

Pentagon 'concerns' with Pakistan aid

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After promising last month that U.S. aid to Pakistan would no longer be a “blank check,” the Obama administration is attempting to head off efforts in Congress to place tough conditions on the multi-billion dollar assistance package it is seeking for Islamabad.

Senior Pentagon officials told lawmakers yesterday that conditions being proposed by both Democrats and Republican in Congress could “severely constrain” the U.S. strategy for Pakistan, which has assumed greater urgency in recent days as evidence has mounted that the security situation in the country is deteriorating.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, yesterday sent a letter laying out their “strong concerns” about legislation authorizing additional \$1.5 billion a year for Pakistan introduced by Rep. Howard Berman, D-Ca., the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

But in a statement replying to Gates and Mullen, Berman played down the conditions in his bill.

“I get the impression that those criticizing my bill haven’t actually read it,” he said. “It doesn’t include any 'rigid' or 'inflexible' conditions. We are simply asking the President to hold the Pakistanis accountable for their commitments to fight the terrorists who threaten their and our national security.” The bill does allow the president to waive restrictions on military aid if it is “vital to the national security interest of the United States.”

A similar measure is under consideration in the Senate. Lawmakers on the House and Senate Appropriations Committees are also considering proposals for placing conditions on Pakistan aid.

The issue of conditioning aid to Pakistan has the potential to turn into a difficult fight for the White House, because many of those leading the fight to impose restrictions on aid are some of the administration’s closest allies on other issues.

As supportive as these lawmakers normally are, many have lost patience with Pakistan, which has received billions in U.S. aid since 2001 but remains a haven for al Qaeda. Many lawmakers are angry, too, that Pakistan’s military has failed to move decisively against Taliban and other militant groups until recent weeks when fighters moved within a few hours drive of Islamabad.

Administration officials have the same concerns about Pakistan’s commitment to fighting the insurgency it faces, but they argue that the congressional efforts to restrict aid is too blunt an approach. They say the effort to move the Pakistani government will be more effective if it is carried in private talks between U.S. and Pakistani officials, including next week when Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari is expected in Washington for talks along with Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

“There is still no more blank check,” said a senior administration official, stressing that the administration would be tough on the Pakistanis.

But the effort to head off congressional restrictions comes at the same time the administration is urging lawmakers to move as quickly as possible on a supplemental spending request, which includes an additional \$1.8 billion for Pakistan.

That gives Congress leverage over the administration that it could use to force the White House to eventually accept some conditions aimed at forcing

The split is reminiscent of the battle the Bush administration fought with Congress in 2006 over benchmarks for measuring progress in Iraq

Among other requirements, the Berman bill would prohibit military assistance unless the president certified that Pakistan's government is taking actions to dismantle nuclear weapons-material supply networks and to combat terrorist groups, according to a summary of the bill.

The bill would also halt all U.S. assistance after next January if the "freely elected government of Pakistan," is overthrown in a coup, which has happened repeatedly over Pakistan's history.

"The degree of conditionality and limitations on security assistance to Pakistan," Gates and Mullen wrote, "severely constrains the flexibility necessary for the Executive Branch and the Department of Defense given the fluid and dynamic environment that exists in Pakistan."

The warnings in the letter were echoed by Undersecretary of Defense Michele Flournoy, who testified Wednesday that the requirements in the Berman bill, "seemed very absolute and inflexible." She said that the administration also opposed conditions under consideration in the Appropriations committees/

The Berman measure would also allow Congress to vote on overturning the presidential determination that Pakistan is cooperating adequately.