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## Pakistan-US plan falls into place

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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KARACHI - The seamless friendship between the chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, and Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani, has cemented the relationship between the military establishments of the two countries to levels not seen since the 1950s, when Pakistan was a frontline state against communism.

The result is that Islamabad and Washington are in a position to implement coordinated, long-term policies in the region, which include action against militants, moves to improve ties between Pakistan and India, especially their dispute over divided Kashmir, and the evolution of a broad-based, stable civilian government in Pakistan.

However, just as the US and Pakistan have forged a united front, so too have the previously splintered militants and groups that oppose them in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, setting the stage for a struggle of unprecedented proportions.

The new relationship between the US and Pakistan, supported by a host of American advisors based in the capital Islamabad, is expected to play out on two main fronts.

First, Pakistan will launch a comprehensive battle against all Taliban groups in the country, irrespective of whether they are perceived as good or bad. Over the years, there have been numerous attempts to split the Taliban by making deals with the good ones, that is, those seen as more moderate, to bring them into a peace process.

Second, an initiative will be made by the Pakistani government, supported by the country's Western allies, for better relations with India, strongly mediated by the Pakistan army. The aim will be to reopen the dialogue process on Kashmir which was stalled following the Pakistani-linked terror attack on the Indian city of Mumbai last November in which 166 people were killed. This could also help in building a joint mechanism for cooperation between India and Pakistan with the US in fighting terror.

**Militants reorganize**

In recent months, different militant groups located in the North Waziristan and South Waziristan tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan have united. At the same time, an al-Qaeda group led by Abdullah Saeed is participating in the belated spring offensive in Afghanistan - it marked this by shooting down a US aircraft in Paktia province last week.

The powerful Haqqani network is also flexing its muscles - it is behind the capture of a US soldier who appears on a recently released video that has caused outrage in the US over the abuse of prisoners of war. The prisoner is believed to be at a Haqqani base in North Waziristan. The group is beefing up its military presence in and around the two Waziristans in an area said to be the headquarters of three powerful networks that have allied.

The networks are that of Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud in South Waziristan, al-Qaeda's at the crossroads of the two Waziristans and Sirajuddin Haqqani's group in North Waziristan.

Asia Times Online has learnt that Pakistan has gradually moved its forces into Bannu, the principal city of Bannu district in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), and Dera Ismail Khan, another city in NWFP. It has also stationed troops in the Waziristans. Tension is rising there, with the Taliban having disrupted the supply lines of troops based in North Waziristan.

The deadline for the beginning of an all-out operation is not known. It will be the first time that all Taliban groups are targeted - the Sirajuddin network has traditionally been pro-establishment.

### **The good and now the bad**

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), US intelligence and Arab states have for many years maintained excellent relations with Jalaluddin Haqqani, the legendary Afghan commander against the Soviets in the 1980s. Haqqani, now seriously ill, supported the Taliban movement in the mid-1990s on the instructions of the ISI. But the Taliban never considered him a part of the movement, more as a warlord who had allied with them.

As a result, Haqqani was never given any significant position in the Taliban regime. When the Taliban abandoned Kabul in the face of the US-led invasion in late 2001, Islamabad tried hard to get him to abandon Taliban leader Mullah Omar and become the next head of the Afghan government. He flatly refused the proposal and went to a base in North Waziristan.

In 2006, he was elevated by the Taliban to the number one commander in Afghanistan. Pakistan was not too concerned as Haqqani had never meddled in the internal affairs of Pakistan, never allied with a Pakistani political party or group and he had never supported any mutiny in Pakistan.

But now that Haqqani is ill and bed-ridden, his power has been handed to his son Sirajuddin. Siraj's strength, like his father's, is his Punjabi comrades, but his friendship with al-Qaeda's Arab ideologues has influenced him.

Unlike his father, Siraj is close to Pakistan militants hostile to the establishment. The intelligence apparatus was prepared to overlook this, but not any more.

Some while ago, Siraj's brother, Dr Naseer Haqqani, was arrested while attending a meeting that included several wanted people. To the surprise of the security forces, Baitullah Mehsud

negotiated for his release, agreeing to swap a few Pakistani soldiers for the detained man. Subsequently, Baitullah and Sirajuddin became close.

This explains the failure of the recent operation to get Baitullah. It depended on the cooperation of local anti-Baitullah tribes who happened to be Taliban, such as those of Mullah Nazir and Gul Bahadur and the now slain Qari Zainuddin Mehsud. Sirajuddin quickly sent messages for all commanders to unite in support of Baitullah, and their compliance ended any hope of him being isolated.

It also explains why the Haqqani network is now in the sights of the military as it prepares for a renewed battle against militants.

On the domestic front, the friendship of Kiani and Mullen has led to the acknowledgement that if military goals are to be achieved, the country needs a stable democratic government.

This explains President Asif Zardari's recent visit to opposition leader Nawaz Sharif, the chief of the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), at his residence near Lahore. Zardari proposed to bring the PML-N into the ruling coalition government, possibly with Sharif as prime minister.

Sharif's reservations over extensive presidential powers are the main stumbling block. But whether or not Sharif accepts cabinet portfolios for his party or the premiership for himself, his party is completely onboard with the government's national and international policies.

"In principle, Pakistan has agreed on a stable government, cordial ties with India and support of the war on terror. But for the first time, Admiral Mike Mullen and Ashfaq Parvez Kiani have made a joint initiative to implement this principle under a set mechanism so that there can be no deviations," a senior Pakistani diplomat told Asia Times Online on condition of anonymity.

The militants, too, have their mechanisms in place, and they too don't plan to deviate. A mighty collision is inevitable.