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Reuters

Pakistan-U.S. ties on hold for "re-evaluation"

By Michael Georgy and Chris Allbritton

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ISLAMABAD - Pakistan's ties with the United States remain on hold following a NATO cross-border air attack, its foreign minister said on Thursday, and Washington should not push Islamabad to go after militant groups or bring them to the Afghan peace process.

"Now that the re-evaluation process is under way as we speak, so till the time that that re-evaluation process is not complete, we cannot start the re-engagement," Hina Rabbani Khar said in an interview with Reuters on Thursday.

The November 26 NATO attack on the border with Afghanistan, which killed 24 Pakistani soldiers, plunged relations between Washington and Islamabad to their chilliest levels in years.

Yet Khar struck a positive note, stressing the long alliance was vital for the two countries.

"I think this will also give us the ability, if we play it right, to strengthen the partnership and to make it much, much more effective," she said.

"Let me categorically say that we consider our relations and our relationship with the U.S. to be an extremely important one."

Khar said proposals for the tenor and rules for relations with the United States could be out within days.

"We are trying to push for it as we speak," Khar said. "I know that they have completed their recommendations and we will look for an appropriate day to hold the joint session of parliament. The recommendations could come out in days."

The United States sees Pakistan as critical to its efforts to wind down the war in neighboring Afghanistan, where U.S.-led NATO forces are battling a stubborn Taliban insurgency.

But the NATO border incident exacerbated a crisis in relations which erupted after U.S. special forces killed Osama bin Laden in a unilateral raid on Pakistani soil in May last year. It embarrassed Pakistan's powerful military.

Ties between Washington and Islamabad were also severely hurt a year ago by the killing of two Pakistanis by a CIA contractor: "I would say they are conveniently on hold until we start re-engaging," said Khar.

FOCUS ON HAQQANI NETWORK

The foreign minister rejected some media reports that Islamabad had snubbed a request by U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan Marc Grossman to visit, saying it was a matter of choosing a more beneficial time.

The United States has long sought Pakistani cooperation in tackling the Haqqani network, the Afghan insurgent group now seen as the gravest threat to NATO and Afghan troops.

In October, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Islamabad with top U.S. military and intelligence officials and urged the Pakistanis to persuade militant groups to pursue peace in Afghanistan, and to tackle them if they don't cooperate.

Earlier, the then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, blamed a deadly bombing at the U.S. embassy in Kabul on the Haqqani network, which has long ties to al Qaeda. He said it acted as a "veritable arm" of Pakistani intelligence.

Pakistan argues that the United States needs to be patient and gain a greater understanding of the region's complexities before acting, and that pressure would only hurt efforts to pacify Afghanistan.

"'Push' is never wise. I think that every country must be allowed to develop their own strategy and their own timing," said a confident-sounding Khar, stressing that another incursion by NATO or the United States would be harmful.

"What is unacceptable to Pakistan is to have any troops on the ground. What is unacceptable to Pakistan is not to respect the inviolability of our borders," she said. "All of these things make it more difficult for us to be an effective partner."

While the United States is expected to keep a modest military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014, all of President Barack Obama's 'surge' troops will be home by fall and the administration -

looking to refocus on domestic priorities in a presidential election year - is exploring further reductions.

Khar said the United States should take a closer look at realities on the ground in Afghanistan, where the Kabul government is hoping to make security forces more effective before Western combat troops are due home by the end of 2014.

She said: "They need to ensure that they are bound by ground realities and not artificial lines of any type, timelines or anything else."