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Fine Tuning U.S. Relations with Pakistan

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Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's visit to Washington this week offers an opportunity to bolster goodwill between the U.S. and Pakistan and also to address tensions in the relationship. The visit comes amid simmering frustration on both sides related to an upsurge of violence in Afghanistan by Taliban militants who many believe are sheltered in Pakistan and to the recent U.S. focus on a civil nuclear deal with India. Though the Pakistani and U.S. leaders will publicly tout their growing strategic dialogue on issues such as economics, trade, education, and energy, privately they will need to address the growing problems in the relationship.

Scrutinize Tribal Areas Deal

A key issue the two sides will address is Pakistan's September 5 announcement of a truce with Pakistani tribal leaders who have been sheltering al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The deal is incredibly risky and demands close U.S. scrutiny. Pakistan also is reportedly releasing from jail scores of Taliban militants, many of whom are likely to return to battle against coalition forces in Afghanistan. President Bush will need to seek clarification from President Musharraf on these worrisome trends and underscore the importance of ensuring Pakistan does not serve as a safe haven for those who are seeking to destabilize Afghanistan or planning international terrorist operations. This should be a crucial and non-negotiable United States objective.

Musharraf's decision to end the military offensive in the region was driven partly by his need to

reduce growing discontent over the operations within both the religious parties and the military, which has lost several hundred soldiers in the offensive. The agreement also may help relieve political pressure on Musharraf following the recent unpopular assassination by Pakistan's military of a key Baluch politician, which the religious parties also criticized.

For now U.S. officials appear willing to give Musharraf's new strategy the benefit of the doubt, although they admit it is unclear whether it will help end attacks on coalition forces in Afghanistan or contain the threat of another major international terror attack. The Pakistan army began military operations in the Waziristan agencies of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in early 2004 when it became increasingly evident that al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists were enjoying safe haven in the remote border areas. State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism Henry Crumpton testified on June 13 to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the strategic importance of eliminating terrorist safe havens and pointed to Pakistan's military operations in the tribal areas as a sign of success on this front. It is unclear therefore why

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halting the military operations now is a move in the right direction.

Another indicator of the success of Musharraf's new policy for the tribal areas will be the reaction of President Karzai's government in Afghanistan. The Karzai government has repeatedly blamed Islamabad for harboring Taliban insurgents who have stepped up their attacks in Afghanistan over the last year, especially in the south and east, resulting in more than 2,400 deaths since January. Musharraf met Karzai in Kabul earlier this month and admitted that Taliban have been crossing the border from Pakistan into Afghanistan, but he denied his government was supporting the infiltration. President Bush will try to help smooth relations between Kabul and Islamabad when he hosts a White House dinner on September 27 for both leaders as part of celebrations related to the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

It is imperative that the U.S. continue to work closely with Pakistan to keep the terrorists on the run and in disarray in this critical region. Islamabad has committed to increasing economic development resources for the area and to extending the central government's writ there. The U.S. should fully support these efforts.

Emphasize U.S. Long-term Commitment to Pakistan

The Musharraf visit also provides an opportunity to overcome Pakistani frustration with what Islamabad views as a U.S. tilt toward India due to the intense focus over the last year on securing a U.S.-India civil nuclear deal. The U.S. has been clear that it is not contemplating a similar nuclear deal with Pakistan and should instead focus on promoting economic ties and other development initiatives that demonstrate U.S. interest in fostering human development and stability in Pakistan. Pakistanis are skeptical of Washington's long-term commitment to the country, and they remember how the U.S. abruptly halted assistance in the early 1990s because of Pakistan's nuclear program. Most U.S. policymakers now acknowledge it was a mistake to cut off the aid and send home hundreds of USAID mission employees who had helped

create a wealth of goodwill between the Pakistani and American people.

Musharraf may seek U.S. support for Pakistan's position on Kashmir, but Washington should make clear that there is no justification for the use of violence. Over the last decade, the U.S. has played a critical role in preventing full-scale war between Pakistan and India but has been unsuccessful in convincing the two countries to address the fundamentals of their dispute. Recent reports of possible connections of Pakistan-based Kashmir groups to international terrorist plots demonstrate the inherent dangers of Islamabad maintaining a permissive attitude toward indigenous militant groups. President Musharraf and Prime Minister Singh agreed on Saturday to establish an "institutional mechanism" to implement counterterrorism initiatives, but lack of trust between the nuclear-armed neighbors will make it difficult to achieve concrete results in the short-term.

Washington should acknowledge President Musharraf's leadership role within the Islamic world in calling for the promotion of a moderate, progressive Muslim society, while emphasizing the importance of including democratic development as part of his vision. The 2007 elections in Pakistan will provide a crucial test for future stability in the country, and Washington should take the lead in calling for transparent, open, and fully participatory elections.

Conclusion

This week's visit provides an opportunity to demonstrate steadfast U.S. support for building ties with Pakistan and to highlight our strategic dialogue on issues related to trade, investment, energy, science, and education. At the same time, President Bush should not shy away from straight talk on terrorism issues and should coax further cooperation from Islamabad in denying safe haven to individuals and groups that threaten both Pakistan and the international community.

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