

Opening Comments of Senator Russ Feingold (D-WI) at the Senate Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services,
and International Security: "Addressing the U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Relationship."
Thursday, June 12, 2008, 2:30pm

I would like to thank Chairman Carper for inviting me to give some brief opening comments at this very important hearing on the US-Pakistan strategic relationship. This hearing is particularly timely given the critical juncture at which this partnership stands. Although we have a checkered history with Pakistan, the recently elected civilian government provides an opportunity to develop a sound and comprehensive bilateral relationship that serves the needs and the principles of both countries while also ensuring our national security – and theirs – over the long term.

As some of you may know, I recently returned from a four-day trip to Pakistan, where I met with a broad range of political officials from numerous parties, as well as with President Musharraf, Pakistani intelligence officials, the ousted Chief Justice, and representatives of Pakistan's civil society. I traveled to Peshawar, which lies near the border with Afghanistan in the tumultuous Northwest Frontier Province, and to Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, where I visited successful U.S.-funded earthquake recovery programs.

I chose to visit Pakistan because it is out of that country that we face our most serious national security threat. As the intelligence community has confirmed again and again, Pakistan is the central front in the fight against al Qaeda. Confronting this threat, which includes addressing the al Qaeda safe haven in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, must be our top national security priority. That means tracking down Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda operatives, and working with the Pakistan government to neutralize forces before they plot or carry out attacks against Americans. It also means making clear to our Pakistani friends that cutting deals with al Qaeda or the Taliban is simply unacceptable.

But these can not be our only goals. This fight is more than a manhunt – if we are serious about fighting al Qaeda, and preventing future generations of bin Ladens from emerging, we must also recognize the needs of the local population and expand our development assistance throughout a country where poverty and anti-Western sentiment is pervasive.

A key part of this new approach will require Pakistan's newly elected government to rein in the military apparatus, which has historically controlled much of Pakistan's politics and policies – sometimes overtly by a military dictator running the country and other times more discreetly from behind a screen of a civilian-led government. And as Pakistan's new government seeks to establish itself, we must find a way to defend our national security interests while recognizing that the emergence of a democratic, civilian government in Pakistan is in our long-term strategic interests. We need the support of the Pakistani people and their democratically elected leaders to successfully counter al Qaeda and extremism.

There is an opening right now for the United States to develop a new relationship with Pakistan. This administration's reliance on a single, unpopular leader who came to power through a coup

was a serious mistake that was inconsistent with our values and our national security interests. Now we must end that mistake by expanding our relationships, and supporting basic democratic institutions. A more inclusive policy will allow our counterterrorism partnership to withstand the turbulence of Pakistan's domestic politics, and help mitigate already high levels of anti-American sentiment.

This Administration's policies toward Pakistan have been highly damaging to our long-term national security. Although Pakistan's domestic politics remain fragile, we must seize this occasion by working with those who promote democracy, human rights, development, and the rule of law. We must align ourselves with the moderate forces critical to the fight against extremism and commit to supporting economic reform, legal political party development, and initiatives to integrate the FATA into the rest of Pakistan.

This will not be easy, but it is long overdue and will help ensure that we are using all the tools at our disposal to fight al Qaeda and associated terrorist threats. Combating extremism and denying terrorists the safe haven now found in the FATA requires, among other things, creating sustainable development strategies that provide both opportunities for Pakistani people and tangible examples of American good will. This must include not only traditional development projects, but institution building and political engagement in a region long deprived of such opportunities. While we target terrorists and extremists in the FATA, we must also make sure that the people of the FATA have economic options that can help them resist terrorism and extremism, while reducing anti-American sentiment.

Supporting the Pakistani people as they seek to strengthen development initiatives and democratic institutions is not just an outgrowth of our values -- it is in our national security interests. This is not to say that this process will be free from challenges -- there are already serious hurdles that must be dealt with, including negotiations in the FATA and Northwest Frontier Province, both of which are cause for serious concern and skepticism. America's allies must know that there can be no negotiations with terrorists who have sworn to harm our country. Those who would plot against American troops in Afghanistan, or Americans here at home, must be pursued relentlessly.

We must, however, recognize that the new leadership was elected democratically by the Pakistani people. And we must try to work with them to advance our mutual interests in fostering security and development in the region.