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Mangoes and Schools: Rethinking U.S. Aid to Pakistan

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This summer, after nearly two years of bureaucratic wrangling, the first of Pakistan's famous mangoes will appear in fruit aisles across the United States. Unfortunately, their arrival will turn few heads. Though officially the [world's sweetest mango](#) (by scientific consensus) the fortunes of this newest export seem unlikely to fill the schedule of Pakistan's eloquent ambassador to Washington, Hussein Haqqani. Rather, it is the bitter state of his country's already sour relations with the United States that will tax his talents for the foreseeable future. Long dubious of Islamabad's commitment to the fight against militant Islam, American officials and lawmakers have been increasingly inclined to read the discovery of Osama bin Laden in the town of Abbottabad as damning evidence of complicity at the upper levels of Pakistan's intelligence establishment. Now, the murky circumstances surrounding an unsuccessful [raid on two bomb-making facilities](#) have led the Obama administration to announce the suspension, or even [cancellation, of nearly \\$800 million](#) from the more than \$2 billion in assistance provided annually to its South Asian ally. But should the mango's arrival be so easily ignored? The furor in Washington over Pakistan's lukewarm commitment to the 'War on Terror' is hardly undeserved - CIA Deputy Director Michael J Morell rated Pakistan's cooperation on counterterrorism operations as a ["three" on a scale of ten](#) - yet the question is not whether funds should be cut, but how they should be allocated. U.S. policy in Pakistan is understandably dominated by America's interests in neighboring Afghanistan. Accordingly, the vast majority of aid to Pakistan is composed of security assistance, and the cooperation won by this largesse has been vital to military efforts in the region. But the blind bundling of foreign policy into one security-focused 'Af-Pak' package fatally ignores the human element of counterterrorism. American predator drone strikes may effectively "bug splat" (as the lingo goes) bad guys, but they are essentially negative in nature. Even if their targets are destroyed without killing innocents, - which [90% of Pakistanis](#) do not believe to be the case - their success will only prevent destruction, not create growth. The cultivation of an export market for Pakistani mangos in America might, on the other hand, offer jobs and livelihoods to thousands of impoverished farmers and generate [millions in new revenue](#). Such positive action must accompany the negative in any counterterrorism strategy if crucial "hearts and minds" are to be swayed. However, mangos aside, the provision of this kind of assistance is woefully anemic. The Kerry-Lugar-Berman bill passed in October 2009 pledged to [triple economic assistance](#) to \$7.5 billion over five years, but a [2010 Pew Poll](#) found that only 55% of Pakistanis were even aware that their government receives funding from the United States and, of these, only 27% believed a significant portion of that funding to be directed towards development. In short, American policy is, as Nancy Birdsall of the Center for Global Development (CGD) notes, ["way off course in Pakistan."](#) A fixation on security has led us to "neglect low-cost, low-

risk investments in jobs, growth, and the long haul of democracy building." In a political system crippled by corruption, and an economy struggling to employ its rapidly growing population, such neglect must not continue. Fortunately, the U.S. development mission in Pakistan is not beyond repair, but cash and cannons will be of little further use. Instead, a [June 2011 report by the CGD](#) suggests, what is needed is a reorganization and redirection of aid efforts. The combination of USAID programs in Pakistan under a single director, as well as the posting of development goals and data on the progress of those programs in one accessible location, would help streamline the messy distribution of AID funds. While, a temporary suspension of trade tariffs, duties, and quotas on exports to the U.S. would help rebuild trust between the two countries, and breathe life into Pakistan's underutilized manufacturing capacity.

Similarly, addressing the dismal state of Pakistan's education system would go far in proving a real commitment to the welfare of the Pakistani people. Pakistan, the sixth largest country in the world (by population), currently places 143rd in country [league tables on education](#) expenditures (a measly 2.6% of GDP). No wonder, then, that [only 47% of Pakistani boys](#), and a shocking 22% of girls, complete even primary level schooling. Less than 19% move on to upper secondary school. Education is the foundation of any modern economy and sweeping reform of Pakistan's bloated military budget is needed to combat its learning crisis. Still, American agencies can help push such reforms at the policy level, while private charitable organizations have also proven quite effective at the grassroots level. Greg Mortenson, writer of the best-selling book "Three Cups of Tea", and previously the most successful proponent of Pakistani education in the United States, has recently been discredited by an April 2011 ["60 minutes" exposé](#), which revealed his widespread misallocation of charitable donations. But the dream of an educated Pakistan should not be thrown out with his dirty linen. The [Marshall Direct Fund](#), a small charitable outfit based in Carbondale Colorado, presents one attractive alternative. Eschewing Mortenson's expensive model of constructing whole schools from scratch in rural areas, the Fund leases cheap space and focuses on teaching in order to provide alternatives for Pakistani youth in the urban areas where a majority of terrorist recruitment takes place. The charity also runs a program called ["Global Kids Connect"](#), which seeks to connect young American school children with their Pakistani counterparts and humanize, for both sides, a cultural 'other' that is so often defined by inflammatory and sensationalist rhetoric. Though small, MDF has put its limited budget to excellent use, and the example set by its generosity ripples far beyond those students directly affected. Such individual generosity, combined with a dedicated effort at the policy level, can help reverse the worrying trends developing in US-Pakistani relations. Economic uncertainty and ramshackle progress on security have made Pakistan-bashing an easy past-time in Washington, and efforts to cut U.S. aid are well underway. Perhaps, they should be; however, the antics of Pakistani leadership (especially within the ISI) should not lead Washington to abandon the country. The temptation to view Pakistan solely through the prism of security is strong but essentially misguided. Relations must be approached holistically if American goals in the region are ever to be fully realized. Military solutions are vital in the fight against violent extremism in the region, but that dead horse has been thoroughly beaten. Mangoes and education could present a faster path to stability than bullets alone.