As Clinton prepares to visit subcontinent

US delivers a thinly disguised ultimatum to Pakistan

Peter Symonds
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Remarks by the US State Department's chief spokesman James Rubin last week are the clearest indication yet that Clinton's planned visit to the Indian subcontinent at the end of March will not include Pakistan on its itinerary. Any decision to snub the Pakistani military regime headed by General Pervez Musharraf will represent a further shift by the US towards India as a major partner and will add to instability in the region.

Speaking at a press conference on January 27, Rubin said the possible connection between the Pakistan military and the Harkat-ul-Mujahedeen—the Kashmiri separatist group blamed for the hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814 in December—was "a matter of extreme concern to us". He pointed out that the US had declared the group, previously known as Karkat-ul-Ansar, a terrorist organisation in 1997.

Asked about the implications of the connection, Rubin stated: "If the Secretary of State determines that a government has repeatedly provided support to international terrorism directly, then she would be prepared to designate that country as a state sponsor of terrorism." It was not a threat but "a comment about the realities," he added. But the warning is clear: if Pakistan fails to agree to US demands to crack down on Kashmiri separatist groups operating from its territories against Indian-controlled Jammu & Kashmir then it faces being branded a terrorist state, losing US foreign aid and IMF loans, and being internationally isolated.

Rubin also expressed US concerns that the Pakistani regime's recent decision to require loyalty oaths of its judges undermined "the integrity and independence of the judiciary". The junta's move was aimed at preventing former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted last October by the military, from mounting any effective legal defence to charges of hijacking and attempted murder, or using the courts to challenge the regime.

"General Musharraf needs to make clear in a comprehensive fashion how he intends to return Pakistan to an elected government with a functioning legislature and an independent judiciary under a democratic constitution," Rubin said. "Let me be clear. We are not conducting business as usual with Pakistan, in light of the October coup there."

The Indian government, of course, has welcomed US criticisms of Pakistan. "Pakistan has been for a very long time state sponsors of terrorism," a Foreign Ministry spokesman said last Friday. "We've time and again pointed to facts and events that underscore our judgement that Pakistani officials continue to nurture terrorist organisations." The Indian government has accused Islamabad of organising last December's airline hijacking and called on the US to put Pakistan on its list of terrorist states.

But India has provided no evidence of direct Pakistani involvement in the hijacking as distinct from general support for Kashmiri separatists groups. The purpose of the strident anti-Pakistani rhetoric of the Indian coalition government headed by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been to deflect criticisms of its actions, both from the relatives of the victims who were demanding a deal be done to end the siege, and from the Indian press and politicians demanding tougher action.

US criticism of Pakistan has nothing to do with any genuine concerns about either "democracy" or "terrorism". For decades during the Cold War, US administrations backed military dictatorships in Islamabad as a counterweight to India's relations with the former Soviet Union. In the 1980s, the CIA—working closely with the Pakistani military and intelligence—covertly financed and armed Islamic fundamentalist groups waging war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. The US formally ended military ties with Pakistan in 1990 but continued to provide funds and arms to various Islamic groups through Pakistani intelligence agencies until 1994.

Washington's newfound scruples about the lack of democracy in Pakistan or the activities of Islamic fundamentalist organisations in Afghanistan and Kashmir coincide with its changing strategic and economic interests in the region. US demands that Islamabad rein in Kashmiri separatist groups and put pressure on the Taleban regime in Afghanistan are bound up with its fears about the destabilising influence of Islamic fundamentalism, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus where the US is seeking to establish a secure political and economic environment for corporations to exploit huge oil and mineral reserves.

As for the expressions of concern over the seizure of power by the Pakistani military, they have been very limited. Unlike in Ecuador where the recent military coup lasted a matter of hours after Washington expressed its displeasure, the only demand initially placed on Musharraf was that he indicates "a timetable" for the return to parliamentary rule. The US is prepared to tolerate an autocratic regime in Islamabad to stabilise what was becoming a highly volatile political situation in the country, as long as the

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arrangement is not permanent and the military accedes to US wishes.

The first obvious indication that the US was moving away from its Cold War ally and toward India came last year in the midst of the Kargil dispute. The Clinton administration put great pressure on the Pakistan government, then headed by Sharif, to compel Pakistani-backed fighters to pull out of fortified mountain positions in the Kargil area of Jammu & Kashmir. Opposition to Sharif's acquiescence to US demands as well as protests over his implementation of IMF policy helped to create the political climate in which the military was able to seize power virtually unopposed.

Since then there have been growing contacts between the Clinton administration and the BJP-led government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, including between the military and intelligence services. US Energy Secretary Bill Richardson visited New Delhi last October and US Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers was there last month. On January 20, the US State Department announced an agreement with India to establish a joint working group on counter-terrorism and noted that the two nations had agreed to work together "to ensure that the perpetrators of the hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814 were brought to justice".

On Monday, the US formally announced Clinton's trip to the Indian subcontinent, the first by a US president for more than two decades. Clinton is to spend five days from March 20 in India with "high hopes" of building an India-US relationship "appropriate for the new century". The US has not insisted that New Delhi sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) as a precondition for the tour. As well as a strategic ally, the US also has an eye on the economic prospects being opened up as Indian governments implement pro-market policies to attract foreign investors. According to White House officials, "no decisions have been made about other stops" but it looks increasingly unlikely that the Pakistan regime will be able to measure up to the US demands.

Pakistan's response has been tempered by two main considerations. The Musharraf regime cannot afford either economically or politically to be isolated internationally. The country has been on the brink of insolvency over the last two years and is completely dependent on the limited loans being provided by the IMF and other international agencies. At the same time, however, the junta faces the prospect of substantial domestic opposition from Islamic fundamentalist groups if it is seen to cave in to US demands for a crackdown on Kashmiri separatist groups or the Taleban regime in Afghanistan.

A delegation of senior US officials, including Assistant Secretary of State Karl Inderfurth and Michael Sheehan, a counterterrorism co-ordinator, met with Musharraf in late January but he turned down their demands to shut down Harkat-ul-Mujahedeen and cut links with other Kashmiri groups. "As an excuse for not taking action, General Musharraf and other government officials expressed concern about how the fundamentalist Islamic parties in Pakistan would respond to a clampdown on the group. The fundamentalist parties, the best known of which is Jamaat-e-Islami, regularly accuse the government of selling out to the United States," a *New York Times* article noted.

Islamabad has, however, tried to prove itself to the US in other areas. Despite its support for and close ties with the Taleban regime in Afghanistan, Pakistan has frozen Afghani bank accounts in line with UN economic sanctions imposed at the behest of the US. The Clinton administration has been seeking to force the Taleban to hand over Osama bin Laden, accused by Washington of masterminding the bombings of its embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.

On December 19, the Musharraf regime announced it had rounded up 200 suspected supporters of Osama bin Laden. A few days earlier Pakistani authorities arrested a Jordanian national, Khalil al-Deek, on suspicion that he was plotting attacks against US targets, and handed him over to Jordan. Clearly concerned at mounting Pakistani pressure, a senior Taleban official visiting Islamabad this week pledged to ensure that bin Laden did not "use Afghan soil for terrorism" but refused to agree to hand him over to the US.

In response to US demands, Musharraf has outlined a tentative plan for local elections this year and provincial and national elections after 2001. In the same interview on Star TV in India, Musharraf indicated that Pakistan is bending over backwards to get Clinton to visit. "We would love him to come to Pakistan," he said. "The indicators from our side [that] could be given are being given." At the same time, Pakistan is putting out feelers for support from elsewhere—Musharraf went to Beijing in mid-January to cultivate closer relations with its longtime ally China.

It is unlikely, at least in the short-term, that the US will completely sever political ties and economic aid to Islamabad. A bankrupt Pakistan embroiled in political and social crises would have a profoundly destabilising influence. Moreover, as an article in the *New York Times* noted: [T]here was substantial resistance from the Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency to putting Pakistan on the [terrorist] list, in part because of past help that Pakistan gave the United States during the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan."

Nevertheless, while the US may not be willing to completely abandon Pakistan, Clinton's visit to India will mark a key turning point in relations on the subcontinent. There are already indications that closer ties with the US are emboldening the BJP-led government, which is facing hostility, internal divisions and strikes at home, to resort to nationalist rhetoric and a more aggressive stance against Pakistan and in the region.

An article in the British *Economist* magazine entitled "South Asia's ugly truce" noted that "parts of India's establishment seem to be arguing that Pakistan's nukes and a desire for world approbation should not inhibit India's response to provocation. General V.P. Malik, chief of India's army, said recently that India's restraint 'may not be applicable in the next war'."

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