

Behind Kerry's mission: In US-Pakistan relations, 'divorce' is not an option

On a mission to improve US-Pakistan relations, Sen. John Kerry announces a Pakistani goodwill gesture: the return of the tail section of the US helicopter used in the bin Laden raid.



Sen. John Kerry (l.) shakes hands with Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani prior to their official talks at Prime Minister house in Islamabad, Pakistan, on Monday.

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By [Howard LaFranchi](#), Staff writer / May 16, 2011

Washington

Calls for a “divorce” in US-[Pakistan](#) relations have gripped [Washington](#) since the [US](#) raid that killed [Osama bin Laden](#), but [Sen. John Kerry](#)'s visit to [Islamabad](#) Monday underscores that key US interests won't be addressed by a simple split between the two countries.

Senator Kerry, who has become the [Obama administration](#)'s go-to guy for handling crises in the [Afghanistan](#)-Pakistan arena, took a tough message emphasizing the grave state of relations to his meetings with both the Pakistani army chief, [Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani](#), and [President Asif Ali Zardari](#).

The US wants to know who in Pakistan knew of Mr. bin Laden's existence over several years in a compound near the Pakistani capital, with even President Obama stating publicly that the [Al Qaeda](#) leader must have had a "support network" inside Pakistan.

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The Pakistanis insist publicly that no further "unilateral" counterterrorist missions by the US will be tolerated – although Kerry told reporters before meeting the Pakistani leaders that the US will "consider all options" if senior Al Qaeda and [Taliban](#) leaders are located inside Pakistan.

But Kerry, who is chairman of [the Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#), also discussed a list of ways the two countries can move beyond their strained relations to more mutually beneficial cooperation in his meetings with the Pakistani leaders.

Pulling back from the brink

The emphasis in Washington has been on how the always-prickly relations between the two partners in the battle against Islamist extremism might have hit a breaking point over the May 1 killing of Al Qaeda leader bin Laden within a stone's throw of [Pakistani military](#) installations. But Kerry's emphasis was on pulling relations back from the brink.

Among other things, he announced that [Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) will soon visit Pakistan to participate in a regular "strategic dialogue" between the two countries – a trip that some US officials had said was cast into doubt by the bin Laden raid.

Kerry said that Pakistani leaders agreed to a "series of steps" the two countries will take to reverse the downward spiral in relations, although he did not immediately elaborate.

The senator did announce one goodwill gesture by the Pakistanis that might help quiet the critics who say the bilateral relationship has been an exclusively one-way street. Military officials agreed to return the tail section of the sophisticated helicopter that Navy SEALs used to carry out the May 1 raid. The helicopter had to be destroyed at the end of the 40-minute operation when it experienced difficulties taking off, but US officials wanted the intact tail section back before it could fall into the wrong hands.

'Carrot and stick' diplomacy

Kerry's approach in Pakistan was classic "carrot and stick" diplomacy, according to some foreign policy analysts.

“He’s applying some pretty strong pressure to try to get to the bottom of who in the security and military apparatus knew what about bin Laden, but ultimately he’s employing both carrots and sticks,” says [Malou Innocent](#), a foreign policy expert specializing in South Asian issues at the [Cato Institute](#) in Washington.

“Kerry wants to hold out the carrot of continued assistance, but at the same time he is approaching this as a moment to employ the sticks as well,” she says. “He wants to get the Pakistanis to reveal what different elements in the country knew about bin Laden, and to extract more cooperation going forward for addressing all the extremist threats that exist in Pakistan.”

The US provides Pakistan with more than \$3 billion in military and civilian development assistance annually, although some in Congress are calling for that aid to be slashed.

As a longtime advocate of a substantial aid package to help turn Pakistan away from the extremist temptation, Kerry has an interest in holding off the advocates of a divorce from Pakistan, Ms. Innocent notes.

“His reputation is on the line here, first and foremost because his name is on the bill that has Pakistan receiving \$7.5 billion [over five years] in civilian assistance,” she says. “He doesn’t want to see that derailed.”

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