

Obama's South Asia challenges

Guest columnist Ahmed Rashid says US President-elect Barack Obama will face some of his trickiest foreign policy challenges in South Asia.

The extraordinary electoral victory of Barack Obama will hopefully tilt the world away from what many see as the ruinous unilateralism of George Bush's policies towards greater multilateralism.

Mr Obama's parentage and upbringing straddle so many identities that they can only be of benefit as he sets about formulating new policies to deal with the burgeoning crises in Afghanistan and Pakistan while ensuring that India helps rather than hinders the peace process in the region.

The world's euphoria at Mr Obama's victory will initially give him a honeymoon period around the world.

"For the first six months no European leader will be able to say no to any demand Mr Obama makes," a European foreign minister tells me.

"If he asks Europe for more troops for Afghanistan or money for Pakistan, it will be difficult to refuse."

If Mr Obama is to pursue a comprehensive strategy to help Pakistan and Afghanistan combat jihadism, India will have to play a role and be part of the solution

So far Mr Obama's plans have been policy sound bites, more to do with electioneering rather than then dealing with real problems on the ground in South Asia.

However there are signs from Mr Obama's South Asia team that has been working on policy issues over the past few months in Washington, that he wants a comprehensive and interlocking strategy in South Asia.

Sensitive

Thus Mr Obama's promised surge of US troops in Afghanistan will be matched by an all round comprehensive surge that includes better reconstruction, development and extending the reach of the Afghan government into the provinces.

The US military has already indicated that it is prepared to fight against extremist Taleban but talk to more moderate Taleban.

There will also be sensitive political issues to be resolved.

Will President Obama back the re-election of Hamid Karzai as president of Afghanistan when and if elections take place in October 2009?

Will it back the new Afghan government plan to arm local Pashtun tribes to better resist the Taleban? How much will Mr Obama push Nato and the European Union to provide more troops, trainers and money for Afghanistan?

Pakistan issues

Pakistan has the severest political and economic crisis in its history.

It also faces a jihadist insurgency that is spreading beyond northern Pakistan, an army that is still hesitant to cede too much power to a civilian government and an ubiquitous intelligence service that runs a state within the state.

There is also a division within the establishment.

Traditionally the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party has been close to the Democrats, while the army has always preferred the Republicans - perhaps because Republican presidents rarely question military rule.

Despite the efforts of President Asif Ali Zardari, the US-Pakistan relationship is at a low ebb due to the US belief that the army is not fully confronting the jihadist threat.

Mr Obama will need a comprehensive policy for Pakistan that both strengthens democracy, woos Pakistan's main street by a more people-orientated aid program, while ensuring that the army remains a US ally and is not alienated.

Mr Obama will have to combat the deep anti-Americanism that Mr Bush's policies created amongst the public, media and the army.

This anti-Americanism is being exploited by the jihadists who attack democracy, women's rights and other freedoms as belonging to Western rather than Islamic value systems.

Both Afghanistan and Pakistan will have to also wake up to another reality.

Gone are the Bush days when US government aid was doled out with little accountability or few conditionalities.

Eighty per cent of the \$11.8bn funnelled to Pakistan since 2001 was gobbled up by the army with an unprecedented lack of transparency or accounting by either Islamabad or Washington.

Some of the over \$20bn of US aid to Afghanistan has been siphoned off to fuel local corruption, pay expensive American consultants or carry out over-billed development projects.

While the international financial crisis will make every US penny count, the new Democrat administration has pledged to better monitor and account for all US aid.

A bill introduced before Congress by now Vice President-elect Joe Biden, which promises Pakistan \$1.5bn a year for development aid for five to 10 years is heavy with conditionalities.

The aid money will only flow if Islamabad strengthens democracy and fights terrorism.

India rattled

India is waiting to see how President Obama deals with the nuclear agreement signed with Bush.

India has already been rattled by a comment by Mr Obama on CNN that the US should help resolve the Kashmir dispute.

The Indian media has criticised an essay that I wrote with fellow Afghan analysts, Barnett Rubin in Foreign Affairs magazine this month urging the US to pressure Delhi to do more to resolve its disputes with Islamabad so that the Pakistan army could feel less threatened by India and divert more resources to fighting militancy.

India's foreign ministry is now sending a delegation to meet with the Obama transition team.

India has traditionally refused to accept outside pressures on improving its relationship with Pakistan, but negotiations on resolving the Kashmir issue have been paralysed since the 2004 ceasefire - largely because India refuses to discuss the issue.

However if Mr Obama is to pursue a comprehensive strategy to help Pakistan and Afghanistan combat jihadism, India will have to play a role and be part of the solution.

Ahmed Rashid is the author of the recently published Descent into Chaos: How the war against Islamic extremism is being lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

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Mr Rashid has been a voice of moderation in Pakistani journalism for a long time. It might seem to some that some of his suggested policies are far too radical, or anti-nationalistic to implement, but it might be very well the time to step back, and take a rational look at issues affecting South Asia. With the two biggest countries in the region dictating their foreign policy via typical show boating, it might be a better solution to have a voice advocating a middle ground via a third party. At this time, it seems like Mr Obama might be that voice. Only by taking concrete, maybe radical steps, to solve the Kashmir problem, by holding a plebiscite of the local people, in conjunction with the Pakistani establishment, establishing a local constitution of laws to govern them by and maintaining a security presence to grant protection to the people, not to harass them, can we bring a semblance of sanity to this region. The people of the world need it, and it's long overdue.

Ram Hariharan, India

The solution to all of South Asian problems lies with Pakistan. But Pakistan's problems lies in its intelligence agency - the ISI - and army which have a strong grip on every aspect of politics. The ISI is notorious for its covert operations and links to extremist organisations. And the Pakistani army is unlikely to be willing to cede too much of its power to a civilian government. So South Asia's issues are perpetual unless dramatic and historic events take place.

Haroon Ahmed, Islamabad

I don't understand how India can be dragged into talks on Kashmir just because the US and Pakistan have a problem in Afghanistan. These two issues have totally different historical reasons and are linked now just because they are happening in the same region and at the same time. Ideally, Pakistan should realise that India is not the issue but for that to happen, India needs to give a ironclad contract that it wont change any borders or interfere in Pakistan's internal affairs. The US or UN should guarantee that promise and this should let Pakistan and the US focus on the monster they created.

Andy Rebeiro, Canada

Ahmed Rashid is right on target as usual. Obama surely has to help Pakistan with aid if he does not want the country to disintegrate and become a nightmare to make Somalia seem a convivial place by comparison. However there has to be strict accountability or else any amount of aid will come to nothing eventually. Unfortunately nothing has really changed as far as the probity of Pakistan's democratic champions is concerned, and the military cannot be expected to undermine its own interest by allowing for the welfare of the people to take priority over national security.

Shehzad Shah, Pakistan

Mr Rashid is a very respected Journalist in South Asia, but it is amazing that he is rewarding Pakistan, which is responsible for training and harbouring terrorists. It has become the largest exporter of terrorists and Jihadists in the world, endangering the whole world, not just India. The only way to stabilise the region and win the war in Afghanistan is by stopping American aid to Pakistan and by destroying its Islamic bomb.

There is no other you to stop the monster.

Dr.Nirode Mohanty, USA

I strongly believe that America must first accept the wrongs it has done to the humanity, specially to Afghans, Iraqis and Palestinians. President Bush's foreign policy of interfering with other countries independence must be scrapped immediately if Obama is to gain any popularity with the Muslim world. Peace is first priority in every part of the world and it can be achieved by correcting America's foreign policies and not blaming others to follow its hidden agenda. Be honest to the world and then expect the same treatment in return. May God bless the new president and guide him to lead his country in the right direction.

Imadul Islam Faroqui, India

Is it really fair to say that India is unwilling to discuss the Kashmir issue? Would it be equally reasonable to say that the Kashmir issue cannot be discussed when Pakistan is run by a civilian government? Considering that the Simla agreement was signed with Zia ul Haq and the 2004 process was begun with Pervez Musharraf isn't it a reasonable conclusion that Pakistani civilian government cannot afford peace with India on Kashmir? Kashmir has always been a perfect issue for Pakistani governments to bring up to distract from their economic crises, corruption and political infighting. It's a bit unfair to lay the blame entirely on India's shoulders. Shame.

Varoon P Anand, Panama

Taking sides on Kashmir is not going to help American interests in the region. I am surprised that the BBC keeps the issue in the international news by reporting even the smallest incident in the valley. Moreover, the Kashmir issue should be seen in the larger context of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir where the voices of largely Hindu (Jammu), Buddhist (Leh & Laddakh) and Shia Muslims (Kargil) go unreported in the international media. The world's attention should be more focussed on trying to save Pakistan from becoming another Afghanistan.

RS Sahota, Hong Kong

As an Indian, I know that majority of Indians would only cherish a vibrant, prosperous Pakistan. It is a win-win situation for both nations. Even the right wing BJP reached out to Islamabad when it was in power. American handouts are not the way forward. Mutual cooperation with your neighbours, all of them, is the best way forward. Why should our fellow Pakistanis/Indians queue up at western embassies, when better conditions can be created? Sound unrealistic? The alternative is more of the same, for the next 50 years, while the world moves on.

Nisheeth Tak, Ireland

Obama's statements during his campaign vis-a-vis South Asia appear to have been mere electioneering. His macho assertions that he would support hot pursuit into Pakistan seem to be a cover for the deeper strategy being formulated by his South Asia team to take on the vexing issues of the region more comprehensively. Obama is wise to link the longstanding Kashmir dispute (which India erroneously believes it can sweep under the rug) to peace and stability in the region. Pakistan's 180 degree turn under President Musharraf - in which all covert support to Kashmiri militants was stopped - means that India can no longer blame Islamabad for the unrest in Kashmir as it has tried to do for decades now. India's covert support to militants in Pakistan working through Afghanistan is also creating a security vacuum that will eventually come back to haunt us all. The new American administration would be wise to use it's leverage with its ally India to suggest it accept a co-operative rather than an imperialistic approach to its regional relationships.

Ramo Mihar, Bangladesh

Mr Rashid has missed the important part of South Asia - the eastern part. There are several disputes in this area. Bangladesh and India are in disagreement over water sharing in common rivers, the boundary in the Bay of Bengal and the use of arms during peace time in common border areas which left many people dead. The two countries have a tense relationship which had turned in arms confrontation straggle several times. Recently Burma started oil and gas explorations in disputed waters in the Bay of Bengal which could have resulted in further confrontation. Therefore, the Obama administration needs to focus on this area as well if it is serious about stopping escalations of violence. We have to remember that this area is the world's most populated area. Any violence will impact significantly on a huge number of people.

Hossain, Adelaide, Australia

Sorry Mr. Rashid - the Pakistan army will never feel "less threatened" by India since its raison detre is "defending" Pakistan from India.

Atul Arora, Germany

I am very sceptical about the the views expressed by sub-continental writers like Ahmed Rashid, who seem to represent the interest of those whose pay them. His writing should simply be called the policy briefings on behalf of his paymasters.

N Mahmood, UK

Why would India be "rattled" by Obama's offer to solve issues in South Asia including the Kashmir dispute? India has been a stable democracy these past 60 years and has nothing to fear from another working democracy. It is Mr Vajpayee of India who started the peace process with Pakistan which soon fell apart because of internal problems in Pakistan. India has also been remarkably tolerant of the Pakistan army's many incursions onto Indian soil, such as the Kargil dispute. India is a strong country internally - economically, democratically and socially - and as soon as Pakistan builds an internally strong democracy, it will realise there is nothing to fear from India. As long as the Pakistani military and the ISI holds the keys to the country, there is no hope of resolving religion-based border disputes.

SK, India

What is Obama's policy on the Sri Lankan civil war? It is another long running conflict that needs to be resolved.

Sivaguru V, Canada

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