

White House Wants to Draft Its Own

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Just as it did with Iraq, Congress is moving toward imposing benchmarks that the Pakistani government must meet to qualify for billions of dollars of U.S. military assistance. But the proposed restrictions, introduced in House legislation Thursday, have made both the White House and the Pakistani government uneasy.

A bill sponsored by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard L. Berman (D-Calif.) would authorize \$3 billion in aid to train and equip the Pakistani military over the next five years, along with \$7.5 billion in economic and development assistance. It would also limit the kinds of military equipment Pakistan could receive and the ways in which it could be used, and require regular audits and presidential certification of counterinsurgency progress.

A bill with similar aid amounts is being drafted in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, although Senate discussions with the White House on benchmark provisions are ongoing. Introduction of that legislation is not planned until after the two-week congressional recess.

The administration plans to ask for \$500 million for the Pakistani military in a supplemental war-funding proposal next week, and to spend the same amount during each of the next four years. In a speech unveiling his Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy last month, President Obama said the United States must "demonstrate through deeds as well as words a commitment [to Pakistan] that is enduring." He called on Congress to pass the still-unseen Senate bill.

At the same time, Obama pledged, there would be no "blank check." Recalling "mixed results" from previous billions in aid, he said that "Pakistan must demonstrate its commitment to rooting out al-Qaeda and the violent extremists within its borders."

But the White House and U.S. military commanders, citing Pakistani political sensitivities and the need for flexibility, would like to set their own metrics. "I would say we are still in the process of developing sort of strategic-level metrics and benchmarks" for both Pakistan and Afghanistan, Defense Undersecretary Michelle Flournoy told Congress on Thursday. Lawmakers would be consulted, Flournoy said, and the administration hoped "to be able to bring those forward to you in the not-too-distant future."

Berman said Congress should be in on the ground floor of the benchmark determination. The administration, he said, "talks about wanting to write benchmarks, but I think we need to be involved in doing that." The White House would make the initial determination on Pakistani performance, he said, but his bill creates "a process, as cumbersome as it is, to review the basis of that determination."

The bill would set up a program to monitor Pakistani progress in a number of areas, including defeating extremists and protecting human rights, and require Obama to provide specifics underlying his own assessments. It would also prohibit additional U.S. spending on Pakistan's F-16 jet fighter fleet, which the Bush administration agreed to upgrade. Lawmakers have argued that the planes are part of Pakistan's defense strategy against neighboring India but that they have little use in counterinsurgency efforts against al-Qaeda and Taliban forces.

Legislation imposing benchmarks for political and military progress in Iraq were largely dismissed by the Bush administration and ultimately disregarded even by Congress as violence increased and then diminished following an increase in U.S. troop numbers.

In a telephone interview yesterday, Berman also questioned the administration's plan to channel the Pakistan military assistance program -- including funding for training and the purchase of U.S. helicopters and a range of counterinsurgency weaponry -- through the Pentagon rather than through the traditional route of the State Department's Foreign Military Financing program.

The direct military control has been used only in situations where U.S. troops are involved in combat, including Iraq and Afghanistan.

"This gets very bureaucratic," Berman said, "but we think there's an important oversight there. The military are obviously very involved in what equipment is going through, but at the end of the day it is part of a relationship with Pakistan that should be channeling . . . through the FMF program," with "our State Department on top of it."

The Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, Husain Haqqani, said his government welcomed Berman's initiative "to create a framework for enhanced and long-term partnership. We look forward to engaging members of the U.S. Congress on some of the specific provisions of the proposed bill.

"At the same time," Haqqani said, "it might be prudent not to restrict security assistance. Because Pakistan's armed forces will be the spearhead in the actual fight with the terrorists."