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Obama and Pakistan: Let's Hope for the Best

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When Senator Barack Obama advocated unilateral military action against Pakistan, if the Pakistani Army refused to act first on actionable intelligence against Al-Qaeda, he was referring to President Musharraf's so-called aloofness from Al-Qaeda's presence in Pakistan. Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded promptly and forcefully; it termed the senator's remarks "irresponsible" and called them a cheap shot at scoring political points at home. Senator Hillary Clinton's assessment about Senator Obama's naïve foreign policy perspective was echoed by Republican forerunners such as Mitt Romney who said Obama wants to "have tea with our enemies and bomb our allies."

This op-ed will analyse the Senator's speech with two major assumptions; the Senator's speech advocated a paradigm shift in U.S. foreign policy toward the Muslim World from forced regime change to holistic economic, cultural and military engagement; second, despite his progressive ideas, the Senator's remarks about Pakistan were ill-informed.

Only two hours after he spoke to a robust crowd at my internship place, Woodrow Wilson Center, I waited patiently to meet him. I had previously talked to his young and ambitious staff members about Pakistan; I was perturbed by his harsh tone toward Pakistan. When the senator approached me, I introduced myself. There was a pause and then I asked him jokingly, "Senator, are you going to invade my country?" His smile disappeared for a second and then came back. It mirrored his ambivalence.

This ambivalence is not ubiquitous in Senator Obama's experience in U.S. foreign policy toward the Muslim World. The senator's speech, and arguably the most important part of it, was focused on the need to "redefine the debate" between the United States and the Muslim World by "not compromising on America's values." He implied that America's moral ground based on liberty and justice for all was lost to an inconsistent and hypocritical foreign policy. Among major initiatives to remedy the situation, such as the Middle East peace process and US military operations in the world, the senator advocated the creation of "America's Voice Corps," which the senator said will "send out into the field talented young Americans who can speak with - and listen to - the people who today hear about us only from our enemies." Such a force of young people will be able to combine their efforts with their counterparts in the

Muslim World creating bridges of understanding and common goals.

Moreover, Senator Obama stated his willingness to talk to America's traditional enemies and allies in the Muslim World; he resurrected President Kennedy's famous phrase, "never fear to negotiate but never negotiate out of fear". He said that today's world was interdependent and becoming increasingly united not by major peace initiatives but by individuals through inter-religious and inter-ethnic integration, and one that can not easily be divided into axes of good and evil; a world where state and non-state actors are equally and dangerously influential. For example, failed states, if neglected, become America's colossal failures, and non-states such as Al-Qaeda become more organized and ambitious with every ill-conceived military action in the absence of political and economic reform.

Therefore I was baffled by the Senator's broad-brush criticism against America's only significant Muslim ally in the war on terror. Home to the Muslim World's second largest population and its only nuclear power, Pakistan provides a 100,000 strong and committed military force and not a mercenary force in the war on terrorism. The Pakistanis are fighting their own war, one that has placed a shadow of doubt over every citizen and one that the government is finding harder to fight because of its own mistakes in quashing democratic forces.

However, unlike mass media organizations such as CNN and Fox News, Pakistanis don't easily forget their fallen. More than 1,200 young Pakistani men and women in uniform have died in a war that was more difficult for them than the one Americans are fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq in that they had to kill and capture their own nationals - talk about deteriorating morale when one is ordered to kill citizens not thousands of miles away in a distant country but a few miles away from one's capital city, and sometimes a few blocks away from the Awan-e-Sadr, the "Pakistani White House."

Senator Obama wanted to criticise President Musharraf's failed attempts to curb terrorist activity by brokering peace with tribal leaders sympathetic to Al-Qaeda operatives in Waziristan region of Pakistan. But then there is no credibility in the Senator's statements if he implies that Pakistan should be punished for its more than five year campaign against Al-Qaeda. Pakistani forces have killed or captured the largest number of Al-Qaeda operatives, more than all other allies combined including the master mind of 9/11. In addition, the notion of US-unilateral military action on Pakistani soil is not new - for years American Special Forces have conducted missions in Pakistan.

That said Pakistan's current sacrifices are not sustainable or justifiable in the long-run without political reform. Many soldiers have died in vain due to ill-conceived military adventurisms in the FATA and Baluchistan region. They died for their country, which is controlled by unelected hubris. There was never a vote for or against the war on terror, no vote to send the troops, no debate on their armor, no questioning about the budget. It was done for reasons many Pakistanis support, but by officials who rarely took their case to the

people.

There was progress in the war on terror but political uncertainty, civil liberty violations and the general feeling of apathy among the youth have created a dangerous environment. Together with the sheer force of Pakistani patriotism in the upcoming elections, and Senator Obama's pro-engagement strategy in 2008, we can all "hope" for a better future, otherwise the senator's inadequately nuanced words may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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