

Bush's public slap in the face to Pakistan's president

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US President George Bush ended his high-profile tour to South Asia last Saturday with a 24-hour trip to Pakistan that proved to be an acute political embarrassment for President Pervez Musharraf. Having gone out of his way to secure closer relations with India, Pakistan's long-time rival, Bush delivered what amounted to a thinly disguised public rebuke to the Pakistani military strongman.

In contrast to India where Bush signed a raft of wide-ranging deals, the US president issued a rather routine joint statement with Musharraf that offered the Pakistani regime little in return for its support for Washington's "war on terror," particularly the US occupation of Afghanistan. At their joint press conference last Saturday, Bush made it abundantly clear that Musharraf could only expect further US assistance if he continued to do Washington's bidding.

The Pakistani ruling elite was particularly concerned about the nuclear deal between the US and India agreed just days before in New Delhi. Both Pakistan and India have refused to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Each tested nuclear weapons in 1998 and confronted sanctions as a result. Yet, India has been offered a unique arrangement by the US to assist its civilian nuclear program without having to sign the NPT or abandon its military nuclear program.

The obvious question in Islamabad is: why has not Pakistan, which the US has declared "a major non-NATO" ally, been offered the same deal? The unpalatable answer is: Washington, which signed an agreement with India as the price of a close strategic relationship, sees no need to make a similar offer to Pakistan, given Musharraf's political and economic dependence on the US.

The relationship was evident at the joint press conference. Bush condescendingly described Musharraf as "a man of courage and vision" and declared that the two men had "revived and maybe further strengthened

this relationship," forged after the September 11 attacks on the US. But when asked about India's nuclear deal, Bush did nothing to soften the blow. "I explained," the US president said, "that Pakistan and India are different countries with different needs and different histories."

When it came to Pakistan's role in helping to prop up the US occupation of Afghanistan, Bush was even blunter, publicly questioning Musharraf's dedication to the "war on terror" and thus the alliance between the two countries. "Part of my mission today was to determine whether or not the president is as committed as he has been in the past to bringing these terrorists to justice, and he is." Bush's words were designed to reinforce demands in Kabul and from the American military for Pakistan to do more to stop the infiltration of armed insurgents into Afghanistan.

Musharraf was clearly on the defensive. Pakistan already has some 70,000 to 80,000 troops engaged in a worsening conflict in the traditionally autonomous tribal areas along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. The US has carried out covert military missions inside Pakistan, resulting in civilian deaths and deeply felt anger. Yet, put on the spot by Bush, Musharraf was unwilling to offer the mildest of criticisms and thus appeared as a complete flunky. "If at all there are slippages, it is possible in the implementation part. But as long as the intention is clear, the resolve is there and the strategy is clear, we are moving forward towards delivering and we will succeed," he lamely declared.

Behind closed doors, US demands were undoubtedly even more emphatic. Speaking to the media, Pakistani Prime Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri said there had been "a frank discussion" in which the Pakistani president had made "a comprehensive and telling response" to American concerns. "They had a level of discussion I had not seen before," he said, adding that Musharraf had handed over detailed Pakistani intelligence to Bush.

Evidently Musharraf bent over backward to assure Bush of his loyalty.

Bush's treatment of Musharraf has only compounded the political difficulties confronting the Islamabad regime. Growing layers of the Pakistani population are deeply hostile to the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. This is particularly so in Pakistan's border areas, which have been subject to Pakistani military repression and US attacks. In recent weeks, large protests erupted over the publication of the anti-Muslim Danish cartoons and rapidly became a vehicle for anti-US and anti-Musharraf sentiment. A massive security operation surrounded the Bush visit as thousands of protesters took to the streets last Friday and Saturday to vent their opposition.

In a desperate bid to regain some credibility, the day after Bush departed, Musharraf launched a heated attack on Afghan President Hamid Karzai for questioning Pakistani efforts to hunt down Afghan insurgents. He criticised Karzai for "bad-mouthing" Pakistan and accused Afghan's intelligence and defence ministry of being involved in "a deliberate, articulated conspiracy". As the war of words escalated, Musharraf met with US Central Command chief General John Abizaid on Wednesday to express his displeasure over Karzai's criticisms as well as to assure the Pentagon that Pakistan was committed to "the war on terror".

There is no doubt that Bush's visit to Pakistan has further weakened Musharraf's precarious position. The Pakistani president is caught in a bind—dependent on Washington for economic and political support on the one hand, while on the other he confronts widespread opposition at home. By publicly highlighting Musharraf's position as a US vassal, Bush has compounded these difficulties.

Bush's visit also provoked concerns in the US media about the dangers of instability in South Asia. In an editorial entitled "Mr Bush's Asian Road Trip," the *New York Times* declared that it would have better if Bush had stayed home. "It's just baffling why Mr Bush travelled halfway around the world to stand right next to one of his most important allies against terrorists—and embarrass him."

In a comment entitled "The Musharraf Dilemma," the US thinktank Stratfor declared: "The lectures by Washington, couched though they may have been, were not lost in Pakistan, particularly since they came on the heels of a landmark nuclear agreement with arch-rival India. The lack of parity in the way Washington deals with Islamabad versus New Delhi has long been keenly

felt by the Pakistanis. But the tenor of Bush's recent visit also casts Musharraf personally in a bad light, since he has long portrayed himself as the navigator who could steer the country out of the mess created by civilian leaders in the 1990s. The chastisement will do nothing to ease challenges Musharraf is facing at home.

"With Al Qaeda leaders believed to be hiding in Pakistan's hinterlands, there is no question that the United States needs the country as a dependable ally in its war against jihadists and the firmness of Musharraf's grip on power is a key concern. But as domestic problems for his administration multiply and political returns from Islamabad's alliance with Washington dwindle, questions are surfacing in both Pakistan and the United States about his continued ability to govern."

As Stratfor noted, Musharraf spent Monday trying to put "a positive spin" on Bush's visit. Speaking to journalists in his office, the president offered a contorted and defensive explanation, saying Pakistan was "not in competition with India" and unlike India had no "global or regional aspirations". In the next breath, however, he admitted that rivalry with India had been pivotal to Pakistani ideology for decades and that "the army will still remain India-centric for obvious reasons".

The disappointment in ruling circles in Islamabad was palpable. The *Daily Times* wrote: "The unexpected cold response [from Bush] and no major development both on the economical and political front during the two-day visit of the US president have shattered hopes." The Karachi stock exchange declined sharply on Monday by 468 points or more than 4 percent.

As well as undermining the Musharraf regime, the Bush visit has also highlighted Washington's deeply destabilising influence on the region as a whole. By tilting strongly to India, which the US views as a potential counterweight to China, the Bush administration is upsetting the previous tenuous relation of forces on the subcontinent, particularly between India and Pakistan, and paving the way for future conflict.



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