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Pakistan's military sets Afghan terms

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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With the United States striving hard to establish dialogue with the Taliban, Asia Times Online sources privy to the Pakistan military establishment reveal that the army has clearly spelled out that Washington must make sure any Indian involvement does not go beyond development work in Afghanistan and that Delhi plays no part in any overall strategy concerning Afghanistan.

The United States has said that it wants to reach out to second- and third-tier Taliban and, in doing so, exert pressure on the top Taliban leaders to seek reconciliation. Instead, Pakistan has emphasized that it is necessary to talk to Taliban leader Mullah Omar and his appointed representatives.

At the same time, Pakistan has rejected US proposals for the balkanization of [Afghanistan](#), by which it was proposed to appoint an autonomous controlling authority for southeastern and southwestern Afghanistan - the Pashtun-majority areas.

The Pakistani military has also given assurances that US officials will be granted visas, but, unlike previously, they will not be allowed visas on arrival. Further, for the first time, Pakistan has clearly refused to mount operations against the Sirajuddin Haqqani network, as well as that of his ally, Hafiz Gul Bahadur, as they are not hostile towards Pakistan.

At this important juncture of the American-led war in Afghanistan, Washington desperately needs Pakistan's support, as it did after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the US to stage the invasion of Afghanistan.

Pakistan's demands were relayed in recent encounters with US officials by, among others, the

chairman of the [joint chiefs of staff](#) committee, General Tariq Majid; the chief of army staff, General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani; and the director general of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), [Lieutenant General](#) Ahmad Shuja Pasha. The US officials included visiting Defense Secretary Robert Gates and General Stanley McChrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan. Majid also set out Pakistan's position at a recent North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) meeting in Brussels.

A straight-forward encounter

In the years following the invasion on Afghanistan in October 2001, Pakistan was frequently accused of duplicity in the US-led "[war on terror](#)", even though it provided extensive logistical support. This included bases for the US [Air Force](#) to carry out strikes in landlocked Afghanistan, transit routes for NATO supplies (now flowing freely again), collaboration with US intelligence agencies to arrest top al-Qaeda members, and [military operations](#) in the Pakistani tribal areas against pro-Taliban militants.

Yet the Americans still believed that Pakistan's support was half-hearted and that it tacitly supported the Taliban. One reason for this belief was Pakistan's opposition in principle from the beginning to the war on the Taliban. Former president Pervez Musharraf consistently urged the Americans to engage the Taliban in a political process.

In the early days of the conflict, the Americans were not interested in any form of reconciliation with the Taliban as the regime had been toppled in a matter of months and its leaders were holed up in the mountains straddling Pakistan and Afghanistan: Washington had no reason to talk to such losers.

Nine years on, the situation has changed dramatically. The American war machine is under siege and huge swathes of Afghanistan are either under direct Taliban control or heavily influenced by the militants.

The US and its allies are still game for a fight, though. In a matter of days, thousands of coalition and Afghan troops are expected to try to take back Marjah in Helmand province in one of the biggest offensives of the war. It will be the first major operation since US [President Barack Obama](#) announced last year that 30,000 additional troops would be sent to Afghanistan. (Pakistan has made its opposition to this surge clear to the US.)

However, it is widely acknowledged that the big push is aimed primarily at softening up the Taliban, rather than defeating them in the field, and that talks remain the only viable path to peace.

Just as the US has over the years changed its thinking on Afghanistan, given the realities on the ground, it has revised its opinion on Pakistan.

About two years ago, the administration of George W Bush became convinced that a coalition [government](#) comprising secular and liberal political parties would handle the "war on terror" more effectively than Pakistan's [security](#) apparatus, such as that ruled over by Musharraf, a general.

However, although such a secular government emerged after Musharraf stepped down in August 2008, it has not lived up to expectations. It has not won credibility among the masses due to economic mismanagement, the mishandling of a judicial crisis and the failure to adopt a straightforward policy against militancy.

By the end of 2009, the coalition government of President Asif Ali Zardari was riven with political in-fighting and there were large ethnic riots in the port city of Karachi, mainly between two pro-American political parties.

It was evident that political players were in no position to handle the sensitive issues relating to fighting the "war on terror", and in a short time all decision-making concerning security issues passed on to the military. Although militants have not been conclusively defeated in Pakistan, the military has waged several big operations in the tribal areas.

From the US perspective, more important is the rapport that has been established between US and Pakistan military leaders; even US [Secretary of State](#) Hillary Clinton indicated on a visit to Pakistan that the White House favored dealing directly with the military establishment on issues concerning the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Kiani has explained to the US that while the Pakistani army - and Kiani himself - are essentially strategically India-centric, they will work in partnership with the Americans to help the US win the war in Afghanistan. Pakistan sees the next phase of this as the eradication of terrorism and militancy from the region and the incorporation of the majority Pashtun population of Afghanistan, which supports Taliban, fully into the political process.

A friendship of two armies

Kiani is scheduled to retire in November, while ISI chief Pasha is due to leave office in March. Zardari's government is preparing to promote officers with whom it could work, that is, who would listen the government.

The president of the National Defense University, Lieutenant General Muhammad Yousuf, and [the Corps](#) Commander Gujranwala, Lieutenant General Nadeem Taj, are the most-discussed candidates in President House for the position of chief of army staff.

Zardari has also indicated his intention to revive the position of national security advisor to be filled by a retired four-star general to control the ISI.

The government is making all efforts to take Washington into its trust, but according to insiders it is having little success. On the other hand, the military establishment is heavily engaged in day-to-day [business](#) with the Americans to tackle the military and political issues involved in finding a solution to the Afghan insurgency. If Pakistan's political government tries to bypass the military, it might face serious embarrassment.

Washington apparently supports the idea of extending Pasha's term for another year - Kiani

would take that decision, whether or not Zardari approved. As for Kiani, he has been heard to say that his position "is not an issue at the moment".

Pakistan has once again emerged as vitally important to the US in dealing with Afghanistan, from securing NATO's supply lines to cutting off the supplies of the Taliban and getting them to the negotiating table. Washington is apparently ready to sacrifice its political allies in Pakistan and work directly with the military to achieve these goals.