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THE GOOD NEWS

We have had, for a change, some good news from Pakistan in the last two days. The spiraling political crisis which threatened to destabilize the country has been avoided by a political arrangement at the last minute. In fact, the demonstrators were in the streets, and early clashes between them and police had already occurred. This arrangement involved President Zadari and Prime Minister Gilani, and their PPP government, agreeing to reinstate the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who had been sidelined and then dismissed by President Musharraf's government just over two years ago. That began a long struggle by civil society organizations to restore not only the Chief Justice but, more importantly, the judicial independence of which he was a strong symbol. The movement of lawyers that pushed for these objectives was a strong factor in the fall from power of President Musharraf, and threatened the ability of President Zadari's and his PPP government to govern effectively. Clearly, to many Pakistanis, judicial independence was an idea whose time had come—once again.

US-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS

I will return to this crisis, but I want to cover first US relations with Pakistan, particularly as they seem to be shaping up under the administration of President Obama. For the past

few days, these relations have been intensely political as the USG focused at all levels on trying to help resolve the crisis. This was very appropriate given its threat to our interests in Pakistan. Ambassador Anne Patterson seemed tireless in her efforts to help defuse the crisis. I lost count early on as to how many times she saw the President, the Prime Minister, the Chief of Army Staff, the leader of the other major political party, Nawaz Sharif of the PMLN, his brother, and other political leaders. This effort on the ground was, of course, aided by calls from Secretary Clinton and Special Envoy Holbrooke to these same leaders.

Over the past few months, it has become clear that the new US administration is viewing Pakistan through a slightly different lens than have previous administrations. Pakistan remains a close ally, but a troubled one, that could turn into the primary problem in South Asia, and in our ongoing struggle against terrorists that threaten our homeland and other Western and South Asian allies, including Pakistan itself. Therefore, it seems to me that the USG is searching for adequate mechanisms to help Pakistan focus on the existential threat it faces in the growth of the extremist networks in that country and to provide the means for the Pakistani military, as well as the government, to push back effectively against extremist groups.

One way of doing this is to change the content of the military assistance we provide to emphasize training and equipment aimed at counter-insurgency operations. The Pakistan Army remains woefully under trained and under resourced to fight a counter-terrorist type of war. We will have to improve also in the delivery of such equipment. Former

Pakistani government officials in a position to know insist that US-provided counter-insurgency equipment, such as attack helicopters and night vision goggles, was delivered up to 18 months later than promised.

The other main change in our assistance programs has already been foreshadowed in the bill that Vice President Biden shepherded through the Senate last year. This bill increases significantly the proportion of economic and social development assistance in our assistance packages, and I believe the ultimate target is to triple economic assistance to Pakistan. Though this turn is, perhaps, later than it should have been, investing in Pakistan's economic and social development is another way to strengthen the Government no matter which of the democratic parties is running it. It is Pakistan's miserable economic and social conditions that, in part, are responsible for the rapid growth of extremist Islamist forces in the country.

I believe that, while extremely delicate, a major diplomatic aim in our relationship with Pakistan will be to encourage the government to continue engage with its neighbor India on the issues that have divided the two countries, often bitterly, for over 60 years. We have learned recently that the two countries, when both are blessed by strong governments, can find ways bilaterally to reduce tensions and put long-standing, festering issues such as Kashmir on the path to resolution. This is a very sensitive issue, and the US should not be perceived as mediating or meddling in any way. In the early years, our primary way of furthering this objective may be our assistance programs aimed at strengthening the country and the government in power.

THE POWER STRUGGLE AND POLITICAL CRISIS

If the power struggle between the PPP of President Zadari, which rules the central government, and the other major party, the PMLN of Nawaz Sharif, which rules Punjab, is really over, it is very good news. The “long march,” which had all the signs of engendering violence that would likely spun completely out of control, was called off before the violence had a chance to set in. Had that happened, I think it likely that the Army would have had to step in, though it clearly didn’t want to.

If the crisis has been resolved by real give-and-take democratic compromise, it would be even better news. But was it? History would tell us that it was more likely the result of intense pressure by Pakistan’s Western allies, and more importantly, by the Army, that led President Zadari to cave in to the demands of the marchers and his primary political opponent Nawaz Sharif, who adopted the “long march” despite his problematical past with the judiciary. It may be a repeat of the Army’s involvement in the 1993 conflict between—guess who—Nawaz Sharif, the then Prime Minister, and the President, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, over whether the latter had the authority to fire the former. And, guess what—it was an activist supreme court that started the conflict by overruling the President’s dismissal of Sharif.

History also tells us that in periods when elected governments rule, if one of the major parties is in control of the central government and the other in control of Punjab, the

dominant and most populous province, it is very likely that the two will struggle for national power instead of cooperating to govern.. The clearest example of that was Benazir Bhutto's first term as Prime minister, heading a coalition government (as is Zardari) that spent all its time in power disputes with Nawaz Sharif's coalition which controlled Punjab. After the February 18, 2008 election which brought Zardari and the PPP to power in the center and Sharif to power in Punjab, there was much talk of, even a timid effort at, a coalition of the two big parties. Our hopes were swelled by that illusion as some even thought that Pakistan's restored political leaders had learned from history. Alas, no

I don't think we know enough yet to declare the resolution of this crisis a resounding victory for democracy. But no doubt, it is better than the alternative—cascading violence which could have fatally weakened the Pakistani government, and increased the country's vulnerability to extremist encroachment on the state.

PAKISTAN'S WILL TO RESIST

Our increased economic assistance programs mentioned above will, we hope, not only strengthen the country over time, and allow the governments to take stronger action against those who pose an existential threat to the state, but also work to strengthen the will of Pakistani society to resist this threat. So many forces work in the opposite direction these days that one sometimes wonders if that will is strong enough to prevail over the inertia that often seems to greet the encroachments of extremists. History is not a friend in this endeavor. The territory that is now Pakistan has been the pathway of

invaders from the Northwest since Alexander's time, and the indigenous populations have learned how to cope with and accommodate invaders. Since Pakistan's birth 62 years ago, its political leaders have made a habit of Faustian Bargains with single-minded religious forces, trading away bit and pieces of the secular, liberal vision of the nation's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah for short-term political gains. This tradition continues in the peace deals, such as in Swat, which have been singularly unsuccessful, though this seems to be continually forgotten. Perhaps most importantly these days, there is a constant blare of accommodationist rhetoric in the Pakistani media, particularly among the many new cable TV channels where demagoguery seems to be particularly acute. Most of these media stars push the line that the extremists threat to Pakistan is mainly an American myth, fostered to get the Pakistanis to fight our war; the terrorists and the war would just go away if only the Americans would, is their claim. Among other things, we need to help the government get control of its own airwaves.