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U.S. Sees Weakening for Zardari

By JAY SOLOMON

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WASHINGTON -- The Obama administration is preparing for a significant weakening of Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari's political position in the coming months, as pressure intensifies for him to shift executive powers to his country's prime minister and military.

Pakistan's power struggle comes as the Obama administration is seeking to significantly remake its relationship with Islamabad, tied to the U.S. decision to send 30,000 additional troops to help rout insurgents in neighboring Afghanistan.

Mr. Zardari announced last week that he was transferring formal control over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal to Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, and Pakistan's president is being pressured to shed additional powers -- such as the right to dismiss the parliament and make key military appointments.

U.S. officials acknowledge that significant opposition to his rule has limited Mr. Zardari's effectiveness. He also been dogged by decades-old corruption charges. A 2007 amnesty agreement on those recently expired, potentially exposing him to a challenge to his rule by Pakistan's Supreme Court.

The Obama administration, said senior U.S. and European officials, has worked to develop ties to other leaders including Mr. Gilani, the likely beneficiary of any changes. The Obama administration's point man on Pakistan and Afghanistan, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, has also been conducting regular discussions with opposition leader Nawaz Sharif and with

Islamabad's generals, to ensure constitutional process is observed as powers are shifted away from Mr. Zardari, said U.S. officials.

The State Department worried in March that Islamabad could be gripped by political paralysis when Mr. Sharif indicated he would challenge Mr. Zardari's rule. But senior U.S. and European officials said there now is little alarm in Washington that a diminished role for Mr. Zardari -- who generally supports U.S. policy -- could substantially undercut efforts to stabilize the region.

American diplomats note that Mr. Zardari campaigned on amending Pakistan's constitution to limit the powers of the president to rectify moves made by Pakistan's former military strongman, Pervez Musharraf, who stepped down in 2007.

"We don't depend on Zardari as the government, a la Musharraf," said a senior U.S. official working on Pakistan. "One of the achievements we've made over the past year is that our relationship is broader, and government-to-government."

Mr. Holbrooke has sought to improve relations with Mr. Sharif, a former prime minister largely shunned by the Bush administration due to his ties to Islamist political parties. Mr. Holbrooke has also kept open discussions with Mr. Gilani.

Many Pakistan analysts credit the engagement with helping build consensus in Pakistan for pursuing military operations against the Taliban. After years of largely refraining from fighting, Pakistan's army has launched offensives in the Swat Valley and the South Waziristan region in recent months.

"The Obama administration played the political card about as well as they could," said Christine Fair, a Pakistan expert at Georgetown University.

The White House approved in October a five-year, \$7.5 billion aid package that aims to significantly increase U.S. support for economic development and civil society. Congress, however, has tied the assistance to certification that Pakistan has ceased support for militant Islamist groups and isn't involved in nuclear proliferation.

U.S. National Security Adviser James Jones delivered to Mr. Zardari last month a letter from President Barack Obama calling for more effort by Pakistan to combat five militant groups, including the Taliban, al Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, and Lashkar-e-Taiba, according to officials. In exchange, Mr. Jones pledged greater U.S. intelligence-sharing, weapons sales, and efforts to enhance economic development and trade. The existence of the letter was earlier reported by the Washington Post.