The Pakistan Paradox

by Dennis Ross **(/experts/dennis-ross)**

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Articles & Testimony

On the day that Pakistan saw a new prime minister sworn into office, one of Pakistan's leading newspapers, The News, led with the headline, "Hands Off Please, Uncle Sam." The article was a response to the arrival of two senior American envoys, Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte and Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher. They were hoping to foster ties to a new government, true, but their more immediate mission was to convince the new prime minister to preserve President Pervez Musharraf's policies of partnering with the U.S. in the war on terror.

One can hardly blame the Bush Administration for being concerned about developments in Pakistan. It is a nuclear-armed country; it is the front in the war on terror; it will largely determine the fate of Afghanistan, particularly as the Taliban has been able to recoup by operating with relative ease across its border; segments of its intelligence and security services have Islamist sympathies; and the leaders who have emerged from the elections, Asif Ali Zardari and Nawaz Sharif, have made it clear that they intend to deal with terror by talking to extremist groups in the tribal border areas, while also opposing American bombing in those areas.

In the last several months, we have seen that President Musharraf has lost the vast majority of the Pakistani public. His declaration of emergency law and disbanding of the Pakistani Supreme Court last fall was the last straw for a public that had already grown disillusioned with Musharraf's effort to hold onto power regardless of the costs to the country. The parliamentary elections in February became a referendum on his rule -- and he lost unmistakably. The Bush Administration and the president personally have been seen by Pakistanis, fairly or not, as being more committed to Musharraf than to Pakistan and the rule of law.

To make matters worse, Pakistanis increasingly believe that they are paying the price for our war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Pakistanis are interpreting the increasing terror attacks in the country as a direct response to the recent uptick in our bombing of Al Qaeda targets in the border areas. All of this means that a negative reaction to the arrival of senior U.S. envoys should not have been unexpected. Pakistanis believe that they are carrying out a democratic coup, sweeping away the illegitimate underpinnings of the Musharraf presidency, and are not about to take kindly to American efforts to shore up Musharraf or preserve his policies.

They want change -- not just with Musharraf himself, but also with his policies for dealing with terror. The question

for the U.S. is whether we can live with the change, and at the same time, manage it so that Al Qaeda and the Taliban not only don't benefit, but also lose their sanctuary in Pakistan.

The irony of the Pakistan election is that Musharraf was not the only big loser. So were the religious parties that had dominated the Frontier Province over the last five years. The religious parties were among the most conservative in Pakistan and unmistakably sympathetic to Islamist forces. Rather than opposing Al Qaeda and the Taliban, they seemed emotionally connected to them. Musharraf often appeared to act with the sensibilities of these parties in mind.

Hence another irony: Musharraf, our partner in the war on terror, was not so energetic in going after Al Qaeda and the Taliban in the border areas. On the contrary, he and his intelligence services seemed to turn a blind eye to the Taliban's reconstituting itself, as it recruited new members and planned attacks into Afghanistan from across the border in Pakistan. Repeatedly, Afghani President Hamid Karzai complained of Pakistani complicity with the Taliban along the border. Increasingly, U.S. officials over the last several years have gone to Pakistan to push Musharraf to do more to root out the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

Last year, the U.S. intelligence community concluded that Al Qaeda had largely recovered its strength in no small part because it was able to operate much more freely in the Waziristan region of Pakistan. A 2006 deal Musharraf had struck with the tribes in North and South Waziristan backfired and contributed to the strengthening of both Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

One more irony: The big winner in the elections in the tribal areas was the Awami National Party (A.N.P.), which has long accused Musharraf and the Pakistani intelligence services of duplicity in its dealings with Islamist groups. The A.N.P. opposes talks with Al Qaeda and foreign militants because, as Afrasiab Khattak, the secretary general of the A.N.P., has said, "We don't have a common language with them." But the party does favor an approach that emphasizes dialogue with the local tribes, economic development and assistance to the area, and the use of the police rather than the military (except in limited circumstances) to bring peace to the provinces. If anything, Nawaz Sharif has been more outspoken about how to deal with terror, calling for talking rather than the use of force.

With these not entirely favorable conditions in mind, how should the U.S. proceed? Deputy Secretary Negroponte was no doubt right when he said before leaving Karachi last week that "Security measures are obviously necessary when one is dealing with irreconcilable elements who want to destroy our very way of life. I don't know see how you can talk with those kinds of people."

But what about the model we have now been using in Anbar province in Iraq? The Sunnis in the "Sons of Iraq" and the "Awakening Councils" have become our partner in fighting Al Qaeda in Iraq. Al Qaeda produced a backlash among the Sunnis and we have seen the benefit of supporting these groups. Is it possible to cultivate a similar realignment in Pakistan? Could the A.N.P. approach be one that we should support in a similar fashion?

One thing is for sure: There has been a change in Pakistan, and it is being driven by those who are emphasizing democratic processes and the rule of law. We should be on the right side of this. What's more, we have little choice. Pakistanis are moving in a direction that we cannot stop but should try to channel. That is common sense and good statecraft.

But as the Pakistanis make their decisions, they should also know that we have interests and stakes and will not be indifferent to what they do. Surely, for their own interests, they don't want those who employ terror and who are responsible for killing Benazir Bhutto to further entrench themselves. Separating the tribal groups from Al Qaeda and the Taliban is a strategy that could work if orchestrated effectively.

To be sure, the new Pakistani leadership might be tempted to cut a deal with Al Qaeda and the Taliban that would see them stop their attacks in Pakistan by permitting them to operate and plan attacks at our expense. We need to

prevent that, and we probably can, if we are clear about our interests and needs. We should say that we will help provide financial and other means for their new strategy, assuming it is transparent. We should also repeat what Senator Barack Obama said last summer: If we get actionable intelligence about terror acts being prepared in these provinces of Pakistan and the Pakistanis won't act, we will.

Statecraft involves conditioning attitudes in private even with those who we hope will be our partners. Making clear we will respect Pakistani interests and needs is one part of statecraft; so is making sure there are no illusions about our interests.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World **(templateC04.php?CID=270)** . ❖

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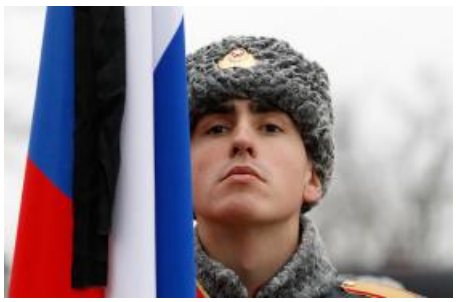

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