

# New phase in Pak-US ties

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THE most prominent feature of the new phase in US-Pakistan is that it owes much to the personal equation between President Pervez Musharraf and President George W. Bush. If any proof was needed of this important factor, it was amply provided by General Musharraf's recent Washington stopover and meeting with the American leader.

Brimming with confidence after his talks with Mr Bush, President Musharraf described his meeting as "wonderful", and said that it had "paved the way for a long-term, strategic and broad-based relationship" with the world's only superpower. He described Pakistan as a "front-line state" successfully fighting against Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, and disclosed that Pakistan had arrested 600 Al Qaeda and Taliban operatives, including some of their key leaders.

Perhaps no US president has ever publicly praised a Pakistani leader in such effusive terms, even during the worst days of the Cold War or when the struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was at its height, as President Bush did at the joint media appearance after the talks. Calling his Pakistani counterpart "a world leader", the American president said that "there is a relationship in which I can call upon my friend to help deal with international issues such as the development of a Palestinian state." He said he looked forward to working with President Musharraf on that important issue.

Praising President Musharraf for restoring democracy in Pakistan, Mr Bush observed that the world could learn from Pakistan that Muslims could also have a democratic set-up. "There are some in the world who do not believe that a Muslim society can self-govern. Some believe that the only solution for government in parts of the world is for there to be tyranny or despotism. I don't believe that. The Pakistani people have proven that those cynics are wrong," said Mr Bush. He went on to observe that President Musharraf can help in world peace by reminding the sceptics what is possible. Expressing unequivocal support for the Pakistani president, Mr Bush said he looked forward to "working closely" with him for the next four years.

Assessing US-Pakistan ties, President Bush said: "All in all, our relationships are good, they are strong, and they will remain that way." When asked how he would define the long-term vision he has for ties with Pakistan, Mr Bush replied that it was a relationship which was very mature in this sense. He, however, was careful not to use the term "strategic" in regard to bilateral relations between the two countries.

The United States is all set to deliver to Pakistan defence equipment worth \$1.2 billion which will include eight P-3C Orion Surveillance aircraft for its navy, 200 Tow 2-A missiles and 14 TOW 2-A missiles. The

Pentagon has already notified the Congress about the proposed sale. Although the proposed sale of equipment will not affect the basic military balance in South Asia, India has cautioned the US against arms sale to Pakistan. "US arms supply to Pakistan," says Indian foreign minister Natwar Singh, "will have a negative impact on the goodwill the US enjoys in India, particularly as a sister democracy."

Though the issue of the F-16 fighter jets to upgrade the defence capability of Pakistan was discussed during the talks, no decision seems to have been taken. Pakistan wants to buy up to 25 F-16s, costing \$25 million each, by mid-2005 to add another squadron of these jets to its airforce. In order to mollify India, the US has reportedly offered to sell sophisticated weapons to New Delhi, including F-16s.

While there is nothing wrong with the policy of the present government to maintain friendly and close relations with the US, we must keep in mind that this is an essentially unequal friendship between a superpower and a middle order country. It is a relationship that can only last so long as mutual interests endure. It could also mean having to sacrifice national interests in order to sustain close cooperation.

According to an *Indian Express* report, India is not interested in the purchase of F-16s because it already has Russian SU-30 MKI and French Mirage 2000. Though it has objected to the proposed US arms sale to Pakistan, India is itself interested in purchasing weapons from Washington.

During defence secretary Rumsfeld's current visit to New Delhi, India is likely to discuss a possible purchase of the Patriot missile system. The Patriot is a ground-based missile system that can defend against ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and aircraft. The proposed sale of arms to India by the United States also reportedly includes C-130 stretched medium lift transport aircraft and P-3C Orion maritime surveillance planes. According to the Indian media, the US offer has already been discussed by the Indian ambassador to the US, Ronen Sen, with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee.

It is important to view the new phase in Pakistan-US relations in its proper perspective.

With Pakistan as a front-line state in the fight against Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, the US at the moment needs it more than the other way round. But this equation will change and the importance of Pakistan will diminish as the fight against terrorism progresses and Al Qaeda and other terrorists are decimated. Another downside of the relationship is that being based primarily on a personal equation between two heads of government, the institutions are not deeply involved in it, which renders its durability doubtful.

There is a qualitative difference in US relations with Pakistan and in its ties with India. It is with New Delhi that Washington is developing a strategic relationship. In his National Strategic Review of September 2001, President Bush described India as a "strategic partner" of the US. In similar statements on January 13, 2004, President Bush and the then prime minister of India, Atal Behari Vajpayee announced a new strategic equation between the United States and India. Explaining the rationale behind the decision, Mr Bush said: "The expanded cooperation is an extended milestone in transforming the relationship between the US and India based increasingly on common values and common interests." Also, Mr Bush's statement that a partnership with India would increase stability in Asia was an acknowledgement that India

had assumed a significant position in US strategic and security plans in Asia. The most important factor influencing US policy seems to be the perception in Washington that in the post-Cold War era, India as a stable democracy, based on institutional solidity, would be a more reliable partner in US policy objectives in the Asian region.

The current warmth in Pakistan-US relations should not make us unduly euphoric or oblivious of the realities on the ground. We must guard against the temptation of self-deception — the inclination to assess situations in terms of preconceived notions or wishful thinking while ignoring or rejecting any signs to the contrary. Irrespective of the upswing in our relations with the sole superpower, we should pursue the ongoing peace process with India sincerely and seriously because there is no alternative to a Pakistan at peace with itself and its neighbours.

There is nothing wrong with the policy of the present government to maintain friendly and close relations with the United States. However, we must keep in mind that it is essentially an unequal relationship, a relationship between a superpower and a middle order country. As between two unequal persons, similarly between two unequal nations, there cannot be friendship. There can only be a relationship based on mutual interests and the relationship will last as long as those mutual interests last.

We should also keep in mind that interests of nations change with the passage of time. In relations between a superpower and a smaller country, it is an uphill task to build and sustain close cooperation and understanding, without sacrificing national honour or interests. This is because the relationship is basically asymmetrical. It is so easy to become a client state of the superpower, unless the utmost vigilance is exercised. The real challenge of our foreign policy is to establish a cooperative relationship with the United States without sacrificing our self-respect or vital national interests.

The writer is a former ambassador