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## The Zardari Equation

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High drama seems imminent in the most crucial war-on-terror front as Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari warns of conspiracies brewing against his person – political as well as physical.

Even those vaguely familiar with his (and the country's) history understand that the physical threat is neither new nor going away anytime soon, it is part and parcel of his chosen package. So it is almost certainly his gut sensing danger on the political front, that has him worried.

As a first step, he's been apparently successful in getting the party to rally around him. Talk of a deepening rift with his handpicked prime minister has ceased, as Yousuf Raza Gilani was the first to stand by him. The opposition party, usually only too willing to stealthily approach the GHQ, seems much wiser this time. In fact, Nawaz Sharif has won himself precious points in the domestic, as well as international media, by firmly posturing against another coup, no matter how business goes about in Islamabad. And the army, under General Kiyani, deserves special appreciation not only for the clean up in Swat, but also for not yielding to the temptation of everybody knows what.

Yet Zardari has ample reason to be worried. Most of the country is still unable to stomach his rise to the presidency that too a presidency still to be defanged. People's expectations from the return to democracy after the Feb '08 elections lie in ruins. Going by most on-ground accounts, rarely has corruption and the general letdown factor been higher in the country's largely troubled political history.

His hide-and-seek on the most important issue following the election (chief justice case) lent credence to fears about his unreliable nature. Little surprise that the post-election PPP-PML(N) romance was short lived, and mutual mistrust quickly reverted to historical levels.

More revealing is the type of political incompetence that distances the powerful military. In one breath, he threw the military's entire nuclear doctrine out of the window when he claimed a "no first strike policy." (Maybe they didn't air those long let-me-tell-you-about-deterrence speeches by Gen Musharraf in jail). Even worse, he all but ruined decades of Kashmir policy by equating all resistance activity in the valley with terrorism.

His antics have clearly angered opposition politicians as well as the army high command. He'll be less smart than he seems if he does not detect a bit of self-preservation in Gilani's amplified loyalty, or if it slips him that the PML(N) is not presently concerned with tipping over his government prematurely because it is busy consolidating outside Punjab for the next general election. All this while, the all-noticing army remains silent with good reason. Despite the unsettling internal politics peculiar to Islamabad, the country remains prominently featured in news bulletins across the world. Having originally midwived the Taleban after the tragic geo-political nightmare of the '80 and '90s, its attempts at reining in the illegitimate child are watched closely and learnt from in power centres of the world as urban guerilla warfare becomes the 21<sup>st</sup> century way of doing the war business. Given the circumstances, it was only natural that General Kiyani stayed well within his mandated space, being a bigger menace for (late) Baitullah Mehsud than President Zardari.

From here, then, commences the true test of Zardari's guile. Time, allies and circumstance are already less supportive. In the absence of visible improvement in the political sphere as well as quality of life for millions across the country who are paying the price of political ineptitude, even the hand of the superpower is more likely to squeeze than tap the shoulder. He played his cards well by engineering a perfectly legitimate rise to the top. But now he's mutating the result towards the oft-repeating situation where the ballot box might again be put under lock and key in some back office of the GHQ, this time perhaps to the people's relief. Zardari will have to wriggle well to avoid the axe.