

US-Pakistan relations in post-poll period

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Pak-P. Relations

Dawn 27/11/04

THE US presidential elections generated a lot of interest in Pakistan and other states in Asia and Africa. The leaders and the informed public in these countries keenly observed the elections because hardly any state has escaped the fallout of US unilateralism and the use of overwhelming military power to pre-empt perceived terrorist threats to American citizens, territory and interests.

A large number of governments expressed reservations of varying degrees on this policy but the US leadership paid no heed to their concerns. The government of Pakistan is delighted with the re-election of George W. Bush because the Pakistani leadership and the Bush administration have been working together in the global war against terrorism since September 2001. The official interaction between Pakistan and the US is smooth and there is a common perspective on stability in Afghanistan and the containment of terrorism.

Top officials of the two governments meet frequently to discuss matters of mutual interest and General Pervez Musharraf is said to have developed a personal equation with President George Bush and outgoing secretary of state Colin Powell. In the post-election period, both sides can build on what they have already achieved.

were imposed on Pakistan when it exploded nuclear devices on May 28 and 30, 1998.

Third, new economic sanctions, described as "democracy sanctions", were imposed on Pakistan when General Pervez Musharraf assumed power on October 12, 1999.

Fourth, limited-scope sanctions were imposed in November 2000 for two years on some departments/agencies of Pakistan (i.e. Ministry of Defence, Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Organization), debarring them from business deals in the US, on account of receiving missile technology and equipment from China. These sanctions were extended in September 2001 (a few days before the terrorist attacks in the US) and March 2003.

The first three categories of sanctions were lifted in October 2001 because Pakistan's decision

Bush also guarantees that the \$3 billion five-year assistance package, committed during President Musharraf's visit to the US in 2003 and approved recently, will continue.

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The Musharraf regime's continued confrontation with the opposition is likely to adversely affect its efforts to combat terrorism. The Bush administration may be left with no choice but to advise the Musharraf regime to go for political accommodation and liberalization of the polity.

Pakistan and the US can diverge on the precise strategies for combating terrorism. This can happen if the security situation deteriorates in Afghanistan and its newly elected government is unable to enforce its writ beyond Kabul and a couple of other cities. The US may seek greater Pakistani military support to cope with these challenges.

This may involve strict security measures in the tribal areas and punitive measures against Pakistani hard-line and fundamentalist Islamic groups that openly sympathize with the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The Pakistan government may find it difficult to pursue its

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of the ordinary people and political circles in Pakistan has been somewhat different. Most of them were disappointed that the US had re-elected George Bush. This was mainly because of the widely shared perception in Pakistan (and other Muslim countries) that the Bush administration pursued anti-Muslim policies. Its policies on counter-terrorism placed the blame of terrorist attacks in the US on Islam and the Muslims. Other factors that caused alienation in the Muslim world included the pro-Israel US policy on the Palestinian question, US military action in Afghanistan and Iraq and the US military occupation of Iraq.

Describing George Bush and his close associates as anti-Islam and anti-Muslim, ordinary folk in Pakistan were sympathetic towards John Kerry, hoping that he would soften the hard-line US approach towards the Muslim world and assign a greater role to the UN in coping with the Iraq problem.

America today suffers from a serious image problem in Pakistan and other Muslim countries. At the popular level, people fear the Bush administration in its second term will pursue a tougher line towards the Muslim world and resort to brutal means to curb the insurgency in Iraq. The attack by US troops on Fallujah is cited as the unfolding of this policy in the post-election period.

A similar approach may be adopted to crush opposition to the Karzai government in Afghanistan, to be followed by intense military pressure on Iran and Syria. The first statement of George Bush after his re-election makes no attempt to allay these fears.

Pakistan and the US reinvigorated their bilateral relations in the post-9/11 period because the former decided to join the US-sponsored global effort to combat terrorism. Prior to such a dramatic shift in Pakistan's policy, Pakistan was under four types of US sanctions. First, all economic assistance and military sales were suspended to Pakistan in October 1990 when the US invoked the Pressler Amendment pertaining to Pakistan's nuclear programme.

Second, additional sanctions

to join the US-led war against terrorism made it relevant to US global and regional security interests.

Direct US economic assistance to Pakistan since early 2002 has focused on fiscal support, debt relief, technical and commodity assistance, financial and technical support in the fields of education, health care, food, institutional capacity-building, especially the strengthening of democracy, elimination of child labour and narcotics control. The US has also extended economic and technical assistance for strengthening security on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, improvement of communications and road building in the tribal areas, counter-terrorism measures, and record-keeping of people leaving or entering the country through different entry-exit points.

Furthermore, Pakistan also obtained economic assistance from the IMF, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank for various development projects, including poverty reduction. The Aid-to-Pakistan Consortium recommended its members in December 2001 to reschedule Pakistan's debts for 38 years. The improved relations between Pakistan and the US enabled the government of Pakistan to convince the Bush administration in December 2003-January 2004 that it was not involved in the unauthorized transfers of some nuclear equipment and technical know-how from Pakistan by Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan.

The re-election of George W. Bush ensures that the momentum of the reinvigorated US-Pakistan ties will continue and that Pakistan will continue to get economic and technical assistance from the US and international financial institutions. Pakistan also expects to obtain military hardware from the US.

The government is keen to obtain F-16 aircraft to replace the 40 F-16 aircraft it obtained during 1983-87. The US has so far made no commitment about the supply of F-16s or any other sophisticated military aircraft.

The re-election of George

reluctant partnership with the MMA if the US government insists on effective implementation of its policy of enlightened moderation and containment of Pakistan-based militant Islamic groups.

The Musharraf government may be reluctant to step up military measures to contain terrorism in view of the serious difficulties in the conduct of the military operation in Waziristan, including its negative fallout on the Pakistani mainland in the form of increased bomb explosions and terrorist attacks.

Another potential source of divergence is the US policy towards India, especially the US-India partnership in the security field. Pakistan will be extremely unhappy if the Bush administration supports India for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. The Bush administration describes its relations with India and Pakistan as two independent tracks because both countries are important for the US for different sets of reasons. However, this is not how India-US relations are viewed in Pakistan.

The unfolding of a strategic partnership between India and the US in disregard of Pakistan's security sensitivities can put strong domestic pressures on the Pakistan government to slow down its partnership momentum with the US. However, the negative fallout of the stepped up US-India multifaceted cooperation can be coped with if Pakistan-India relations continue to improve and their bilateral dialogue results in resolution of contentious issues. The US can, therefore, reinforce its efforts to combat terrorism by facilitating conflict-resolution between Pakistan and India.

Despite the overall convergence between Pakistan and the US on the war against terrorism, there are points of divergence in their perspectives and policies that can cause strains in their interaction. Both need astute diplomacy and an appreciation of each other's sensitivities if periodic problems in their relations are to be handled in a manner that shared interests and the areas of convergence do not