

Febrile frontier:

Pakistan The growing strength of Islamist militants in border areas threatens the foundations of a state that is crucial to Washington strategy in the region, write James Lament and Farhan Bokhari

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Mohammad Ali Jinnah's narrow face stares out from the walls of his immaculately preserved office in Karachi. The folded writing pad and blotter of Pakistan's first governor-general are placed on the wide desk almost as they were left at his death in 1948, little over a year after the partition of British India established the state that has since venerated him as father of the nation.

In the surrounding rooms of what is now the governor of Sindh's residence are models of battleships, submarines and building projects - the trappings of modern statehood. Here, time has stood still. But beyond the latticed colonnades and well-tended lawns is a country in turmoil.

As Richard Holbrooke, US President Barack Obama's special representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan, touched down in Islamabad this week, he was weighing strategies about how to return Pakistan to the secular ideals of Mr Jinnah's time. The tone of his visit was set by Mr Obama, who on Monday night called on Islamabad directly to do more to crack down on al-Qaeda safe havens in its territory. "It's not acceptable for Pakistan or for us to have folks who, with impunity, will kill innocent men, women and children," he said.

Mr Holbrooke had been sent to the region "to deliver a message to Pakistan that they are endangered as much as we are by the continuation of those operations."

South Asia is a top foreign policy priority for the Obama administration, and at the heart of the strategy is saving Pakistan, a country with functioning institutions and a largely moderate population, from going the way of Afghanistan.

The growing strength of the Taliban on both sides of the border has grave strategic implications for western powers, including US forces, whose numbers in Afghanistan are likely to swell by 30,000 later this year in their

effort to defeat the Islamist insurgents in the region where the 2001 terror attacks on the US were planned.

Today, Pakistan is fighting for its survival against religious extremists. The founding values of the original Muslim homeland were overtaken swiftly in the 1970s by an Islamic Republic that promoted militant groups dedicated to the "jihad", or holy war, and later developed nuclear weapons. Insurgencies in neighbouring countries engendered a deadly culture of religious violence that has much of the region now in a stranglehold.

The war in Afghanistan has spilled over the border, with the "Talibanisation" of large swaths of Pakistan largely bereft of economic development. Arguing that al-Qaeda bases in Pakistan's border country represent the biggest threat to its own security, the US is also carrying out an increasing number of strikes by Predator drones against targets in Pakistan, even as Pakistani officials argue that the attacks only further inflame militancy and anti-Americanism.

Mr Holbrooke will try to redefine the US's flagging relationship with Pakistan to reverse the decline. Praised and reviled as a "diplomatic bulldozer", he is expected to take a tougher approach than the Bush administration, which for much of its time in office framed the relationship around former President George W. Bush's close alliance with Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's former president.

The previous US administration was unable to overcome a pervasive anti-Americanism that resented the impression that, while India was a real partner, Pakistan was merely a hired gun to go after al-Qaeda on the border - or more currently, that the US throws money at the Pakistani military and knocks the civilian leaders around the head from time to time.

Mr Holbrooke, who made his name with

Balkan peace deals in the 1990s, is sizing up a defiant, unpredictable country. Only three days before his arrival, the Pakistani courts threw down a gauntlet to the west when, in an unexpected move, they ordered the release from house arrest of Abdul Qader Khan, the architect of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme who also sold nuclear technology to countries such as Iran and North Korea.

The US immediately highlighted its concern that Pakistan had never given its interrogators access to A.Q. Khan. "A.Q. Khan remains a serious proliferation risk," the state department said last week.

The freeing of Mr Khan followed the temporary severing of an essential supply line for Nato forces in Afghanistan when a bridge close to the Khyber Pass was blown up. The incident was preceded some months earlier by the torching of a compound full of Nato-destined trucks in Peshawar.

These incidents serve to remind the US of the leverage a weakened Pakistan still has over Washington. They are part of a practised balancing act that keeps the country in the eye of the west, at odds with its neighbours and divided in itself.

"It paws at the precipice but always brings itself back," assures one diplomat. "It's a balancing act. It's not best practice but it can't be disastrous." Pakistan wants Mr Holbrooke to address how to win back large swaths lost by the government, and not just the border war with al-Qaeda militants. Baluchistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, North West Frontier Province and the Swat Valley are now overrun by a seemingly faceless enemy, the Taliban. In the country's newspapers are grisly tales of a reign of terror - of bombings, beheadings and the forced closure of girls' schools.

In government and diplomatic circles, officials debate whether large tracts of Pakistan's western border region are "lost" or still "contestable". Pakistan's largely moderate population is slowly waking up to its encirclement. At the end of last month, activists took to the streets of Lahore to protest the loss of the Swat Valley and called for the government to take its territory back from militants.

Less than three hours' drive from

Islamabad, the valley is fondly remembered by many Pakistanis as a tourist paradise in one of the most beautiful parts of the country. No more. Civilians are leaving in droves. Last week, militants kidnapped 30 soldiers and policemen after they ran out of ammunition in an exchange of fire. A rogue radio station announces death lists. Peshawar, the strategic -frontier town before the Khyber Pass, is perilously close to going the same way.

Terror is increasingly not confined to Pakistan's remote border areas. It has also taken root in the cities. The extremists have shown they can mount attacks almost at will in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore and Karachi, and assassinate political leaders, such as Benazir Bhutto. This month, an American United Nations official was abducted. At the weekend, a Polish hostage was beheaded. The construction of an imposing blast wall in front of the Harriott Hotel in Islamabad - a raging inferno in September - bears testament to the ubiquity of the threat.

At the other end of the country, the mood is much the same. Ishrat-ul Ebad Khan, the governor of Sindh province, of which Karachi is the capital, says his city is being infiltrated by Taliban, who use it to raise money from criminal activities.

Mr Khan says Pakistan is ill-equipped to fight a war against extremists, while its people are oblivious to the magnitude of the threat. "We cannot afford turbulence. We cannot afford to have this war. Unless stable, how can we continue to fight a war? We are paying a price."

"Paying a price" is a phrase frequently uttered in assessment of Pakistan's prospects. The civilian government complains bitterly that the international community, and particularly the US, is not giving Islamabad sufficient financial support to repel the Taliban advance. It wants a policy where military pursuit of militants is coupled with greater development assistance.

Yousuf Raza Gilani, Pakistan's prime minister, says that an army not trained to fight a guerrilla war wins back territory only to lose it again when it moves on, leaving a vacuum behind. "I would urge the world, especially the US President Mr Barack Obama, to go for the real issues, that is the economy. The

[Americans] are hit themselves badly [with the credit crunch], but at the same time... when you fight terrorism, you have to pay a price for that," says Mr Gilani.

But US officials point to the \$11bn in military aid the Bush administration gave Pakistan, only to see much of it used to bolster capacity against India rather than exclusively focusing on the battle against the militants. Indeed, a new bill set to come before the US Congress with the backing of the administration would triple US civilian assistance to Pakistan to \$1.5bn a year - but also make military assistance and arms sales conditional on effective steps against al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Financial assistance has already come in the form of an International Monetary Fund rescue package. The \$7.6bn package, agreed at the end of last year, rescued Pakistan from a balance of payments crisis that threatened to exhaust foreign reserves and precipitate a debt default.

But Pakistan expects more. Japan is likely to host a Friends of Pakistan donor conference in April. President Asif Ali Zardari has voiced hopes of attracting \$50bn but against a backdrop of a global financial crisis and fiscal stimulus packages his country will be lucky to receive a sum between \$4bn and \$10bn.

Some critics, however, argue that it is

not money but political will that will bring a victory over militants. They detect an institutional unwillingness in the civilian government, the army, which formerly sponsored militant groups in insurgencies in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and civil society to confront the enemy.

"The Pakistani civil society has not yet made up its mind to fight, without any reservation, the jihadi cult. As long as the Pakistani civil society does not take a stand on this issue, it cannot be helped," K. Subrahmanyam, the Delhi-based strategic affairs analyst, writes in The Times of India.

Mr Holbrooke will be encouraged to focus on the immediate menace in the Swat Valley as much as hunting down al-Qaeda militants in the border region.

"Swat is the test case. If the Pakistani ruling establishment is able to stop the Islamic militants then and there, maybe they can then turn the corner and begin defeating these groups," says Hasan Askari Rizvi, a Pakistani political commentator. "So far, there are few signs which suggest that the corner is being turned."

Others warn that Mr Holbrooke has little time to lose to neutralise a threat far greater than the one he encountered in the Balkans. The Swat Valley's capture shows Pakistan's precarious balance is tipping towards theocracy.

What Obama's people call AfPak is to others an emergent Pashtunistan

A new word is echoing in the corridors of Washington. "AfPak" is being used to describe one of the most troubled regions of the world, one the administration of President Barack Obama sees as both a single interconnected problem and the biggest foreign policy task it faces.

The neologism acknowledges a worrying fact on the ground. The colonial-era border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, called the Durand Line, has, in effect, ceased to operate. "This is the big challenge for the Obama administration: how do you stabilise the two countries when the border frontier doesn't

exist?" asks Brahma Chellaney, professor of strategic studies at the Delhi-based Centre for Policy research.

The difficult terrain of the border region harbours al-Qaeda and Taliban militants who have been fiercely resisting attacks from Nato forces in Afghanistan and the Pakistan army on the other side. How this conflict is resolved will determine the stability of the region and the level of global threat to the US. Signaling the approach, Mr Obama said this month that his two principal goals in the war in Afghanistan were to prevent the country from again becoming a base for terrorist attacks on

the the U. S. and to stop it from destabilising Pakistan any further.

At a press conference this week, he made it clear that we would take a tough line with both countries' governments. The president said he had sent Richard Holbrooke, his special representative to the region, to make clear to Pakistan that it is "endangered as much as we are" by the continued ability of militants, to operate.

He declared that he would not permit al-Qaeda to maintain "safe havens" in the region. "What happens between the Afghan-Pakistan border will shape everything else," says C. Raja Mohan, professor of international relations of Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. "People who live across the Durand Line are willing to do things to hurt and damage the US. How the US deals with this is the most important issue."

The 2,640km Afghan-Pakistan border was drawn in 1893 and named after Sir Mortimer Durand, foreign secretary in the British Indian government. It has long been a source of friction as it divides Pashtun people, whose leaders on neither side recognise the border.

A lack of policing of the remote frontier

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has precipitated a de facto merger of parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan, shrinking the authority of the civilian governments in Kabul and Islamabad.

"Pashtunistan is a reality. The same has already happened in Baluchistan. In more than half of Pakistan, the writ of the state doesn't run," says Prof Chellaney. Some analysts point out that meetings this week between Mr Holbrooke and Hamid Karzai, the president of Afghanistan, and Asif All Zardari, his Pakistani counterpart, are in both cases with interlocutors who control little more than their capital cities.

At his press conference this week, Mr Obama also directed an apparent barb at Mr Karzai, noting that "effectively the [Afghan] national government seems very detached from what's going on in the surrounding community".

Mr Holbrooke's patience may meanwhile wear thin with Pakistan's generals too. Many doubt that they are sincerely committed to rooting out militants, as they still regard the Taliban as a strategic ally that allows Islamabad to project its power into Afghanistan.