

Key US lawmaker presents vast Pakistan aid package

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WASHINGTON— A top US lawmaker has introduced a vast new aid package for Pakistan that aims to triple economic assistance and shore up democratic rule while crushing Islamist extremists, his office said Friday.

Democratic Representative Howard Berman, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, hopes to build "a new framework" between the two allies with the bill he offered on Thursday, his office said in a statement.

"We need to create a long-term strategic partnership with Pakistan, one that transcends our mutual counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism goals, and speaks to the needs of average Pakistani citizens," Berman said.

There is consensus in Washington that stabilizing Afghanistan, and crushing Islamist Taliban fighters as well as Al-Qaeda and other extremist allies, requires enlisting significantly more support from Pakistan.

The measure calls for boosting US economic aid to 1.5 billion dollars per year through 2013 with a special emphasis on strengthening democratic rule of law there and overhauling Pakistan's education system -- including the closure of any religious schools, known as madrassas, that support terrorism.

The bill also expands US military aid to Pakistan, including meeting some longstanding requests like a plea for more night-vision equipment and aerial drones, but limits most of the assistance to counter-terrorism efforts.

It also requires that all military aid go through Pakistan's elected government, and cites a requirement that Islamabad show a sustained commitment to fight terrorist groups and curb the spread of nuclear know-how.

"Our commitment to Pakistan's political stability and economic development is matched only by our sense of urgency in ensuring that Pakistan has the right tools to protect its people, secure its borders and intensify its operations against extremist elements," said Berman.