

The War On Terrorism

Testing Time For Pakistan In return for accepting the way Pakistan is handling a nuclear-proliferation scandal, the United States expects Islamabad to step up cooperation in the war against terrorism. But the U.S. still feels Islamabad isn't doing enough against the Taliban and extremists at home, and bilateral ties could be sorely tried

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While the United States and Pakistan coordinate stepped-up military efforts to capture or kill Osama bin Laden, the Americans say Islamabad is not cooperating fully in U.S.-led efforts to destroy the Taliban despite Washington's restraint over Pakistan's nuclear-proliferation scandal. And this reluctance to move against Afghanistan's former rulers threatens to put a spoke in Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's relations with the U.S. and undermine regional stability. Washington's expectations of Musharraf are many--and it believes they are not all being met. "It's a bit of three steps forward, one step back," says U.S. Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz during an interview, in which he gave a tough assessment of some aspects of Pakistan's commitment to the war on terrorism. Apart from helping track down Al Qaeda and the Taliban, the U.S. wants Musharraf to wind up the underground sales network established by disgraced nuclear physicist Abdul Qadeer Khan; support American stabilization efforts in Afghanistan; prevent Islamic militants from crossing into Indian Kashmir; step up the peace process with India and rein in Islamic extremists at home. Moreover, the Americans believe Musharraf owes them for their benign reaction in the Khan case--they accepted a presidential pardon for Khan and Musharraf's refusal to investigate the army for any role it may have had in the scientist's nuclear-related dealings with countries such as Iran, Libya and North Korea. "We feel it gives us more leverage," Wolfowitz tells the Review. "I think it may give Musharraf a somewhat stronger hand in Pakistan. He's got an act to clean up. The international community is prepared to accept his pardon of A.Q. Khan for all he's done, but it's clearly a kind of IOU that, in return for that, there has to be a full accounting of everything that's happened."

That said, the Americans are also anxious not to destabilize Musharraf, who is facing growing opposition at home because of his alliance with the U.S., resurgent Islamic militancy and resentment within the government at the army's refusal to cede it any real power since being elected in 2002. Indeed, the stability of South and Central Asia hangs largely on Washington improving its complex relationship with Musharraf and Pakistan's army in the next few months. The health of the relationship also holds the key to greater stability in Afghanistan, where a planned June presidential election is threatened by stepped-up attacks by a resurgent Taliban, the continued grip of warlord militias, a booming drugs trade and the unwillingness of the international community to provide troops for enhanced security.

The most urgent immediate issue for Washington is the hunt for bin Laden, which stalled for much of last year after the U.S. moved intelligence units, surveillance equipment and special-forces troops from Afghanistan to Iraq, according to U.S. and Pakistani officials. Now they are back and the U.S. has launched a massive military and intelligence operation aimed at snaring the Al Qaeda leadership before the scheduled June presidential election in Afghanistan and the American election in November. High-flying U2 surveillance aircraft, low-flying Predator drones and enhanced satellite capability are maintaining a 24-hour watch on the rugged Afghan-Pakistani border. Meanwhile, Task Force 121, a U.S. commando group which hunted down Saddam Hussain in Iraq, has been shifted to the region, say the officials. But Pakistani military cooperation is imperative. Success, says Wolfowitz, "still depends mostly on the Pakistanis." And while Pakistan has insisted that it will not allow U.S. troops on its soil, equipment and U.S. communications experts have been flown into the northern city of Peshawar, according to local officials. The stepped-up search is focusing on South Waziristan, a tribal zone in northwest Pakistan where the Americans believe bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders are receiving shelter. Pakistan has moved about 3,000 regular troops and tens of thousands of militiamen to the mountainous area in a bid to force the Al Qaeda fugitives across the border into

Afghanistan, where American troops are waiting. Last year U.S. diplomats said Pakistan was being less than cooperative in the hunt for Al Qaeda leaders, but that is slowly changing. Pakistani officials insist they are doing everything possible in a difficult region. Sixteen soldiers have been killed by local tribesmen in South Waziristan since October. However, what concerns Afghan President Hamid Karzai is not Al Qaeda, but the Taliban, who have launched dozens of small attacks in southern and eastern Afghanistan in recent weeks. On March 5, Taliban guerrillas killed eight Afghan soldiers in Kandahar province close to Pakistan's Baluchistan province, while an Afghan soldier and a Turkish engineer were shot dead the same day in neighbouring Zabul province. One day later, suspected Taliban

Intelligence Agency, told a Senate hearing in Washington in late February that Taliban attacks have reached, "their highest level since the collapse of the Taliban government" in December 2001. He added that the threat they posed "is potentially eroding commitments to stability and progress in Afghanistan." But the U.S. believes that Pakistan could do more to help eradicate the threat posed by the Taliban. "There is greater cooperation, but [it] continues to be a bit of an issue," says Wolfowitz. "One of the ways they (Pakistan) slice it is to cooperate regarding Al Qaeda.... It's increasingly clear that we're not about to give up on the Taliban. We have a long commitment to Afghanistan."

The U.S. message to Musharraf is stark: Rein in those who are sympathetic to the Taliban, especially elements in military intelligence and the Islamic fundamentalist governments in Baluchistan and North West Frontier Province. But such a move would endanger the political alliance that the Pakistan president has struck with five mainstream Islamic parties in the national parliament. Critics say that this political alliance has only emboldened Islamic extremist groups in their support for the Taliban and Kashmiri militants and in their opposition to Musharraf. At the same time, Islamic militancy is fuelled by growing anti-American sentiment. In Waziristan, angry tribesmen are sniping and firing rockets almost daily at Pakistani border posts. Wazir tribesmen were further infuriated on March 1, when nervous soldiers opened fire on a vehicle, killing 11 civilian passengers. Since the latest army operation began in Waziristan on February 20, tribal elders have delivered only 60 out of 123 tribesmen on a list of those accused of sheltering Al Qaeda fugitives. "The situation in the tribal belt is explosive and could erupt into open war between the army and tribesmen," says a Pakistani diplomat. Musharraf also has to cope with strife between Muslims. On March 2 in the southwestern city of Quetta, 44 people were killed and 150 wounded during an attack with grenades and explosives on a Shiite Muslim religious procession. Most of the dead were Shiites. Police claim the perpetrators were members of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a militant Sunni Muslim group which Musharraf has banned but failed to effectively clamp down on.

And all these problems are exacerbated by the fact that because Musharraf will not let Pakistan's elected government wield any real power, there is no buffer between the military and the Islamic militants. "We have a government that can't deliver everything we would like to see and it would like to see, and we don't have the ability to simply say if you don't do [this] we will cut off our whole relationship with you and let you go under," notes Wolfowitz. Meanwhile, the U.S. and its allies fear that Musharraf is endangering the political process in Afghanistan by not moving decisively against the militants at home. The United Nations-brokered December 2001 Bonn agreement on Afghanistan stipulated that presidential and parliamentary elections be held simultaneously in June. That appears increasingly unlikely with the worsening security situation. The U.S. is now pushing for a presidential election in June, with the parliamentary general election to be delayed until next year. The UN, the U.S., the Afghans and the international community have to take a decision by March 31, when an international donors' conference in Berlin will try to raise more money for Afghanistan's reconstruction. And Wolfowitz warns that it will be difficult to postpone the presidential election "without looking like it's a vote of no confidence."

Adds Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador in Kabul: "Elections will be the final phase of the Bonn road map; if not, there will be a crisis of legitimacy." But that is disputed by many, including officials from the UN and international aid agencies and by some European diplomats and Afghans. "The real crisis would be if you had a discredited election in which many people don't get to vote," says a senior European diplomat in Kabul.

VOTER-REGISTRATION DELAYED

The stepped-up Taliban attacks prompted the UN in January to scale down the registration of the estimated 10.5 million eligible voters located in the south. Only 1.2 million people in eight major cities have been registered so far. Moreover, only 70% of the \$98 million the UN needs for conducting the registration process has been provided to date. Another \$100 million will be needed to hold the election. Meanwhile, efforts to boost the security apparatus within Afghanistan have made little headway. According to Khalilzad, only 10,000 men of the new Afghan national army and 15,000 policemen will have been trained by June. A U.S. plan to recruit militiamen loyal to regional warlords for an Afghan National Guard has come under fire from aid workers and many Afghans, even though a senior U.S. official describes the initiative as a stopgap measure. Ultimately, security largely rests on the international community providing more troops, in addition to the 11,000-strong U.S.-led coalition forces hunting Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters and the 5,600 troops of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) pledged to deploy more troops outside Kabul when it took over command of the ISAF last August. But European states have been reluctant to sanction more troops. "There's a tendency to talk very boldly about the European security structure and then not make available any of the funding necessary to make it happen," says Wolfowitz. The Americans and Nato are currently discussing a plan to bring in

security problems, some aid workers and Afghan experts say it makes sense to postpone the June election because it will disrupt many of the positive nation-building projects now under way. These include the disarmament and demobilization of 100,000 militiamen, massive road-building projects, reconstruction of thousands of schools and hundreds of local government centres, and a World Bank-sponsored project to curb heroin production in all 32 provinces. Drug-trafficking is a major source of funding for terrorists, and last year Afghanistan produced 3,600 tonnes of heroin, or 80 % of the world's supply, according to the UN. A June election would slow down all these projects, not least because some 33,000 Afghans--mostly aid workers and teachers--will have to be hired to run the elections. "Postponing elections after civil war has never brought negative consequences," says Horacio Boneo, an election specialist at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington. "The successful benchmark should be 70% registration and 80% participation of voters. At present that appears impossible."