

US-Pakistan dialogue with a difference

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By Ahmed Rashid

Guest columnist Ahmed Rashid explains why last week's "strategic dialogue" between the US and Pakistan was a significant break with the two countries' troubled past.

When Pakistan's powerful army chief, Gen Ashfaq Kayani, and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi got off the plane in Washington to conduct what was called the "strategic dialogue" with the US last week, they carried a 56-page shopping list asking for money, arms... and more money.

That has been the norm for US-Pakistan dialogues in the past 50 years of an on-off relationship. Meanwhile, the US has always urged Pakistan to fit into its own strategic plans, such as doing more to combat terrorism.

However, this time there was a difference.

The Pakistanis also carried a brief which frankly addressed Pakistan's strategic interests and security needs with regard to India, Afghanistan and sensitive issues like nuclear weapons and terrorism.

Transactional relationship

The US, rather than lecturing, wanted to listen, even if it could not comply with many of Pakistan's demands.

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For the Americans this was a welcome change from the subterfuge, lack of clarity and covert support for militant groups that Pakistan has engaged in in the past.

For the Pakistanis it was a chance to air all their pent-up grievances against Washington and demand to be given the same treatment as arch-rival India.

After 11 September, former Presidents George Bush and Pervez Musharraf carried out a largely transactional relationship. "I will give you an al-Qaeda operative in exchange for two F16 fighter bombers" - was what that boiled down to.

While Mr Musharraf hosted the Afghan Taliban and other extremist groups, as a hedge against Indian influence in Kashmir and Afghanistan, Mr Bush pretended to look the other way. Mr Bush conducted crisis management rather than real engagement.

President Barack Obama promised to put Pakistan on the top of his agenda. Now after 15 months of intense engagement, dozens of visits to Islamabad by American officials and unrelenting pressure, the Obama administration has finally got the Pakistanis to open up.

Now, said officials from both sides, everything was on the table.

That is important right now.

Even though Pakistan may be a crumbling state unable to provide its people with electricity, water, security or jobs, the army's bargaining power with the US has increased dramatically.

That is due to increases in its nuclear arsenal, its stepped-up fight against the Pakistani Taliban after years of dithering and its influence over the Afghan Taliban as the US and Nato prepare to start pulling out of

Afghanistan next year.

At the end of two days of talks, Mr Qureshi said he was satisfied as both sides "move from a relationship to a partnership'. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton shared his optimism.

However, the real dialogue was with Gen Kayani and the army which had prepared Pakistan's briefs, with no objections from Mr Qureshi or the civilian government.

The army tried and failed to make US acceptance of its major demands as pre-conditions for the success of the talks. The US insisted on discussing every issue and conceded little.

The US offered nothing new, but the most concrete results were reflected in a sector-by-sector dialogue by relevant ministries on each side, as to how the US can help rally Pakistan's faltering economy, lack of energy and improve its agriculture and infrastructure.

Key demand

The US is providing an annual \$1.5bn aid package to Pakistan's civil sector for the next five years.

However, Pakistan will still not get improved US trade access for its textile exports - a key demand to revive its moribund industry and something that would be clearly more effective than just aid.

The military will quickly receive some \$1bn in outstanding dues for fighting the war against militants, assured future funding and faster delivery of new weapons including helicopters, F16s and naval frigates.

The Americans rejected Pakistan's plea for a civil nuclear deal like the US concluded with India, partly because of Pakistan's past nuclear proliferation record, but also because Mr Obama could never sell such a deal to the US Congress.

However, this dialogue will continue under a newly formed Policy Steering Group.

The US heaped praise on the army's recent campaign against the Pakistani Taliban, but it was equally tough on the need for the army to abandon its 30-year-long reliance on extremist groups to carry out foreign policy objectives and covert operations against India in Kashmir and Afghanistan.

Pakistan has said it will not act against Lashkar-e-Toiba, the militant group accused of carrying out the Mumbai (Bombay) attacks in 2008 until relations with India markedly improve.

Lashkar was set up and managed by the army's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and India has refused to deal with Pakistan until it curbs the group.

Both the US and Nato now view the Lashkar as a global terrorist group, with cells in Europe and the US supporting the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Major role

The group is accused of carrying out the February suicide attack in Kabul that killed nine Indians. David Headley, a US citizen, has admitted planning the Mumbai attacks and training at Lashkar bases in Pakistan.

To India's chagrin, the US has acknowledged that Pakistan has a major role to play in peace talks between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban and that India and Pakistan need to come to an understanding over their mutual competition in Afghanistan.

When Afghan President Hamid Karzai visited Islamabad in early March, he was bluntly told by the army that he would have to remove two Indian consulates in Afghanistan near the Pakistan border, before the army offered him help to talk to the Pakistan-based Afghan Taliban leaders.

For Pakistan, one measure of success of the talks is the degree to which they have rattled India.

India feels snubbed by the US because its officials have not been given access to David Headley. Delhi is opposed to any dominant Pakistani role in Afghanistan and is nervous about any US-Pakistan nuclear talks.

The US will now have to do some fence-mending with India.

However the complex triangular relationship between the US, Pakistan and India depends for success on the US getting the two enemies to talk turkey about their conflicts.

It also depends on getting the Pakistani army to undertake a real rather than an imagined strategic U-turn, because backing extremists of any hue to carry out foreign policy goals is no longer internationally acceptable.

Ahmed Rashid is the author of the best-selling book Taliban and, most recently, of Descent into Chaos: How the war against Islamic extremism is being lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.