Osama bin Laden and the Nov. 26 unwarranted killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers has tied Islamabad and Washington to the hip in a “prisoner’s dilemma” situation.

Individually, Pakistani and American rationality pushes both to adopt a dominating strategy, at least publicly. However, their collective rationality would suggest cooperation for a win-win situation, if both were ready to mitigate their prisoner’s dilemma. Is that possible?

The prisoner’s dilemma is a game-theory concept that involves two players with two choices. It addresses the genre of situations in which there is a fundamental conflict between what is a rational choice for an individual member of a group and for the group collectively.

Prisoner’s dilemma theory holds that the dominant strategy of individual rationality and self-interest is merely a trap that reduces the prospects of collective gains. Individually, Pakistan and the U.S. may be better off adopting the dominating strategy of not ceding ground to each other’s demands. The logjam in relations exists because the U.S. might not like to set a precedent of ceding to a small power, even if its demands are genuine. An optimal solution lies in a bargain on core interests by both parties.

Some believe the Pakistan-U.S. relationship has probably reached a watershed, and the jury is out on what course the oft-disenchanted allies will take. Islamabad’s known demands are: an unconditional apology over the Nov. 26 Salala killings, immediate cessation of drone strikes, no interference in the Iran-Pakistan pipeline project, and a nondiscriminatory approach in the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

Though Washington has a reconciliatory approach to future relations, its demands are: work as a sincere partner in Afghanistan’s endgame and reopen land supply routes on old terms.

Core Disputes

At the heart of this fractured relationship of distrust and hardened positions lay two core issues.

Instead of exploiting its territory as a Silk Road of trade with Central Asia, Pakistan offered its territory as a front-line state against communism, and Taliban and al-Qaida threats. The onus of this strategic myopia lies more on the U.S., as its focus remained on Pakistan as a front-line state only. The remaining areas of cooperation have been subject to this overarching policy of momentary engagements with Pakistan.

In this unequal relationship, the initiative to set the river’s course lies with the bigger partner; the smaller partner relocates every time the course changes.

U.S. policy to contain China is the second major issue. While geo-economics magnetizes Beijing and Washington, the geopolitics repels them. Although Pakistan played a crucial role in opening China to the U.S. in the 1970s, containing Beijing would be Islamabad’s red line.

The U.S. is building India as a regional counterweight to China, and this in turn exacerbates Pakistan’s security dilemma. Pakistan-India-China and China-U.S. relations are complex, and Islamabad’s challenge lies in maximizing its financial gains with these players through trade while minimizing the chances of conflict.

The big picture shows that a smaller power has fewer levers. Islamabad would face the prisoner’s dilemma and will suffer greater loss if it caves to the U.S. or if it totally disengages from Washington. Washington’s safe exit from Afghanistan and Obama’s re-election campaign would be at risk if it maintains a self-centered policy toward Islamabad.

The following win-win steps can be taken:

If Pakistan shows willingness to accede to U.S.
demands, the latter can tender an apology for the accidental Salala killings. Once the distrust in the war against al-Qaida and Taliban is gone, the unilateral drone strikes would probably end.

If the U.S. shows genuine interest in opening a Silk Road to landlocked Central Asia instead of containing China, Pakistan’s search for alternatives would diminish.

These small but significant steps can serve to solve the prisoner’s dilemma of Pakistan-U.S. relations.

*Published in Defense News, Washington D.C.*