

Bush visit to Pakistan will intensify Musharraf's crisis

Peter Symonds
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US President George Bush arrived in Pakistan last night amid heavy security and a series of anti-US protests in cities across the country. While the main purpose of the one-day trip is to help shore up the shaky regime of President Pervez Musharraf, the Bush administration is directly responsible for much of the political turmoil confronting the Pakistani military strongman.

Having been forced by Washington to back its “war on terror” in 2001 and to help topple the Taliban regime in neighbouring Afghanistan, Musharraf increasingly has been viewed by broad layers of the Pakistani population as a US stooge. Throughout the past month, tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets to demonstrate their opposition to the anti-Muslim cartoons published in European and US newspapers. The protesters have also turned their anger on the Musharraf regime for its subservience to the US as well as its failure to address the economic and social crisis facing millions of Pakistanis.

Anti-Bush demonstrations erupted in a number of Pakistani cities yesterday and more are planned for today, which opposition groups have declared “a black day”. In Rawalpindi, near the airbase where Bush landed, police used batons to disperse about 1,000 protesters who had been chanting “killer go back” and “death to America”. In the southern city of Karachi, around 1,000 demonstrators attempted to march to the American consulate, where a suicide bomber killed a US official and three others on Thursday. At the largest rally in Multan, a Muslim cleric told a crowd of 10,000 that Bush’s visit was aimed at “enslaving the Pakistani nation” and “rewarding General Musharraf for his patriotism to America”.

Far from alleviating the political crisis facing Musharraf, Bush’s visit will intensify it by demanding that he take more action to prevent anti-US insurgents infiltrating into neighbouring Afghanistan. At Washington’s insistence, the Pakistani military has already deployed some 70,000 troops in tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan to hunt down Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters. These repressive operations, as well as covert attacks by US forces inside Pakistan, have generated widespread resentment and hostility toward Musharraf.

An article entitled “Musharraf losing his grip” on the *Asia Times* website on February 22 commented: “The [Islamabad]

administration has already in effect been sidelined in the tribal areas of North West Frontier Province where in South and North Waziristan a Taliban-led administration is in place and the Pakistani security forces cannot move beyond their district headquarters of Wana and Miranshah. Similarly, Balochistan province has turned into a quagmire, with the armed forces having lost their iron grip to insurgents, who are now calling the shots. Almost daily, the fierce resistance blows up gas pipelines and electricity lines in the resource-rich region, and there is little the Pakistani army can do.”

In response to Afghan charges that Musharraf is not preventing the infiltration of insurgents, Islamabad has accused Kabul of helping the Balochistan rebellion. Pakistani Interior Minister Aftab Khan Sherpao told the media yesterday that the issue would be raised with Bush during his visit. “Every terrorist in Balochistan and Karachi has a covert foreign hand involved,” he said, without specifically naming Afghanistan.

Such pleas are likely to receive short shrift from Bush. The Bush administration regards Musharraf as a key ally in assisting US ambitions for dominance in the resource-rich Middle East and Central Asia, particularly in helping the US occupation of Afghanistan. It is prepared to back Musharraf politically and to provide economic assistance in payment for services rendered. But Washington is more intent on establishing a close strategic and economic alliance with Pakistan’s rival India, which the US views as more important as a regional power.

For his part, Musharraf is acutely aware of his dependence on Washington’s continuing patronage. Significantly in the lead up to Bush’s arrival, the Pakistani army issued a statement on Wednesday announcing that a military operation in North Waziristan had killed more than 45 militants, mostly “foreigners”. The Pakistani president will no doubt cite the news as evidence that Pakistan is playing its part in the US “war on terror”.

Musharraf cannot expect much in return, however. Bush will give his public backing for the regime and completely hypocritical praise for its so-called steps toward democracy. Amid the mounting political crisis in Pakistan, Musharraf’s aides and the pro-military Pakistan Muslim League (Q) have hinted that elections slated for 2007 may be postponed. There have also been suggestions that Musharraf may stay on as

president and head of the armed forces—positions that give him broad dictatorial powers.

Bush and Musharraf are due to sign a bilateral treaty to enhance trade and investment. Since 2001, Pakistan has been one of the leading recipients of US aid, receiving around \$US3 billion in direct assistance between 2002 and 2005 including \$1 billion in military-related aid. Additional assistance has been given in the form of “reimbursement” for Pakistani counterterrorism operations.

Bush will certainly try to allay fears in Pakistani ruling circles that the current relationship with the US is simply a matter of short-term convenience for Washington that will be ditched when its interests change. The Bush administration has repeatedly declared that it wants a long-term relationship with Islamabad and has designated Pakistan as “a major non-NATO ally,” qualifying it for preferential military assistance. In a parting speech on Thursday in New Delhi, Bush described Pakistan as “another important partner and friend”. But none of this will mollify concerns in Islamabad about Washington’s obvious tilt in favour of India.

Particularly galling for the Pakistani regime is the nuclear accord between the US and India announced on Wednesday. The agreement, if finally ratified by the US Congress and implemented, would in effect elevate India to the status of a recognised nuclear-armed power. In return for accepting International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regulation of its civilian nuclear programs, India would have access to nuclear fuel and technology without having to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or dismantle its military nuclear program. The accord not only assists India materially, but also enhances its standing as a regional power.

Musharraf will ask Bush for a similar agreement, but is sure to be rebuffed. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told the media on Thursday that a nuclear accord with Pakistan was not possible at present because of “proliferation concerns”—a reference to the clandestine sale of nuclear technology to Iran, Libya and North Korea by a network run by top Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan. The comments will not assuage concerns in Islamabad that the US stance is discriminatory and further evidence that the US places far more weight on its relationship with India, than Pakistan.

The Pakistani president is also likely to ask Bush to do more to push India to make concessions over Kashmir. While a so-called peace process is underway in Kashmir, only cosmetic steps have been taken to end the decades of rivalry, tension and war between the two countries. The lack of cooperation following the devastating earthquake in Kashmir last October is the most recent demonstration of ongoing tensions. Islamabad fears that, without Washington’s intervention, relations between the two countries will only worsen, making any deal over Kashmir impossible.

However, apart from empty appeals for mutual trust and peace, Bush is unlikely to offer Musharraf any support over

Kashmir. In fact, the US president has promised India that he will raise the issue of “cross-border terrorism” with Musharraf. For the Pakistani regime, which has taken substantial steps to rein in Islamic fundamentalist militants opposed to India’s control of Jammu and Kashmir, it is another sign of Washington’s pro-Indian bias.

Bush is also expected to insist that Pakistan backs the aggressive US stance against Iran and to reiterate the US demand that Islamabad, as well as New Delhi, abandon plans for a multi-billion dollar gas pipeline from Iran through Pakistan to India. The end of the project would be a blow to both countries. Pakistan looked to the pipeline for energy supplies and a much-needed economic boost, and as an important card in its negotiations with India.

These unresolved issues highlight the underlying tensions in US-Pakistani relations. It is worth noting that a fortnight before Bush’s visit, Musharraf made a highly visible trip to Beijing where he sought Chinese assistance to expand Pakistan’s civilian nuclear program. During the visit, the Pakistani president signed 13 agreements and a Memorandum of Understanding covering energy, defence, trade and communications. China is a major supplier for the Pakistani military and the two countries have extensive economic ties. China is involved in the construction of a major port facility at Gwadar in Balochistan.

The timing of Musharraf’s trip to China was not accidental. As well as strengthening ties with Beijing, the visit sent a rather obvious message to Washington: if the US decides to downgrade or abandon its alliance with Pakistan, Islamabad has the option of closer relations with Beijing.

While Musharraf is currently tied to the US, there is a certain political logic to the Bush administration’s attempts to woo India as a key element of its long-term anti-China strategy. Regardless of its calculations, Washington’s backing for New Delhi will inevitably strengthen India’s position as a regional power, altering the previous fragile balance of forces in South Asia and propelling Pakistan to further strengthen its ties with China.

Thus the possibility arises that the protracted and bitter conflict between India and Pakistan will become dangerously intertwined with what is shaping up as the chief geo-political fault-line of the early twenty-first century—the potentially explosive conflict between the US and China.



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