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Obama Meets With Pakistan's Zardari and Afghanistan's Karzai

Reuters news reported that Obama would hold separate meetings with each of the leaders as well as a joint session. The meetings began on the morning of May 6 at the State Department, and continued in the afternoon at the White House.

Meetings between cabinet officials from the three nations were scheduled for May 7. Reuters quoted an administration official who said: "Our goal is to get the two countries to work more closely together. You can't succeed in this war given the geography unless they cooperate."



"We'd like an alliance with these two countries against this kind of [extremist] threat," said another official. "It's very simple ... but quite profound."

Reuters also quoted a senior administration official who gave a preview of the president's agenda for the meetings: "He's going to make the obvious general points that have to be said and carry such enormous weight when they are said by the president of the United States — that these two countries have to work together for their mutual benefit, despite their history, despite the suspicions."

Both nations have become key battlegrounds and staging areas for al-Qaeda and its Taliban sponsors. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorists attacks, when a coalition of anti-Taliban Afghan Northern Alliance forces and NATO troops unseated the Taliban from power in the Afghan capital of Kabul and drove them from major cities, the Taliban-backed al-Qaeda militants fled to outlying areas and into neighboring Pakistan. The Taliban have gained control over large areas of the Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) — which includes the Swat Valley.

The government of Pakistan announced on February 16 that it had agreed to accept a system of strict Islamic law, or sharia, in the region, as well as a suspension of military operations in the area. In return, the Taliban promised to end insurgent violence and stop brandishing weapons publicly. The agreement was viewed by many in the West as a futile act of appeasement, because it effectively abandoned parts of northwest Pakistan to the Taliban insurgents, creating a sanctuary from which they can further threaten supply lines supporting the NATO military operation in Afghanistan.

Not surprisingly, the Taliban reneged on their part of the agreement and started expanding their area of control. When the militants came within 60 miles of Islamabad during the last week of April, the Pakistani army started to retaliate. On May 5, thousands of residents fled the Swat Valley as government forces moved in to battle the Taliban. The Pakistan military said in a statement the next day, cited by the *New York Times*, that its forces had killed 35 militants near emerald mines in the Swat Valley when troops returned fire from insurgents. In a separate firefight, 27 militants were killed in the adjoining Buner district, whose occupation by the militants helped produce a consensus that more stringent action was needed.



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U.S. special envoy for the region, Richard C. Holbrooke, said on May 5 that he welcomed Pakistan's more aggressive military actions.

"Until yesterday, the momentum did not appear to be in the right hands," Holbrooke told the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "The army has now begun a major offensive. We'll have to wait and see how it goes."

Holbrooke told committee members that the Obama administration "unambiguously" supports Zardari, even as it puts "the most heavy possible pressure" on his government to fight extremists in the country. "We do not think Pakistan is a failed state," the *Washington Post* quoted Holbrooke. But, he added, "we think it's a state under extreme test from the enemies who are also our enemies."

A senior police official in Peshawar, the capital of the North West Frontier Province, when asked whether Pakistan can contain the militant threat, replied: "It is a manageable problem." The official, speaking on conditions of anonymity, expressed hope that some of the U.S. aid spent on helping Pakistan's military could be sent to his units. As the *Times* quoted him: "If Uncle Sam shows the same generosity to our force, I don't see why we cannot be a good supporting force."

The president has urged Congress to provide \$1.5 billion annually for five years to help Pakistan develop roads, schools, clinics, and other civilian infrastructure. However, members of the House have considered whether to attach stringent conditions to the appropriations. The day before his meeting with the Obama, Zardari met privately for 90 minutes with members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, in what observers consider to be an effort to sway reluctant legislators to help his country.

UPI quoted Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, who said that Zardari's message would be that Pakistan's leaders have "the will to confront violent extremism and terrorism, but we need American support to do it."

In an interview with the German online publication *DW-World*, Gunter Mulack, a former German ambassador to Pakistan, said: "Obama will be asking Pakistan and Afghanistan to work together better, especially in terms of the military and the intelligence services, to suppress the Taliban and al Qaeda in the border region."

The former ambassador expressed his opinion that the United States remains skeptical about whether the Pakistani leadership in general, and the military and intelligence services specifically, have the will to tackle the Taliban and al-Qaeda head on. Said Mulack: "As U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently said, there are major doubts about the Pakistani secret services, which cooperated for too many years with militants, particular in Kashmir. There are also qualms about whether Zardari fully has his heart in it."

The German periodical also noted the Obama administration's promise of \$1.5 billion in annual aid to Pakistan is predicated on an agreement by Zardari to work together with Afghanistan and clamp down on Taliban strongholds in the tribal areas of northwest Pakistan.

At a press briefing held on the eve of the meeting between the two Middle Eastern presidents and President Obama, White House Press Corps member Helen Thomas of the Hearst Newspapers asked administration Press Secretary Robert Gibbs: "Does the President have congressional approval to send thousands of troops to Afghanistan? And what does he mean that extremists are a direct and general threat to us? Can you explain that?"

Gibbs answered: "Sure. I presume that the authorization for increased troop activity in Afghanistan



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goes back to 2000 — I don't know exactly when the vote was, late 2001. I think the president outlined a strategy to deal with this region and to deal with Afghanistan and Pakistan, understanding that al-Qaeda and its extremist allies operated in these two countries. I think it is clear from their actions that they pose a threat not only to those countries, but also to the United States. And I think we saw that."

Thomas interjected: "Are they a threat because we're there intervening in their civil war? Or are they going to come here?"

Gibbs replied: "I think it was pretty apparent the threat that they posed and the destruction that they ultimately caused in 2001, and that the president will take action to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and its extremist allies."

Gibbs' explanation of retroactive authorization to increase troop strength in Afghanistan going back to a 2001 vote in Congress is quite novel, especially considering the lack of a congressional declaration of war and the provision in the Constitution that no appropriation of money to raise and support armies shall be for a term longer than two years.

When Chuck Todd of NBC News asked Gibbs what the president is going to do to reassure Zardari "that he can guarantee the money, that the money is going to come, that Congress will be able to get this done" in the face of growing opposition on Capitol Hill to providing aid to Pakistan, Gibbs answered:

Understand that nobody is more impatient in seeing progress on a strategy to deal with Afghanistan and Pakistan than the president of the United States. He has talked about this for several years. These meetings over the course of the next couple of days make good on the promise of being engaged in this region actively. As I said to Helen, there is a shared threat from al-Qaeda and its extremist allies, and the best way to confront that threat is through an alliance and cooperation with both of those countries.

Of course, paying \$1.5 billion a year to a country is one way to obtain cooperation. But what will happen when the payments stop? More importantly, will they *ever* stop?

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