

US scrambles to save \$7.5bn aid package for Pakistan

Top generals in Islamabad raise 'serious concern' as package labelled a tool of American neo-imperialism

Declan Walsh in Islamabad
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The US scrambled today to rescue a \$7.5bn aid package for [Pakistan](#) that has elicited furious criticism in Islamabad and underscored growing tensions between Pakistan's civilian and military leaders.

Pakistan's foreign minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, and senator John Kerry, who co-sponsored the aid package, are drafting an emergency declaration to assuage Pakistani concerns before the bill is signed into law by [Barack Obama](#) later this week.

Officials said a joint House-Senate statement would "clarify misunderstandings" about the bill in Pakistan, where critics paint it as a tool of American neo-imperialism. "There is nothing in this bill that impinges on Pakistani sovereignty – period," Kerry told reporters.

In theory the Kerry-Lugar bill, as it is known, is good news for Pakistan, a poor country divided by a growing [Taliban](#) insurgency.

The US funding offers \$1.5bn a year for five years for new schools, hospitals, microfinance schemes and other development aid. Only a week ago President Asif Ali Zardari trumpeted it as Pakistan's largest injection of non-military aid.

But everything changed when the country's top generals expressed "serious concern" with the bill. The army is angered at requirements that the US regularly certifies that Pakistan is fighting Islamist extremists, closing down training camps and preventing nuclear proliferation.

Pakistan's official policy is much the same, but critics objected to the bill's sometimes brusque language. One clause calls on the government to "cease all support for extremist and terrorist groups", suggesting it has already started.

The backlash in a country rife with anti-Americanism has been intense. Even as Taliban militants stormed the army headquarters last weekend, the army chief, General Pervez Kayani, flew by helicopter to meet Zardari and the prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gilani, to discuss the bill.

Right-wing media critics see in the American largesse a conspiratorial plan to increase the US presence on the ground and ultimately snatch the country's nuclear assets. Opposition parties have threatened to bring a parliamentary motion that would in effect stop the aid reaching Pakistan.

In reality, neither country can afford for the bill to fail. The US depends on Pakistani co-operation in the fight against al-Qaida and in its prosecution of the war in

Afghanistan. Pakistan's military and government have received more than \$15bn in aid since 2001.

The "joint explanatory statement" is expected to be issued by the [US Congress](#) today. "It will make clear we think it is a very important relationship," said Howard Berman, chairman of the House foreign affairs committee. The bill is due to be signed by Obama by Friday. Even if it is not signed, and the president does not use his veto, it will become law.

Under the surface the controversy reflects bubbling tensions between Zardari and the generals. An attempt by Zardari to bring the powerful ISI spy agency under civilian control last year backfired badly.

The army harbours a deep rooted suspicion of the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and has a particular animus towards its ambassador to Washington, Husain Haqqani. Media outlets prone to army influence have run stories in recent days predicting Haqqani's removal.

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