By Ambassador Teresita Schaffer

Pervez Musharraf's resignation after nearly nine years at Pakistan's helm should take the brakes off the transition to an elected government. This is good news for a country whose political institutions have nearly suffocated under years of military-dominated governments. It is not the end of Pakistan's political crisis, but it gives the United States an opportunity to recalibrate U.S.-Pakistan relations without the complication of the personal connection with Musharraf.

The U.S. administration was slow to realize that Musharraf was no longer capable of being the face of U.S.-Pakistan relations. It continued to see him as a "factor for stability" even after he had been decisively rejected in the elections and had lost control of the machinery of Pakistan's government. But in the past two weeks, the Bush administration made clear its intention to let Musharraf's future play out according to Pakistan's political dynamics. So, more importantly, did the Pakistani Army.

Now Pakistan needs to come to grips with its urgent problems, and the United States needs to help it do so. This will require determination and sophistication in dealing with an elected government and a population that blames the United States for many of its problems. It will also require some attention to the long-term reforms that the country has needed for decades.

The most pressing issue for the United States is Pakistan's impact on the insurgency in Afghanistan. The Pakistani government gives top priority to closing down suicide bombings and the insurgency perpetrated by the branch of the Taliban movement inside Pakistan. This is the only issue that the elected government tried to tackle before Musharraf's departure. The United States is more concerned about control of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

The border and Pakistan's insurgency are two sides of the same coin, and both have to be addressed. There is no way Afghanistan can be rescued without stabilizing Pakistan. Ending the internal insurgency deserves full focus from Pakistan and urgent support from the United States. Whatever the United States can do through training, intelligence, or other means will also support stability in Afghanistan. At the same time, and in a less public manner, the United States needs to enlist Pakistan's help in addressing the border issue. Pakistan can help with both parts of this endeavor through such practical steps as closing down broadcasters that incite violence and moving against those few madrassas that are really paramilitary training sites. This enterprise cries out for a joint strategy—involving political, economic, and military tools—in which the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan can participate.

Pakistan also faces an economic crisis. Between May 2007 and May 2008, food prices rose 28 percent and wholesale fuel prices 46 percent. The cost of food and fuel imports is up about 50 percent from last year. The balance of payments and the budget are both feeling the heat. This could spell sudden death for the government. Pakistan has already asked for help buying grain

and paying for oil, and Washington is responding. But the United States and Pakistan need to focus on agricultural and macroeconomic policies that will encourage a longer-term solution.

A third problem is on the horizon. India-Pakistan relations were a success story in the past four years. When it first took office, the Pakistani elected government wisely decided to continue Musharraf's promising approaches to this relationship. There was little chance of a breakthrough, but relations were relatively stable. Two months of unrest in Kashmir have now put this stability under tremendous pressure. Pakistan did not provoke the unrest, but opponents of peace with India, possibly including Pakistan's intelligence services, may seek to fish in troubled waters. Ominously, major firing incidents are threatening the India-Pakistan ceasefire.

These are heavy problems, and the Pakistan government is badly divided. Its two major political leaders, Asif Zardari and Nawaz Sharif, do not actually hold office but lead the political parties that did well in the last election. Musharraf's departure removes one source of troublemaking between them but also eliminates the common enemy that pushed them together. They are mired in a nasty dispute over the nomination of a new president, an issue that needs to be decided within 30 days. Zardari wants the job, but unsurprisingly, Sharif is having none of it and is looking for the moment to force an election that he hopes to win. The two still have daggers drawn over whether to restore the judges that Musharraf fired, the question that led to their electoral success. Musharraf's departure will make Pakistanis even more impatient to see Zardari and Sharif move beyond politicking and produce results on the issues confronting the government.

The other potential division in the government is between civilians and the military. The army chose to stand aside as the government was moving toward impeachment of Musharraf—in effect, a decision to support the government and the country's civilian institutions. The government is acutely conscious that it needs to have an understanding with the army on major issues of national security. But the potential problem with the army runs deeper. The kind of dysfunction we see now, if continued, could provoke a return to the disastrous days of military intervention.

The United States cannot solve these internal problems, but it must avoid making them worse. Pakistan's civilian leaders need the political space to present their policies in a patriotic light without an excessively visible U.S. role. The United States has become the focus for protest in Pakistan to a far greater extent than is good for it. The Pakistani government's statements will probably have an edge of resentment toward the United States. This need not prevent us from working together, provided the United States has the wisdom and savvy to stay away from center stage. Not an easy task, given the history of U.S.-Pakistan relations, but an essential one.

Expect turbulence ahead. Pakistan's leaders are wary of each other and of the United States, and both have a track record that gives us pause. The urgency of getting started on Pakistan's major problems must not blind us to the longer-term reforms critical to success on the insurgency, the economy, and relations with India. In the past, both Pakistan and the United States have ignored the long term in favor of the urgent. The United States' best shot at

creating a better future lies in addressing both.

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