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The US in a Pakistani maze

By Harsh Pant

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As it seeks to get out of Afghanistan, US reliance on Pakistan is near total. Recent events show that clearly

As Washington tries to find its way out of Afghanistan, Pakistan has emerged as the central player dictating the terms of this emerging endgame in South Asia. Pakistan's army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, and its foreign minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, led a delegation to the US last week to reopen a ministerial-level "strategic dialogue" with the Obama administration. It seemed like a veritable love-fest, with the US secretary of state underlining that a "new day" had begun in the ties between the two states and Qureshi reinforcing the central role of Pakistan in the US' fight against extremism. The Pakistani foreign minister declared himself to be a "happy" and "satisfied" man at the conclusion of these talks. The Obama administration left no stone unturned in courting Pakistan, with the US secretary of defence declaring Pakistan's counter-insurgency efforts to be "extraordinary".

Pakistani officials had arrived in Washington with a 56-page list of "priorities", but there was movement on only a few, though crucial ones. A new \$7.5 billion, five-year US aid package for Pakistan's energy, water, agriculture and educational sectors was announced. Differences over \$1 billion unpaid US reimbursements for counter-insurgency operations were resolved.

Pakistan has received at least \$7 billion worth of arms from the US since 11 September 2001, most of which has been directed at building its military profile to counter India. The latest wish

list included more equipment primarily directed at countering India's military might. Some of the major defence supplies that Pakistan would be receiving over the coming years include eight P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft, five 250 TOW anti-armour missile systems, six AN/TPS-77 surveillance radars, six C-130E transport aircraft, and 20 AH-1F Cobra attack helicopters. Washington is also planning to supply Islamabad with F-16 fighter jets and naval frigates.

For all the talk of ensuring that the civilian government in Islamabad gets strengthened, the Obama administration has completely shifted the balance of power in favour of the army in Pakistan. Kayani has emerged as the most important player and he is relishing his role. He has sidelined President Asif Ali Zardari; he has gone back on the understanding reached between India and Pakistan during the Musharraf period; he has made it amply clear that Pakistani government cannot be allowed to settle the Kashmir dispute by making the Line of Control irrelevant; more damagingly, he has raked up the non-issue of water to justify the Pakistan army's India-centric defence posture.

This is undoubtedly Pakistan army's moment. It is feeling that after years of marginalization, the US needs it more than any time in recent past. More significantly, a perception is gaining ground that it is winning in shaping the strategic map of the region for the furtherance of its own interests.

Pakistan has made it clear time and again that only Islamabad and Rawalpindi can bring the Afghan Taliban into the political mainstream. It captured Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a senior Taliban leader, to sabotage the United Nations' direct back-channel negotiations with Baradar's faction of the Taliban. Pakistan army wants to retain its central role in mediation efforts at all costs.

Ever since the US-India civilian nuclear energy cooperation agreement, the Pakistani establishment has been demanding a similar deal from the US. After rejecting such demands for long, the Obama administration has been shifting its position on this issue. The US ambassador to Pakistan, Anne Patterson, has been reported to have suggested that the US was "beginning to have a discussion with the Pakistan government" on the country's desire to tap nuclear energy.

Though it is unlikely that there will be any movement on this issue any time soon, the Obama administration clearly is not in a position to ignore the demands of the Pakistani security establishment at this critical juncture in its Afghanistan endeavour. It has already effectively marginalized India in Afghanistan. In its desperation to get out of Afghanistan, the Obama administration might be taking an approach that will do more harm than good over the long term. The biggest challenge comes from the rapid ascendancy of the Pakistani military in the nation's power structure and, as a corollary, in shaping Pakistan's strategic agenda in recent months. Instead of helping the civilian government to get traction, Washington itself has pulled the rug from under its doddering feet. By relying on the Pakistani military to secure its short-term ends in Afghanistan, the US has made sure that the fundamental malaise afflicting Pakistan—the militarization of the Pakistani state—will continue to afflict Pakistan and South Asia with grave implications for sustainable long-term peace in the subcontinent.

India cannot be expected to make peace with a security establishment in Pakistan that continues to raise the bogey of the “Indian threat” to justify retaining its predominance over the Pakistani polity. It is time for New Delhi to up the ante and make it clear to the US that vital Indian interests cannot be taken for granted. The US’ credibility as a serious partner in India’s fight against terrorism is increasingly in doubt. India should underline that another terrorist attack will force New Delhi to respond. Just as the US is ignoring Indian interests and trying to preserve its own, India should also start envisaging a more independent foreign policy posture, less reliant on American benevolence.