

Islamabad woos US for long-term relationship without strings attached

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Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's ubiquitous ambassador in Washington, has a brain teaser for Hillary Clinton.

America's secretary of state wants to triple civilian aid to Pakistan but impose clear conditions on military assistance to ensure the money goes towards fighting terrorists rather than building up Pakistan's defences against India.

A big chunk of the mostly unconditional \$11bn in military aid George W. Bush gave Pakistan since 2001 went on the latter. "There is no bullet that has been invented that Pakistan can be given to shoot at the terrorists that cannot be used in case there is a war with India," Mr Haqqani says in an interview. "That said, our primary threat right now comes from terrorism and not from our eastern neighbour so our requests for support will be geared to the primary threat we have."

Yesterday, Mr Haqqani was busy dealing with the latest complication to the US-Pakistani relationship: the release of AQ Khan, the man seen by many Pakistanis as a national hero for his efforts developing the nuclear bomb but regarded by Washington as a dangerous proliferator for his assistance to Iran and North Korea's nuclear programmes.

"It may cause a short-term perception problem here," said the ambassador on Mr Khan's release. "But let's look at the bright side. Pakistan now has a genuinely independent judiciary and we have dismantled the AQ Khan network."

As a close confidante of Asif Zardari, Pakistan's president, Mr Haqqani is seen by many in Islamabad as the country's unofficial foreign minister. Many in Washington view him as the representative of the most dangerous potential failed state on the planet.

In the words of one wit, Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's former military leader, used to put a gun to his head and tell the Americans: "Help me or I'll shoot myself."

Will Pakistan's young democracy play the same game with the Obama administration? Mr Haqqani, a former information minister in the 1990s who went into exile during the Musharraf years to teach in the US, insists it is better to give Pakistan the money and trust the facts on the ground. For example, Pakistan did not stop, and is thought tacitly to have authorised, a Central Intelligence Agency Predator strike against targets in Pakistan three days after Barack Obama was inaugurated.

John Kerry, chairman of the US Senate foreign relations committee, plans to reintroduce a bill that would both authorise the increase in civilian aid to Pakistan to \$1.5bn (€1.2bn, £1bn) a year and render the suggested conditions on military assistance into law. Islamabad believes this could make its democratic government look weak to its domestic enemies, notably the Islamists but potentially also within the ranks of the military. "Assistance that is conditional is never good," Mr Haqqani says. "Our advice has been that while we can always discuss what the Americans would prefer . . . [conditional aid] is not going to serve US or Pakistani interests."

Mr Haqqani is much more enthusiastic about the recent appointment of Richard Holbrooke as the administration's special representative to Pakistan and Afghanistan. India was dropped from his designation after protests from New Delhi, which was suspicious he would try to mediate in what India views as a strictly bilateral dispute over Kashmir.

Nevertheless, Mr Holbrooke will visit India as part of his first tour of the region next week. Mr Haqqani, whose government's relatively warm overtures to India were shot to pieces by the allegedly Pakistan-facilitated Mumbai terrorist attacks in November, chooses his words carefully. "Ambassador Holbrooke's great strength is that he always approaches issues in their entirety," he says.

"One understands India's concerns about not having major powers intercede in the conduct of their foreign policy, but when the Mumbai attacks occurred India's immediate response was that the international community should put pressure on Pakistan."

But Mr Haqqani's most important brief is to encourage the US to put its relationship with Pakistan on a long-term footing - an elusive Pakistani goal almost since the country was created 62 years ago.

Joe Biden, US vicepresident, once spoke for many Pakistanis when he described the relationship as "transactional". America lavishes aid on Pakistan when it needs its help and then switches seamlessly to sanctions after it has got the help it needed. There is barely a think-tank in Washington that has not heard Mr Haqqani argue this must change. "We are transforming ourselves from an authoritarian state to a democratic state. We want it to be a real alliance this time round."

Financial Times, USA, 7 feb. 2009, World News, online. Disponível em <www.ft.com>. Acesso em: 12 fev. 2009.

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