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Pakistan between Washington and the Taliban

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It is not Iraq alone that is breaking apart and in need of a rapid solution, which the hasty visit made by Hillary Clinton may not succeed in finding. The greatest concern facing the Barack Obama administration has become that of Pakistan. Indeed, this nuclear country lies on the strategic boundary between a close relationship to the West, as its partisan, and between falling in the grip of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, given the weakness of the central government in Islamabad and the compromises presented by Asif Zardari to these extremists in order to stay in power.

As the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks were a distinctive feature that took the Bush administration in a different more radical and extreme direction, the concern now being raised by the situation in Pakistan is likely to result in grave danger, prompting the Barack Obama administration to directly intervene, especially if the extremists spread their scope of influence in the northwestern regions, with their alliances reaching the Punjab region, where Lashkar-e-Taiba and similar organizations are active.

Warning of a direct US intervention had been the instrument which Washington had resorted to in order to pressure Pakistan into forcing the Taliban movement to withdraw from the Bunir region they settled in coming from the Swat district. The danger such a Taliban expansion has come to represent was clear in Hillary Clinton's warning that it now threatens global security as a whole. Moreover, General David Petraeus considered that the expansion of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban threatens the existence of Pakistan itself. He had been preceded by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) Admiral Mike Mullen, who expressed grave concern regarding the development of the situation in Pakistan, at a time when the US is reinforcing its troops in confronting the Taliban of Afghanistan. Officials in the Obama administration consider that Zardari ignoring the danger of the Taliban can only be compared to the behavior of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain towards the danger that had been represented by the Nazis and Adolf Hitler's regime during World War II. Hence the warning by US military officials to the Islamabad government was clear: either force the Taliban to withdraw or we will.

Thus the Pakistani government did this coerced under US pressure, and not to protect its authority, which it had voluntarily abandoned in hopes of buying the Taliban's allegiance, after the battles in the Swat region between the movement and the Pakistani army. However, the concessions made by the government, particularly concerning giving Taliban leaders the right to impose the laws of their choosing in the areas that fall under their control, did not lead - as it was supposed to - to their disarmament but has rather increased their influence. Indeed, they have begun to impose a way of life in these areas that is reminiscent of the worst days in which the Taliban used to control Afghanistan.

The lesson Pakistan's government failed to learn from previous experiences is that compromises with extremists do not help build a central government and a strong state, especially if their ideas are like the ones adopted by the Taliban, who consider that imposing their laws on society is the solution which will save Pakistan from Western influence and protect it from interferences, as had been the choice they had imposed on Afghanistan in the past, in alliance with the Al-Qaeda organization. Indeed, concessions from the government in a case such as this pave the way to further internal collapse and further regression of the state's authority, which is what Pakistan is facing today.

Such danger does not threaten Pakistan alone, as such a situation will most likely divert attention away from the Afghan problem, which should be the Obama administration's chief concern, as US Envoy Richard Holbrooke said last week. Indeed, the growth of extremism and the widening of its area of influence on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border, reaching a short distance away from Islamabad, will force the United States to fight two wars instead of its original one. It was originally implicated in the first because of the Taliban, and it cannot ignore the second, in a country whose nuclear capabilities and arsenal represent the greatest danger that the world could face, if they were to fall into the hands of extremist groups to whom President Zardari seeks to offer concessions, for the sole purpose of keeping his post in confronting his internal rivals.