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WikiLeaks Disclosure Sets off Defensive Posture in the International Politics of Pakistan.

LSE Ideas

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The recent news on Pakistan's international relations that came out of the latest [WikiLeaks document cache has been remarkably easy to bear](#). Nothing untoward has happened. All the players have played their parts. International politics between the U.S and Pakistan continues in recognizably similar ways as it did yesterday, and the day before. Of course, strategic politics has nakedly come to the fore and understandably so; the real news however is non-news—that though everyone has grumbled, moaned, they have all walked away into their own corners of politics and chicanery to hold onto their share of power in Pakistan.

Indeed, each partisan to Pakistan's politics is doing its best to preserve necessary ties while claiming priority for its own prerogative. The media is leading the charge here, and both the central government in Islamabad and its U.S allies are on the defensive. The right is blaming President Asif Ali Zardari, pointing to Saudi King Abdullah's criticism of the political situation in Pakistan—a rather veiled threat? — that “when the head is rotten, it affects the whole body.” The left and the center in Pakistani politics, the majority of Pakistanis therefore, are talking about sovereignty as they have always done. Already, judging by a series of opinion polls conducted by organizations like Pew Research and the New American Foundation over the summer, Pakistanis distrust the U.S intervention in Pakistan and blame the U.S squarely for the intensifying drone attacks in the tribal regions. The new revelations that the U.S. had been intent on removing enriched uranium from a nuclear site and therefore, had been intervening in Pakistan's favorite national capability, its nuclear arsenal, can only inflame that distrust and disdain.

So far, the Zardari administration in Islamabad has been loath to deal with the rightists in Pakistani politics. Thus the right-leaning English language newspaper, The News front page piece chiding President Zardari drew an unsurprisingly mild response from the executive office: Zardari claimed that King Abdullah is like his older brother. “Call me names”, he seemed to say, “and I will turn the other cheek.” He might well have added that he is doing this to maintain his precarious grip on power.

Consider that Zardari needs to brush aside this offensive rebuke. Hardliner Saudi Wahhabis help fund the Taliban in Pakistan, as much as they do in Afghanistan. Perhaps to contain the domestic criticism laid against him, King Abdullah spoke to appease the homebred Wahhabis; perhaps not. There is no doubt, however, that Zardari bowed before King Abdullah in order to staunch as much of the runaway support of the right as he can. In order to not fall in the way of his democratically elected predecessor, and current opposition leader, Nawaz Sharif he needs to kowtow to the right. Perhaps more importantly he needs to court the military to his side, though he has long bristled at that fact.

President Zardari and his ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP) have been deferring to the military after a terrible summer of misrule and missed opportunities. After the devastating summer floods that ruined farms and fertile fields in large swathes of the countryside, the people of Pakistan sanctioned the Pakistani military as the only functioning authority in the country. (Note how many are clamoring for the seemingly misremembered clarity and purpose of General Musharraf's rule!) Since then Zardari and his Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani have been looking for a way to undercut the military for their political benefit.

Indeed, the recent news might have provided that opportunity. Upon the disclosure that the U.S. had been trying to get rid of a cache of enriched uranium in Pakistan for fear that it would wind up at the disposal of militants, even the left leaning English daily Dawn that often defends the Zardari administration, raised the specter of Pakistan's contested sovereignty. It's front-page headline: “Pakistan's nuclear capability a source of strength: PM”. At the same stroke as defending Pakistani national pride, Prime Minister Gilani tied together the fate of Pakistan with the fate of the ruling party. Notice though that even though he spoke to the pride of place of the nuclear arsenal, and therefore of Pakistani national security, he failed to mention that the Pakistani military might have anything at all to do with securing Pakistan's nuclear capability.

In response to Gilani's bold move, the U.S. government, through the person of the newly appointed U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, has argued for the continued cooperation of sorts that it enjoys with Pakistan, without backtracking from its criticism of the Zardari government and without disavowing the moves it reportedly made against Pakistan's nuclear, military complex.

These moves and counter-moves raise the haunted ghost of previous U.S. interventions in Pakistan. Those interventions have not gone well for the Pakistani people. How might the U.S. now defend itself against the claim that it is charging head-long into occupying Pakistan, when it has been shown to have interfered into Pakistan's favorite public capability: its nuclear arsenal?

Little surprise then that Ambassador Cameron Munter moved to calm those in the military and in the political right and published an op-ed piece this morning in the right-leaning newspaper The News, announcing in part that:

Pakistan is an important strategic partner of the United States. Of course, even a solid relationship will have its ups and downs. We have seen that in the past few days, when documents purportedly downloaded from US Defense Department computers became the subject of reports in the media.

Moreover he claimed, the U.S foreign policy team: ...

will continue to work to strengthen our partnership with Pakistan and make progress on the issues that are important for our two countries. We can't afford anything less. I am in close contact with Pakistan's leadership to make sure we continue to focus on the issues and tasks at hand. President Obama, Secretary Clinton, and I remain committed to being trusted partners as we seek to build a better, more prosperous world for everyone.

It is too early to tell if the U.S government's overtures to the Pakistani people, over the summer and now, going forward, will smooth out years of implacably opposed opinion on unhelpful interventions in Pakistan's politics. Most Pakistanis think that American promises aren't worth much. Promises of a longer stay coupled with more productive moves to ensure the safety of Pakistanis in the tribal regions, plans to spur on economic growth, raise education standards, fall to daily drone strikes. But maybe there is yet a third way.

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