

PAKISTAN IN FRONT OF THE CHAOS? WASHINGTON'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY VIS-À- VIS ISLAMABAD AFTER THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE USA

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During his election campaign, the new US president, Barack Obama, won over many of his voters by promising change and a new beginning. Now, after his election, people in Pakistan and Afghanistan are not the only ones who ask themselves whether and how these assurances are to be fulfilled, especially in US foreign policy. Will the new leadership in Washington bring about a fundamental change in America's course, including that vis-à-vis Pakistan?

2009 will probably become a pivotal year in the development of the two Asian countries, and the USA as the nation with the greatest influence will certainly seek to take part in shaping it. Pakistan's strategic role in the fight against terrorism, the smouldering conflict in Kashmir, and Pakistan's involvement in the Mumbai attacks show how necessary it is to analyze Washington's foreign and security policy carefully. The fact that Pakistan plays an important part in US foreign policy results from five factors – the country's importance as a zone of war against Islamist terrorism, its regional role in endeavouring to achieve stability in Afghanistan and as a pivot of NATO logistics, its relevance as a nuclear power, the sensitivity of the permanent Indian-Pakistani conflict, and the destabilization perceived to be growing within Pakistan.

Relations between Pakistan and the USA have so far been rather inconsistent and unpredictable. Sometimes, the country was seen as a major non-NATO ally, sometimes as a rogue state reaching for nuclear weapons. Thus, the sanctions imposed on Islamabad in 1990 must be interpreted as Washington's response to Pakistan's nuclear programme. And so, Pakistan hoped in vain for support by the USA in its wars with India and in the Kargil conflict of 1999. Due to its unpredictability, the US has sown little trust in its motives in Pakistan. After September 11, 2001, a paradigm shift took place in the USA's attitude towards Pakistan. As a 'front-line state' in the fight against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, the country received more than twelve billion US dollars in financial aid between 2001 and the end of 2008. Although there have hardly been any reliable controls of these funds, most money transfers, except for a certain amount that was used for development aid, were traceably used to prepare Pakistan's army for the war against terrorism. In the middle of 2007, US secret services called the development of 'safe havens' in Pakistan as a refuge for insurgents in the regions

bordering Afghanistan the biggest current challenge to the USA in general and to the NATO units operating in Afghanistan in particular.

Without a doubt, the Taliban insurgents and the groups that are close to Al-Qaeda were able to regenerate in the last few years. To Washington, the fact that the government in Islamabad went so far as to negotiate with radical Islamic Taliban symbolizes capitulation.

Especially the security of the nuclear arsenal in Pakistan should give the US cause for concern. In concrete terms, we are looking at 50 nuclear weapons ready for use. In this context, the US is interested in two things: on the one hand, it intends to prevent a proliferation of either the technology or the material itself. On the other, it is concerned about how the Pakistani military handle their own nuclear facilities.

Against the background of all this, Pakistan's importance for US foreign and security policy is obvious. Now, how is this policy going to change under the new leadership in Washington? One thing is for sure – today's leading players on the Pakistani side are no longer those of the past: the military government of Pervez Musharraf is no longer in office; the reins are in the hands of a civilian government under president Asif Zardari and prime minister Yousaf Raza Gillani. On the American side, everything points at continuity with the Bush administration, despite the change of government. Persons such as Robert Gates, James Jones, Bruce Riedel, James Holbrooke, and David Pertraeus still hold key positions in the US security and defence apparatus, as they did under George W. Bush. The only new faces are those of vice president Joe Biden and foreign secretary Hillary Clinton. To be sure, the heyday of neoconservatives like Charles Krauthammer is over; however, these had already lost influence in the last years of the old government. The future course of the US will certainly be determined by its own security interests. However, pragmatic multilateralism and well-considered use of American soft and hard power are also on the rise today.

It is remarkable that the conditions for remitting funds to Pakistan are more stringent today than they were in 2007. In the autumn of 2008, Mr Obama himself said that his predecessor's controls of the funds granted to Pakistan were too lax. Given the erosive situation in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Mr Obama will now probably rely on more stringent controls. The fact that another 17,000 US soldiers were sent to the Hindu Kush shows that Mr Obama intends to get the situation in Afghanistan under control. In this context, the NATO partners will probably have to face new demands. Apparently, Mr Obama has concrete expectations and places Afghanistan and Pakistan in a strategic context: according to the president, the two states are 'one combat zone'. However, he plans to take not only military but also development-policy steps, especially in education and infrastructure, in order

to 'de-idealize' extremists and deprive them of their breeding ground for recruits.

All these approaches and initiatives are anything but new. Calls for smart power, more development aid, and improved evaluation and coordination were and still are voiced by both conservative and liberal think tanks. Mr Obama's policy also features elements of that of Mr Bush. Thus, he announced that he intended to increase the use of Predator drones on Pakistani territory, and that members of the Taliban and Al- Qaeda who were caught in Afghanistan would not be treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention.

On the other hand, there will be profound changes in the administrative structure. In this context, Mr Obama endeavours to allocate more efficiently the competences of the bodies involved in the foreign-policy process. Responsibilities for Afghanistan and Pakistan are to be reorganized. Furthermore, Mr Obama seems to place special emphasis on communication so as to forge a consensus. However, Washington will probably not change its position towards India. Initiated in 2006, the USA's endeavours for strategic rapprochement with India will be continued under Barack Obama, although this is likely to put a strain on its relationship with Pakistan. Shortly after his inauguration, president Obama set a new course vis-à-vis Pakistan in foreign and security policy. At the same time, however, his administration also adopted tools of the preceding government. As the front-line state in the war on Islamist terrorism, Pakistan is like a chameleon that changes its colour frequently. Yet there are fundamental points that may form the substance for a strategic partnership between the two countries. Against this background, the USA's foreign and security policy operates at four levels – at the regional level of conflict resolution, at the institutional level of multilateralism, at the national level of its own engagement, and at the level of its strategic partnership with Pakistan.

Pakistan has not yet fallen into the abyss, but it faces it. The situation in the country is indeed ambivalent. Even today, the Taliban do not constitute a substantial threat to the state. However, this might change as bad governance is an ideal breeding ground for rebels. Moreover, the desolate domestic and economic situation offers more explosive material than many might think. Against the background of all this, it can only be hoped that civilian rule will succeed in stabilizing the country. Washington will not be willing to leave the ultimate control of Pakistan's nuclear potential to a permanently unpredictable government in Islamabad, especially as the country will become even more relevant in security policy in the future.