

## Us-Pakistani Relations In Downward Spiral

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By Ahmed Rashid

President Pervez Musharraf and other top Pakistani military leaders are defying the United States on key policy issues, including nuclear proliferation and pipeline construction, as relations between the two countries plummet.

The downward spiral in US-Pakistani relations began following President George W. Bush's brief visit to Pakistan in early March. Bush ruffled Pakistani sensitivities by spending a relatively short time in Islamabad after spending several days in India, Pakistan's chief rival. Military leaders were furious that Bush would finalize a nuclear cooperation pact with the Indian government during his tour without offering Islamabad a similar deal. Bush reportedly exacerbated Pakistani displeasure by berating Musharraf for not doing enough to stop Islamic militant incursions into Afghanistan from Pakistan.

NATO military officials complain that the Pakistan army has stood idle as hundreds of Taliban fighters infiltrate into Afghanistan, threatening the deployment of thousands of Atlantic alliance troops this summer in southern areas of the rebuilding country. Pakistan has declined repeated US, NATO and Afghan requests to take action against Taliban leaders, many of whom are known to be operating in Baluchistan Province. Pakistani officials insist they are doing everything possible to prosecute the campaign against terrorism, and deny that they have knowledge on the whereabouts of Taliban leaders.

In turn, Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence (ISI) accuses Washington and NATO of turning a blind eye to alleged Indian efforts to stoke an insurgency in Baluchistan. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. New Delhi denies meddling in Baluchistan. ISI officials are also convinced that US and Afghan officials are allowing Indian spy agencies unparalleled access and influence among the Pashtun tribes in southern Afghanistan, from where they supposedly are conducting operations designed to destabilize Pakistan.

Many in Islamabad believe that winning the hearts and minds of Afghanistan's Pashtuns is a key for ensuring Pakistan's stability. Thus, Pakistan wants the Americans and NATO to effectively recognize Pakistan's sphere of influence in southern Afghanistan. Washington shows no sign of extending such recognition.

In a move reflecting the level of their anger, Pakistani authorities announced the closure of their investigation into the activities of Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan -- Pakistan's top nuclear scientist, who was taken into custody in 2004 in connection with a proliferation scandal. The announcement came at a time when Washington was seeking Islamabad's permission for US authorities to directly interrogate him. The nuclear scientist, who reportedly enabled the transfer of nuclear weapons technology to several states, including Iran, remains under house arrest in Islamabad. US officials badly want to talk to Khan, believing that he can provide incontrovertible evidence that Iran is striving to build a nuclear weapon. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. In addition, Islamabad is brushing aside US objections as it pushes ahead with plans to build a \$7.2-billion gas pipeline that would run from Iran, via Pakistan, to India.

Such defiant moves are being cheered by many Pakistanis, who have long resented what they perceive to be Washington's bullying of Islamabad. Musharraf isn't doing anything to reverse the current trend, viewing it as an opportunity to shore up his dwindling domestic support. Despite this, the Pakistani president hopes to retain US support for his expected re-election bid in 2007.

On top of the recent bilateral tension, the United States has reason to be frustrated with Musharraf's reluctance to press for the democratization of Pakistan's political system, in which the military stands to play a central role for the foreseeable future. Musharraf appears to believe, however, that the United States will lack viable alternatives in 2007. Ultimately, he hopes, Washington will come to prefer a known entity, even if an imperfect strategic partner, over the prospect of political turnover that could bring to power politicians hostile to American interests.

The problem for Pakistan, and also for the United States, is that a continuation of military rule would not be in the country's best interest. Military rule has run its course in Pakistan. It is deeply unpopular and lacks the credibility to contain Islamic radicals. Pakistan's security climate will only start to improve if the country obtains a genuinely elected government, which does not necessarily confront the military, but works with it to deliver greater benefits to the people. Such a government would also have to develop a new framework for relations with the West, clearly specifying what Islamabad is capable and incapable of doing in the both the anti-terrorism and anti-proliferation struggles.