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## Pakistan increasingly playing ball to rein in Afghanistan Taliban

By Gordon Lubold, Staff writer

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Pakistani leaders visit Washington this week, marking what American officials are billing as a relationship on the mend as the two countries' antiterrorism efforts appear increasingly aligned.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is hosting discussions that include Pakistani army chief Ashfaq Kayani and other officials, spanning a range of issues. But of most interest to the US is what Pakistan is doing to fight militants inside its borders, an effort that could be a game-changer for US operations in Afghanistan.

That effort has been increasingly successful, US and Pakistani officials say. As Pakistan kills or captures militants it sees as threatening its own stability, it recognizes that it is also helping the US make strides in its war on terrorism.

"I think it is fair to say the relationship is gaining momentum," says one senior US military official.

Pakistani officials recently arrested Mullah Baradar, the operational commander of the so-called Afghanistan Taliban that targets coalition forces inside Afghanistan. That is likely the biggest prize Pakistani officials can offer to demonstrate their emerging commitment to helping the US

fight Islamic extremism. In addition to Mr. Baradar, six other members of the Quetta Shurah, the leadership council of the militant group, have also been arrested, according to independent reporting by The Monitor.

Now Pakistan wants something in return.

Pakistani officials brought with them a 56-page document detailing a range of requests, a portion of which pertain to military issues like drone aircraft and other military assistance. US military officials are analyzing the document, the existence of which was first reported by The Wall Street Journal Tuesday, but would not discuss its contents.

“This is not simply about asking and receiving items,” said Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell Tuesday. “Obviously, there are things that we both need to work on to further this relationships, and we, I think there’s a clear desire to proceed down that road.”

“It does include some needs on their part,” said the senior military official.

After fits and starts, the US-Pakistan relationship has strengthened considerably over the last year, driven in part by a multi-billion-dollar foreign assistance aid package for Pakistan passed by the US in 2009. Meanwhile, Pakistan has shown progress against those militants. The US has tried quietly to provide assistance, keeping its distance while giving Pakistan the breathing room it needs to be effective.

This has helped the US to declare that operations against Al Qaeda, with Pakistani assistance, have begun to degrade the terrorist organization.

“Al Qaeda is under significant pressure,” according to a senior military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity but echoed an increasingly recurring administration line. The official said operations in Pakistan, US “global” efforts, and other initiatives were beginning to have an effect on Al Qaeda, even if he didn’t describe what effect that was. “I think it’s much more difficult for Al Qaeda to operate,” he said.

Last week, CIA Director Leon Panetta said Al Qaeda is significantly hobbled, pointing to the combination of actions the Pakistani government is taking against it and other militants there. US drone attacks mounted by the CIA, which Mr. Panetta called one of the “most aggressive operations” in CIA history, are another example of operations given the tacit approval of Pakistan.

All of this comes as the US continues the surge of troops into Afghanistan. By fall, the US will have as many as 100,000 troops there, in addition to a force 45,000-strong of NATO and non-NATO troops. A Marine combat offensive in central Helmand province in the south has so far appeared to be a success, and most combat operations there have concluded. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan, is now preparing to send forces into Kandahar to the east, where a more gradual, longer-term operation will begin to unfold this summer.

But the key to success in Afghanistan lies, to a large degree, inside Pakistan. There, militant groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban in the Swat valley have been left largely alone, at least until now.

“The big question is, ‘have the Pakistanis changed their calculus about the risks of harboring militants,’ ” says Alexander Their, a senior analyst at the US Institute for Peace in Washington, who believes that shift has begun to take place. “In so far as they see that balance changing, then they are more able both politically and strategically to constrict that space, and I think we’re starting to see signs of that.”