
A Balancing Act in Pakistan

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The new government in Islamabad has wasted little time making clear its disapproval of Washington's policy toward Pakistan and its strategy on counterterrorism. The visit by two top U.S. State Department officials on the same day the new Pakistani prime minister was sworn in was widely criticized (CNN) in Pakistan. New York Times correspondent Jane Perlez writes that the three-day trip by Deputy Secretary of State John D. Negroponte "turned out to be series of indignities and chilly, almost hostile, receptions," signaling challenges ahead in engaging Pakistan's newly elected government.

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Islamabad's new leaders have asserted the decision-making process will now involve more than one man (Guardian), implying Washington will have to broaden its regular contacts within Pakistan beyond President Pervez Musharraf. The new government has also made it clear that it will no longer tolerate the death of civilians in anti-militant operations, and further, it prefers negotiating with militants as a strategy to counter extremism.

Yet while the Bush administration's official statements stressed cooperation, the Washington Post reported it continued to step up unilateral strikes against suspected militant hideouts inside Pakistan's tribal areas. The Post report says Washington wants to inflict as much damage as it can to al-Qaeda's network inside Pakistan before the new government puts a stop to U.S. air strikes. CFR's Daniel Markey says Pakistan's government needs to come to grips with the threat posed by internal militants but he also cautions against any heavy-handed U.S. approach to the threat. "The last thing we ultimately want to do is alienate the Pakistanis for short-term benefits," he says. "Killing another top-level leader is probably not worth losing the relationship with Pakistan as a partner."

Experts say a shift in Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy could be worrisome for Washington at a time when militants from Pakistan's tribal areas continue to feed instability across the border, posing challenges to the NATO alliance in Afghanistan (NPR). Some have questioned Pakistan's willingness to fight this war. Matthew Cole, writing in Salon, revisits charges that Pakistani security forces have been abusing U.S. aid by double-dealing and assisting Taliban forces, allegations denied by Pakistani officials.

For much of the Bush administration, U.S. policy toward Pakistan has hinged on supporting Musharraf. "One of the chief drivers of Bush's foreign policy has been the president's own tendency to personalize diplomacy," writes Joshua Kurlantzick in the New Republic. This approach is drawing some critics in Washington and has been singled out by front-runners in the U.S. presidential campaign. Senators Barack Obama (D-IL) and Hillary Clinton (D-NY) have both been critical of Bush's policy and have advocated moving away from Musharraf. They have also said that future U.S. policy toward Pakistan must focus on economic aid that extends beyond counterterrorism efforts. The presumptive Republican nominee for president, Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), has also pressed for economic development and education in Pakistan.

While this may signal a more comprehensive strategy for a future Pakistan policy, experts say Washington has to walk a bit of a tightrope in the country. No matter who calls the shots in Islamabad, the Pakistani army and its intelligence services remain important players in the U.S.-led "war on terror." Pakistani journalist Ayaz Amir writes in Pakistan-based The News that the "rethinking of the American alliance will have to come as much from General Headquarters as from the new National Assembly." The U.S. government has a long-standing relationship with Pakistan's military, as this timeline shows, and experts say it's unlikely the Pakistani army will be willing to cut these ties or forego U.S. aid.

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