

Pakistan's crisis an American challenge

By Han Park | | Story updated at 8:06 PM on Saturday, January 19, 2008

In the aftermath of Benazir Bhutto's death, Pakistan is in chaos facing an uncertain future. No less chaotic and uncertain is U.S. foreign policy. What should Washington do in the short and long terms? In order for Washington to discern a string of policies with some degree of consistent direction, a keen comprehension of the reality of the chaos itself is required.

One fundamental shortcoming in U.S. policies since World War II has been the hasty desire to expand American influence with the ideology of liberal democratization. This foreign policy has marked some successes but a lot of failures. The successes came mostly from European countries, like Germany and Italy, where the underlying political culture emanated from Christian civilization. In other cases, such as Japan, where a similar political culture was absent, the form democracy has taken is one of indigenous creation in consonance with its own civilization.

Most developing countries where American democratization efforts were waged - accompanied by massive economic aid - ended up with dictatorships or perennially unstable systems inviting autocracies of all forms.

One must realize that democracy, as noble as its ideals may be, is viable only when requisite conditions are established.

These conditions include an economic and social environment devoid of life-threatening crises, literacy, civic-minded people, fair and reliable information through mass media, and the rule of law, to name a few.

It is only with these conditions that the institution of liberal democracy can find its foundation.

I'm not necessarily echoing those who believe the Bush administration is responsible for Bhutto's truncated dream, yet one must admit the ambivalent dual paths in our Pakistan policy may have exacerbated the crisis. On one hand, Washington has supported, by pouring in billions of dollars, the dictatorship of Pakistan's Gen. Pervez Musharraf - with the expectation of his cooperation in America's war on terror. On the other hand, Washington has had to repudiate the oppressive measures of Musharraf's governance because they undermine the values of democracy.

The latter idea prompted the Bush administration to pressure Musharraf to soften his iron grip on the people and his political opponents and to encourage Bhutto to return from exile. Bringing in a politician who personally believes in democracy and who holds the vision of democratizing her country, as Bhutto did, does not automatically improve the reality of the situation.

The democratization of Pakistan was not going to be, and will not now, be achieved through a quick fix. In continuously supporting Musharraf, the Bush administration chose to try finding a shortcut to democratization, while also fighting terrorists.

Washington was naïve to expect Musharraf and Bhutto would work out their differences and form a united front to achieve both democracy and a crackdown on extremists. The truth is that Bush's reliance on the military and coercive means to combat terrorists has been misguided and ineffective; the idea of establishing democracy by imposing an election and supporting Bhutto's return was no less faulty.

Today's chaos is a vivid reminder of this failure. It's a chilling fact that most Pakistanis, including Bhutto's own party, don't blame al-Qaida for Bhutto's murder. They hold the government responsible for the assassination; some even believe there was a conspiracy involving Musharraf. They also direct their hatred toward Washington for its support of his regime.

Before the Feb. 18 parliamentary election in Pakistan, it's expected that Musharraf and his party, the Pakistan Muslim League, will do everything to assure perpetuation of their power. It's also expected that the government will be viewed as illegitimate in the eyes of the public, and the country will be subjected to prolonged chaos. Such a government will be unable to control the country without ultimately resorting to emergency measures.

At the same time, as long as Musharraf declares his commitment to fighting the Taliban and al-Qaida, Washington will have no choice but to support the unpopular regime, thus fostering even greater anti-American sentiment among the population. Widespread anti-Americanism among the people will easily be exploited by the Taliban and al-Qaida extremists for recruits. The winners in this will be both Musharraf and, ironically, the extremists. And the greatest loser will be the United States.

What can and should the United States do to alleviate the crisis? Not much in the short run. But one thing Washington can do is reconsider its policy of trusting and supporting Musharraf, whose ability (and even willingness) to fight the Taliban and al-Qaida is questionable, except for piecemeal demonstrations of hunting down some terrorists in order to appease the Bush administration for continuous support.

Washington should assume a policy of non-involvement in the domestic politics of Pakistan because such policy will continue to be futile. In the meantime, Washington must return to the drawing board to design a visionary policy to win the minds and hearts of Pakistanis and the greater Muslim community in the support of uprooting terrorism.

As for democratization, the requisite conditions for democracy must be the guiding principles. When these conditions are lacking, as in Pakistan, our policies should be designed to cultivate these conditions through investments in education and communication infrastructure. Only then will the Pakistanis be able to deny extreme ideologues a haven.

There is another challenge in connection with Pakistan - its possible involvement in nuclear proliferation. Ascertaining the American role, if there is one, in alleviating possible nuclear proliferation by Pakistan is a daunting task.

In the final analysis, the most difficult foreign policy challenges of the Bush administration - the war on terror, democratization, and nuclear proliferation - are intertwined in Pakistan, and the Bush administration does not seem to have a clue how to handle the conundrum. One thing is clear: We should have learned that we need long-term strategies, not just quick fixes, to pursue peace, democratization and nonproliferation. This will require rigorous analyses of the root causes of terrorism, the requisite conditions for democracy, and motives for the development and proliferation of weapons on the part of diverse players in the increasingly complex global community. It is time for our academic community to prepare itself to become relevant and for our government to bring expertise into the mainstream of decisionmaking. Sound bites by politicians and government officials should never guide our foreign policy.