

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2005  
July 28, 2008

## Prime Minister Gilani Visit: Shoring up Democratic Pakistan to Deal with Terrorist Challenge

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Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani's visit to Washington this week occurs at a time when Pakistan faces political and economic uncertainty and a rising Taliban threat in the northwest part of the country, especially along the border with Afghanistan. The visit also takes place amidst growing U.S. impatience with the Pakistani approach to uprooting the Taliban/al-Qaeda safe havens. Rather than conducting military operations against extremists in the Pakistani-Afghan border areas, negotiations remain the Pakistani government's primary anti-terrorism tool. U.S. officials and legislators will have to strike a delicate balance in their meetings with PM Gilani by showing they support the democratic government while at the same time raising questions about current Pakistani counterterrorism policies.

Supporting the new Prime Minister conveys a positive message to the broader Pakistani public about U.S. intentions toward Pakistan. Past Bush Administration policies supporting President Musharraf—whose popularity plummeted last year when he dismissed the country's Supreme Court Chief Justice and later instituted emergency rule measures that sent thousands of activists and lawyers to jail and stifled the media—generated considerable anti-U.S. sentiment among the Pakistani public. Strong support for PM Gilani is essential towards countering such sentiment.

Additionally, such an approach is in principle with the Bush Administration's policy that institution building and support for democratic development remain the most effective ways to combat terrorism over the long term.

**Changing Pakistani Public Debate on Terrorism.** Concerns about U.S. foreign policy toward fighting global terrorism also contribute to the high level of anti-American sentiment in Pakistan. Many Pakistanis blame their government's counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S. for last year's bombing campaign in the country that resulted in over 60 domestic suicide bombings from August 2007–February 2008 and the deaths of over 800 Pakistani civilians and security personnel.

The religious parties in Pakistan capitalize on this sentiment by blaming U.S. and NATO military operations in Afghanistan as well as previous Pakistani military operations in the tribal areas for the suicide bombings inside Pakistan. Fazlur Rehman, leader of the Pakistani religious party Jamiat-Ulemae-Islam (JUI) that has close links to the Taliban, recently warned that the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) was “breaking away” from Pakistan, a situation he blamed on Pakistan's ties to the U.S.

Such assertions jeopardize the future of U.S.–Pakistan relations while diverting Pakistani attention from pursuing policies that will help defuse the terrorist threat. U.S. officials should convey to PM Gilani their expectation that the Pakistani leader-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm2005.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm2005.cfm)

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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ship counter such unhelpful statements and project policies that demonstrate to the Pakistani people that Islamabad and Washington are partners fighting for the same goals in the war on terrorism.

**Developing Joint Strategy in Tribal Areas.** U.S. officials should also probe PM Gilani on his government's efforts to disrupt the Taliban/al-Qaeda sanctuary in the tribal areas and impress upon him that this is an issue with international ramifications and thus requires a closely coordinated joint U.S.–Pakistan strategy. Washington should question Gilani as to why the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other like-minded terrorist groups are asserting more authority in the Pakistan–Afghanistan border areas since the government began pursuing peace deals a few months ago. This is an unacceptable situation from an international viewpoint and demonstrates the Pakistani authorities, in an effort to end attacks inside Pakistan, are likely compromising too much in their negotiations.

While avoiding a threatening tone that would likely be counterproductive, U.S. officials should convey a serious message that Pakistani military

capability and economic resources may not be sufficient to handle the sophisticated and well-armed insurgency growing in the tribal areas. To address the situation, the U.S. and Pakistan will have to work more closely in coordinating military operations, sharing intelligence, and improving communications that thwart cross-border movement from Pakistan into Afghanistan.

**Steadfast Partners.** While the U.S. welcomes the establishment of democracy in Pakistan, time is not on the side of the new government to deal effectively with the international threat building in the border areas unless it accepts U.S. advice and assistance. The worst outcome for Gilani's visit would be one in which the two sides talk past each other and break no new ground on counterterrorism initiatives. From the U.S. perspective, a successful visit would convey support for the Pakistani people but also result in concrete joint initiatives that assure both Americans and Pakistanis that the two sides remain steadfast partners in the war on terror.

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