

US Grows Unhappier With Pakistan - Despite Official Friendship, Three Areas Of Contention Are Straining The Alliance

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By Ahmed Rashid/Islamabad

ISLAMABAD -- Despite Pakistan's support for the U.S.-led war against terrorism and President Bush's public expressions of support for Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, U.S. diplomats and other officials are increasingly dissatisfied with Islamabad, which they say is complicating the antiterrorism effort and straining a crucial alliance.

"Musharraf has made so many unfulfilled promises and pledges to the U.S. that his credibility here is at an all-time low," says a U.S. diplomat in Washington. While few expect an open rift as Washington focuses on a possible war in Iraq, the U.S. diplomat adds that "There are too many contentious issues coming to a head, and the relationship is skating on very thin ice."

President Musharraf, a general who seized power three years ago, has been in a difficult spot since U.S. troops arrived in the region last year to oust the Taliban rulers of neighboring Afghanistan and apprehend their allies in the al Qaeda terrorist organization. The Pakistani leader is torn between placating the U.S. and angering his country's many anti-Western Islamic militants.

Today, U.S. officials express concern with Islamabad's behavior on three fronts: Pakistan's testy relations with neighboring India, its protection of Afghan figures the U.S. considers terrorists, and Islamabad's alleged aid to North Korea. Because Washington's official position is support for Pakistan, the officials asked not to be named.

Despite Gen. Musharraf's pledge in June to stop the flow of Islamic militants into Indian-controlled Kashmir, the officials say Pakistan still allows them into the tinderbox region, over which the two nuclear-armed countries nearly went to war this year. Pakistan denies the charge, although it has admitted before to hosting Islamic militants who have perpetrated attacks in Indian Kashmir. U.S. officials have warned Pakistan not to underestimate India's military reaction if there are further attacks this winter.

U.S. officials say several Western intelligence agencies have also determined that while Pakistan's military is helping arrest al Qaeda militants in Pakistan, it is also harboring former Taliban leaders and supporters of the renegade Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Pakistan's tribal belt along the border with Afghanistan. Mr. Hekmatyar has called for a jihad, or holy war, against American troops and the fledgling, Western-supported government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency is also proving a hindrance. Even though Mr. Karzai, like the Taliban leaders, is a Pashtun -- Afghanistan's majority ethnic group -- his government isn't dominated by the group. "There is strong resentment in the ISI of the huge influence of India and Russia in Kabul and the loss of influence of the Afghan Pashtuns, who are alienated and angry," says a retired Pakistani general in Islamabad. "But it would be a very dangerous step to try and go back to what we were doing in the 1990s," he adds, referring to Pakistan's earlier support of the Taliban regime.

The emergence in Islamabad last month of an audiotape made by al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden didn't help Gen. Musharraf's credibility with the U.S. The tape, which U.S. intelligence officials confirmed as authentic, refutes the general's repeated assertions that Mr. bin Laden is dead and that al Qaeda has little presence in Pakistan. U.S. officials now believe Mr. bin Laden is either hiding in Pakistan's tribal belt along the Afghan border, or has fled to Yemen from a Pakistani port. The officials also believe al Qaeda maintains significant communications and logistics hubs in Islamabad and the port city of Karachi.

Also causing concern in Washington and Kabul is that an alliance of Islamic fundamentalist parties who support the Taliban and have never condemned al Qaeda is set to take over the reins of government in Pakistan's volatile North West Frontier Province, adjacent to Afghanistan. The group has demanded that the military throw out American

intelligence and military officials from the province.

Relations are strained on yet another front the U.S. deems crucial to its security: Pakistan's alleged assistance to North Korea's nuclear program in return for missiles capable of reaching most of India. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell warned Pakistan last week that it could face consequences if Washington discovers that Islamabad is still transferring nuclear know-how to North Korea. "In my conversations with President Musharraf, I have made clear to him that any, any sort of contact between Pakistan and North Korea we believe would be improper, inappropriate and would have consequences," Mr. Powell said.

For the moment, a U.S.-Pakistani rift is unlikely. U.S. officials say Mr. Powell is wary of alienating Islamabad when Pakistan faces renewed threats from al Qaeda, the regional instability that could be worsened by a war in Iraq, and continuing Indian-Pakistani tensions. For their part, Pakistani officials have warned Washington that with anti-American feeling on the rise across the country, Gen. Musharraf has no choice but to show some independence from U.S. pressure.