

WITH US ATTENTION ON MEMOGATE FALLOUT AND TALIBAN, KHAN'S TSUNAMI GATHERS STRENGTH

[youtube]<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iidC31wuEpE>[/youtube]

As reported late yesterday by the New York Times, the US is finally acknowledging that it faces a diminished role in Pakistan. However, restoring even a diminished level of relations with Pakistan after the November 26 airstrike that killed 24 Pakistani troops is complicated by the fact that "civilian and military leaders are clashing over purported coup plots". At the same time, the US continues its efforts at negotiating with the Taliban on a peace agreement for Afghanistan once the US leaves, and has even arranged for the Taliban to open an office in Qatar. These diplomatic moves are all focused on the scheduled 2014 withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan, but standing between now and then are the scheduled Pakistan elections in 2013. Former cricket star Imran Khan appears to be gaining a huge political following and so it seems likely that whether it is the long-rumored military coup or an electoral loss, the Zardari government appears to have lame duck status while participating in these critical discussions.

The Times describes the reduced US role with Pakistan:

With the United States facing the reality that its broad security partnership with Pakistan is over, American officials are seeking to salvage a more limited counterterrorism alliance that they acknowledge will complicate their ability to launch

attacks against extremists and move supplies into Afghanistan.

The United States will be forced to restrict drone strikes, limit the number of its spies and soldiers on the ground and spend more to transport supplies through Pakistan to allied troops in Afghanistan, American and Pakistani officials said. United States aid to Pakistan will also be reduced sharply, they said.

It appears that the reduced number of “spies and soldiers” is down to about 100 from a high of 400. It is also very interesting to note that there have been no drone strikes in Pakistan since November 16, a full ten days before the November 26 border post attack. Today marks the one month mark for the blocking of supply lines through Pakistan in response to the border post attack.

While trying to sort out whether the Zardari government is stable enough to negotiate with over US involvement, the US is continuing its frequently ill-fated attempts to negotiate with the Taliban. The newest development is the agreement for the Taliban to open an office in Qatar. It appears that Afghanistan is going along with that proposal, even though they would have preferred for the office to be in Turkey or Saudi Arabia. I’m assuming these are State Department negotiations and that an office outside Pakistan is needed because the US military would carry out a drone strike against any organized office facility for the Taliban inside Pakistan.

As if the difficulty of determining whether the military will remove Zardari’s government isn’t enough, it appears that should Zardari stay in office until the 2013 elections, his PPP party will face very stiff opposition from former cricket star Imran Khan’s PTI party. Khan staged a rally over the weekend in Karachi that drew a huge crowd that overflowed a site that holds

250,000 people.

Khan's platform is aimed against government corruption, at improving the fate of the poor and railing about a failing economy. His plan is to achieve an Islamic welfare state:

In his speech to the assembled crowd, Khan said that his vision was for Pakistan to be an "Islamic welfare state", where citizens would be entitled to free and equal access to education, healthcare and justice.

Under Pakistan's current of government, citizens are entitled to these services for free, but Khan alleged that the system was not reaching those who needed the most state assistance.

This attitude within the PTI carries a strong message condemning the rich-poor divide. A recent recruit into PTI, Javed Hashmi, who joined from PML-N, expressed it this way at the rally:

"People began looting the country. People were divided into different classes. There was a Pakistan for the rich and the poor. The poor have no personal security while the rich roam around with 1,000 police officers."

Speaking at the rally, former PPP Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Querishi addressed the PTI's position regarding the US:

Mr Qureshi said Pakistan did not harbour any aggressive designs against any country and sought friendship with India and the US, but could not opt for slavery. "If the nation wants to have an independent, sovereign, prosperous, credible and strong Pakistan, it must elect a party whose leadership could offer their heads rather than surrender."

He said the message of this massive rally was clear to the world that no one could bargain over the nuclear program.

The US would be well-advised to keep the PTI's views in mind when developing the new, reduced relationship with Pakistan, lest it risk having the entire agreement thrown out just months before the US is scheduled to leave Afghanistan.