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The Washington Post

Pakistanis voice concerns about Obama's new Afghanistan plan

By Pamela Constable and Joshua Partlow

December 3, 2009

ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN -- President Obama's new strategy for combating Islamist insurgents in [Afghanistan](#) fell on skeptical ears Wednesday in next-door [Pakistan](#), a much larger, nuclear-armed state that Obama said was "at the core" of the plan and had even more at stake than Afghanistan.

Analysts and residents on both sides of the 1,600-mile border expressed concerns about Obama's plan to send 30,000 more troops into Afghanistan in an effort to quickly train local security forces and allow U.S. troops to begin leaving by July 2011.

But officials in Pakistan, which is fighting its own Taliban insurgency, expressed particular concern about their role in the strategy, which calls on this country to step up its cooperation in the fight against terrorism in exchange for a pledge of a long-term partnership "after the guns fall silent."

In a cautious statement, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said the government welcomed Obama's "reaffirmation of partnership." At the same time, it stressed the "need for clarity" in the new U.S. policy and said it wanted to "ensure that there would be no adverse fallout on Pakistan."

The partnership with Pakistan is key if Washington is to succeed in a region that Obama said Tuesday night remains an enduring threat to U.S. security. Islamist insurgents, including members of al-Qaeda, have for years enjoyed a sanctuary in the lawless tribal regions of Pakistan. Since long before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the country's officials have been accused of favoring an unofficial two-track policy in which they pursue violent extremists who oppose the Pakistani state but ignore or even assist those whose targets are across the border.

Washington has now issued a sharp warning that that policy must end.

"For the first time, Obama was very categorical about these safe havens and sanctuaries. It's now going to be much more difficult for those in Pakistan who have been in a state of denial about it," analyst Ahmed Rashid told Dawn Television here. "It's really crunchtime."

Obama's strategy presents the Pakistanis with two central problems. First, they fear a troop buildup next door will send a surge of Afghan guerrilla fighters into Pakistan, further inflaming the situation in a country that has confronted a growing tide of urban bombings and terrorist attacks in the past several months.

The Islamabad government also has come under conflicting political pressures. While the United States wants the Pakistanis to eliminate al-Qaeda sanctuaries on their side of the border, security officials are focused on a military campaign against the Pakistani Taliban forces that are carrying out domestic attacks.

"Our military and civilian leaders need to speak with one voice, so the Americans can see we mean business," said Imtiaz Gul, a political analyst. "But we have to keep our own long-term interests in mind, while taking on the extremist groups that are of concern to them."

Although the United States has provided large amounts of military and economic aid to Pakistan, many Pakistanis remain suspicious of Washington's motives, in part because of its strong friendship with [India](#), Pakistan's rival and neighbor.

And despite the recent domestic attacks, many Pakistanis disagree with Obama's assessment that Pakistan and Afghanistan have "a common enemy." Instead, they blame the United States for the Afghanistan conflict and are reluctant to be drawn into it.

"The U.S. is seen as an occupier in Afghanistan, and there's no way that can be turned around," said Pervez Hoodbhoy, a nuclear physicist and defense analyst in Islamabad. He said that a Taliban victory in Afghanistan would be "terrible for Pakistan," but that the United States had created the problem and must "clean up the mess before it leaves."

On the other side of the border, some Afghans place blame on Pakistan, saying that unless its military and intelligence services show more willingness to confront the Afghan Taliban and deny them sanctuary in the tribal regions of Pakistan, the U.S. military will face an impossible task in Afghanistan.

"Unless we really solve the challenge and the issue of Pakistan, I think you can bring in 50,000 more soldiers, 100,000 more soldiers, but in my view we will still have this problem," said Hikmet Karzai, director of the Center for Conflict and Peace Studies in Kabul. Unless Afghans and Pakistanis sit down and discuss the issues, he said, "I think we're going to be in this mess for a very long time."

Afghans raised their own concerns about the troop buildup. After eight years of war, many are deeply skeptical that any amount of U.S. forces can make Afghanistan safer. Some said the surge in troops could deepen the perception that the Americans are occupiers propping up a corrupt government, led by President Hamid Karzai, who has just begun a second five-year term after a fraud-plagued election.

"If the number of troops increases, insecurity and fighting will increase, more people will be backing the insurgents, more people will die," said Gul Mohammad, a retiree in Kabul. "If they leave, it would be better. Our Islamic territory will be calm, and the fighting will be over."

Paradoxically, many Afghans are equally concerned that the Americans will abandon them as they did in 1989, after Soviet troops pulled out. U.S. Ambassador Karl W. Eikenberry tried to alleviate those fears Wednesday. "We're committed to Afghanistan for the long term," he told a group of Afghan journalists.