

U.S.-Pakistan strategic dialogue: where does it stand?

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Pakistan and the United States completed their two days of high-level strategic talks on Thursday, March 25, 2010, in Washington, D.C. The two-day series of meetings was attended by high government and military officials from both countries. The meetings were seen as a chance to move beyond the mutual trust deficit that the two countries shared and to address the misconceptions among the people of both the countries.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and a number of other officials were present from the U.S. government, including Secretary of Defense Robert Gates; Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; USAID Administrator Dr. Raj Shah; Deputy Secretary of State; Deputy Secretary of Agriculture; Deputy U.S. trade Representative, along with many other officials and American Ambassador to Pakistan, Anne Patterson.

The Pakistani delegation included Foreign Minister Shah Mahmud Qureshi, Minister of Defense Ahmad Mukhtar, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Social Issues; Advisor to the Prime Minister on Agriculture and Water; the Chief of Army Staff General Kayani and his delegation of military advisors; Ambassador Haqqani; Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir; Secretary of Information Technology; Secretary of Water and Power; Finance Secretary; Secretary of Agriculture; Defense Secretary, along with many other officials.

Prior to the talks, Pakistani Chief of Army Staff, General Kayani, met with the head of U.S. military's Central Command, General David Petraeus, the head of U.S. Chief of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, and U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates. General Kiyani remained consistent with his participation and was the star of the show. The basic agenda of the talks for the Pakistani side revolved largely around three focal points:

1. To get a deal similar to the civil nuclear deal U.S. has offered to India.
2. Transfer of missile drone technology.
3. To get payments from the Coalition Support Funds.

Though Pakistan and U.S. have held such dialogues in the past as well, this time the talks were characterized to be more updated and more

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concerned with Pakistan and its people. It is the first strategic dialogue between the two countries led by a Pakistani foreign minister and the United States secretary of state. The dialogue offered a new format of engagement by placing a mechanism which is transparent; it has accountability and delivers result on time. The framework of the discussions also ensured follow-up with a multi-track approach to it.

In the meetings, Pakistan presented a fifty-six-page list of priorities, which included major issues to be addressed collectively. Most important of them was a proposal on a civil nuclear to Pakistan, similar to the civilian nuclear agreement U.S. has with India. The second was the provision of drone technology to Pakistani military with improved surveillance technology as well as missile launch drones, F-16 combat aircraft and other military hardware to fight the Taliban insurgency more effectively.

Other issues addressed were those related to national security priorities of Pakistan, limiting India's role in Afghanistan, and long-term military modernization. Also discussed were the subjects of re-capitalization efforts, areas and sectors to boost economic development, help improve exports of agricultural products and to improve agricultural infrastructure, providing greater market access to Pakistani products and trade concessions, granting relief on textile tariffs, assistance in energy programmes, thermal power station rehabilitation projects, a multi-year security assistance package, and social protection efforts, besides others.

From the U.S. side, Pakistan's role in Afghanistan remained the subject of intense scrutiny between the military officials of Pakistan and America. Reconciliation with the Taliban and reintegration of the insurgents also covered a large part of the talks. Pakistani military and government officials also raised the question of reassurances that substantial U.S. military presence will remain in Afghanistan long after the withdrawal which begins in 2011 and that the involvement of India in Afghanistan will be minimized.

The dialogue was called a success. Both Pakistan and U.S. described it as an opportunity to engage directly on the full range of issues; political, economic and social issues that matter for both the countries and are of common concern, shared responsibility, as well as to produce concrete results. Hillary Clinton in a press conference remarked that the U.S. was happy to "listen and engage with Pakistani partners on whatever issues the delegation raises."

Outcome

The U.S. largely remained silent on the issue of transfer of civil nuclear technology as that would confer legitimacy to Pakistan as a nuclear power. It remained a subject of great scrutiny between both the countries and was among Pakistan Chief of Army Staff's top agenda items. The U.S., however, made no clear statement on it and declared that it was a matter of greater debate. The administration officials added that such an agreement would realistically be 10 or 15 years away.¹ One of the two main reasons which inform the reluctance of U.S. to offer any such deal to Pakistan is perhaps the continued discomfort in Washington over Dr. A. Q Khan's proliferation record. Secondly, it is not seen in the long-term interest of U.S. to make Pakistan and India parts of similar deals whether military or non military.

Among other specific announcements made was an agreement for the U.S. Agency for International Development to help Pakistan upgrade three thermal power plants. Deputy Secretary of State Jacob J. Lew and Pakistan's Finance Secretary Salman Siddique signed a letter of intent regarding cooperation in construction of priority roads in Pakistan to aid in Malakand reconstruction. The project will consist of \$40 million in United States assistance to upgrade two key roads: the Peshawar Ring Road and the road from Kanju to Madyan in Swat, North West Frontier Province. Both nations seek to sort the issues of greatest importance to the Pakistani people: security and economic growth.

The administration also agreed to create Reconstruction Opportunity Zones in Pakistan and agreed to support Pakistan. In this regard, the U.S. promised to pledge 125 \$ million; it is hoped that this money is not driven out from the very controversial Kerry Lugar Bill. The U.S. also offered assistance for the construction of 400-megawatts thermal power stations which is not even a drop in the ocean of the energy crisis Pakistan is facing today.

As a result of two days' talks, both the sides came to the common conclusion to establish a 'Policy Steering Group' which will take care of many fields of common interest like: energy, defence, law-enforcement, counterterrorism, science and technology, education, health, agriculture, water and many other issues. A separate sectoral dialogue track was also announced which will take care of issues related to water, such as water conservation, U.S. assistance in water projects; construction of dams and bridges.

Conclusion

President John F. Kennedy once said that “the only thing worse than being an enemy of the United States is being an ally.” U.S. and Pakistan have shared an off-again on-again relationship. Pakistan over the last decade has played a vital part in America’s fight against terrorism and has paid a greater price in terms of human lives, worsening security conditions and deteriorating economy as compared to any other nation involved in the effort.

For Pakistan and its people it would be utterly naïve to expect any big breakthroughs. It is still a hope that the continuation of these talks will consolidate a new level of partnership between Pakistan and the U.S. However, Pakistan should realise that whatever the U.S. has committed as a result of the dialogue will be subject to congressional approval which is a long and uncertain process. A lot of that depends on Pakistan military’s progress in fighting the insurgents along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and its progress in its fight parallel to the upcoming Kandahar operation.

It is time for Pakistan to realise that it should not place its dealings with U.S. at the cost of its relations with regional countries. Iran has offered 2,200 mw of energy assistance to Pakistan which is half the quantity of Pakistan’s total energy deficit. The current electricity shortage in the country is now at 5,000 megawatts and what the U.S. has offered is only a small proportion of that. Also, the promises U.S. has made will eventually come at a cost.

Though there was no concrete outcome of the dialogue as it was earlier expected, the ‘strategic dialogue’ to some extent presented a framework of talks which was earlier missing between the United States and Pakistan. Some very sensitive issues were agitated which were earlier left untouched. The success of these meetings and discussions will and can only be measured when it translates into long-term progress between America and Pakistan in all walks of life. In short, the strategic dialogue was neither a complete success nor a failure for Pakistan.

Notes & References

¹ Mark Lander, “U.S. and Pakistan Agree to Reinforce Strategic Ties”, *The New York Times*, March 25, 2010.