

Obama-tied Group wants ‘Dramatic’ Shift in Policy Towards Pakistan

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A think-tank closely tied to United States president-elect Barack Obama is calling for a “dramatic strategic shift” in Washington’s policy towards Pakistan, one designed to both strengthen civilian institutions and promote an effective counter-insurgency against al-Qaeda and indigenous Islamist extremists in the tribal areas along the Afghan border who increasingly threaten the country’s stability.

In a report released in Washington on Monday, the Center for American Progress (CAP) is also urging Washington to pursue its goals in Pakistan as part of a broader multilateral effort and a regional strategy designed to address Islamabad’s security concerns with Afghanistan and India.

“The United States needs to make a shift from a reactive, transactional, short-term approach that is narrowly focused on bilateral efforts,” according to the 71-page report, “Partnership for Progress”.

“Instead, a more proactive, long-term strategy should seek to advance stability and prosperity inside Pakistan through a multilateral, regional approach,” it argued, adding that Pakistan “will pose one of the greatest foreign policy challenges for the incoming Obama administration”.

The report, the product of a year-long study that included consultations with a US-Pakistan Working Group consisting of 33 of Washington’s top Pakistan specialists, is likely to be regarded as a bellwether for where the Obama administration will take US policy.

John Podesta, White House chief of staff for former president Bill Clinton and CAP’s president and chief executive officer since its founding in 2001, has headed Obama’s presidential transition team since long before the election, and at least two of the report’s four co-authors – CAP’s Brian Katulis, a Middle East and South Asia specialist, and Lawrence Korb, a senior Pentagon official under president Ronald Reagan – are likely to get senior posts in the new administration.

And while the report itself represented only the views of its co-authors, a large number of working group members, such as vice president-elect Joseph Biden’s top South Asia staffer on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jonah Blank, and former Bill Clinton National Security Council aide Bruce Riedel, have been among the Obama campaign’s key advisers on the region.

The report comes amid palpably growing concern in Washington about the situation in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, where what the report calls a “strengthening, multi-headed

adaptive network of extremists comprised of the Taliban, al-Qaeda and affiliated indigenous militant groups” has made unprecedented gains seven years after they were evicted from Afghanistan by US airpower and the US-backed Northern Alliance.

Since then, Washington has spent more than US\$11 billion on aid to Islamabad, almost all of which went to the Pakistani army, in hopes that the military-led government of former president General Pervez Musharraf would fully cooperate with US efforts to prevent the Taliban and other radical groups from returning to Afghanistan.

But not only have the Taliban and its allies made a strong comeback in Afghanistan over the past two years – in part due to the safe havens they have enjoyed in the tribal regions on the Pakistani side of the border – but their brand of radicalism has spread outward from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where al-Qaeda’s leadership is believed to be based, into the North-West Frontier Province and beyond even into Punjab and other parts of Pakistan’s heartland.

Adding to concerns over the nuclear-armed country’s stability is the state of its economy. Even before the financial crisis that hit world credit markets in mid-September, Pakistan’s economy was suffering serious inflation that put food and fuel prices beyond the reach of many Pakistanis, provoking street protests and riots in some cities.

With rapidly depleting foreign reserves, the government headed by President Asif Ali Zardari was forced just last weekend to agree to a two-year, \$7.6 billion loan by the International Monetary Fund. Conditions for the loan are likely to include reductions in government subsidies on basic commodities that could, in turn, provoke greater unrest and an even greater boost for radical forces.

As bad as the current situation looks, however, the CAP report noted a series of favorable developments that could help redress the situation, beginning with the fact that, unlike the Musharraf regime, the new government – the product of democratic elections in February – is seen as legitimate by most Pakistanis and thus has “a greater potential for representing and mobilizing Pakistan’s population toward fighting militancy and strengthening its governmental institutions ...”

Similarly, the advent of a new US administration headed by Obama could reduce some of the strains created by the administration of President George W Bush, whose strong backing for Musharraf made him deeply unpopular in Pakistan, according to polls taken over the past two years.

In addition, other countries appear more inclined to help Pakistan deal with its economic problems, according to the report. The Friends of Pakistan Group, which consists of the European Union, the United Nations, [China](#), Saudi Arabia, Japan, Canada, [Turkey](#), Australia, the US and the United Arab Emirates – which hosted the group’s meeting in [Abu Dhabi](#) on Monday – appears poised to offer additional assistance.

That willingness extends even to the US Congress, which is likely to take up a bipartisan proposal introduced earlier this year by Biden and co-sponsored by Obama to provide \$7.5 billion in economic and development aid to Pakistan over the next five years.

“This [legislation](#) lays the groundwork for a new strategy in which the United States seeks a partnership with the people of Pakistan and not just a military expected to cooperate with

American security aims," the report argues.

In addition to providing much more non-military aid, the report calls for Washington to recognize the limitations of its influence in Pakistan and move toward a multilateral approach, a direction which the Bush administration has already begun to take through the Friends Group and other initiatives.

"At this point in time, Pakistan's perceptions of the United States are so dismal that efforts to pursue change in Pakistan with the United States in the lead may automatically discredit the effort," according to the report.

Military aid should also continue but be channeled through civilian institutions, according to the report, which stressed that Washington should be as transparent as possible about the aid it provides.

Washington will also have to strike a balance between short-term measures such as its increasingly frequent air strikes against al-Qaeda and Taliban targets on Pakistani soil and its long-term goal of enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of Pakistan's civilian leadership and institutions.

The Washington Post reported on Sunday that the US and Islamabad reached a "tacit agreement in September on a don't-ask-don't-tell policy that allows unmanned Predator [aircraft](#) to attack suspected terrorist targets" in the border area. Under that understanding, the US government would not comment on such attacks, while Islamabad would be expected to complain about them. The agreement followed a cross-border attack by US special forces that drew especially harsh criticism from the Pakistani government and army.

Jim Lobe's blog on US foreign policy, and particularly the neo-conservative influence in the Bush administration, can be read at <http://www.ips.org/blog/jimlobe/>.

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