

Sharif's triumph poses problems for Washington

WORLD COMMENTARY

The bilateral relationship needs to remain stabilised

CLAUDE RAKISITS

NAWAZ Sharif's third coming as Pakistan's prime minister was almost a certainty going into the election. Sharif's party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), won convincingly but will still fall short of having a majority in the National Assembly.

Sharif may well have to depend on the support of Imran Khan's party, the Movement for Justice (PTI), which came third, to pass his legislative agenda. President Asif Ali Zardari's party, the Pakistan People's Party, was a distant second.

Zardari's assassinated wife, Benazir Bhutto, who was the PPP's prime minister twice in the 1990s, must be turning in her grave.

Democracy was the real winner in this election. Despite the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) killing more than 100 people in suicide attacks and bombings in the lead-up to the poll, people were not deterred from voting. The turnout was more than 60 per cent, one of the highest ever in a Pakistan election.

Most significantly, it was the first election since independence in 1947 in which a civilian government completed its full five-year term and transferred power to another civilian government through a relatively free and fair electoral process.

But while the result may have been welcomed domestically, it may not be as well received in Washington.

Sharif has made it clear that he opposes the military campaign against the TTP and wants to negotiate a peaceful solution, with no pre-set conditions.

His view that this is "America's war" is one that is widely held in Pakistan. However, General Parvez Kiyani, the army's Chief of Staff, has made it clear that with the death of 40,000 Pakistanis at the hands of the TTP, this is "Pakistan's war".

Part of such a deal with the TTP would presumably mean withdrawing most of the 150,000 troops stationed in the tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan. It is unclear how the army would respond to such a request, given that it has lost more than 4000 troops, including some high-ranking officers, in its battle with the TTP.

The army won't have forgotten that the last time a Pakistani government cut a deal with the TTP, in the Swat Valley in 2009, the Taliban broke its word and came dangerously close to the capital, Islamabad. The army was forced to move in, 40,000 troops to dislodge them.

Washington would see the withdrawal of Pakistani troops as creating a power vacuum. This

would facilitate the movement of Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network fighters in the tribal areas for attacks against coalition forces in eastern and southern Afghanistan.

An even more sensitive issue will be Sharif's inevitable demand that US unmanned drone strikes against terrorist targets in the tribal areas cease immediately. Given their high success rate in eliminating many high-level al-Qaida and Taliban leaders, it is unlikely that Washington would agree to such a demand. Expect these differences to create significant tension in the bilateral relationship.

Drone strikes are extremely unpopular in Pakistan and are probably the single most important factor feeding the rampant anti-American mood in the country. Given Sharif's strong electoral mandate, it is unlikely he would back down on the issue.

Moreover, Khan's position on the drones, as well as on the issue of negotiating with the Taliban, is virtually identical to Sharif's. Accordingly, Sharif will feel he's on safe ground by pushing hard on both issues early in his administration.

It is important to remember that Sharif, having been prime minister twice in the 1990s, comes with political baggage in the bilateral relationship.

Democracy was the real winner in this election

It was under his watch that Pakistan, in response to India's detonation of nuclear devices, exploded its own nuclear bombs in 1998, making Pakistan a nuclear weapons state.

It was also under his administration that Pakistan initiated the Kargil conflict with India in 1999. Under pressure from president Bill Clinton, Pakistani troops were forced to withdraw back to the Line of Control, the de facto international border between Pakistan and India in Kashmir.

Notwithstanding some of the obvious policy differences that will arise between Pakistan and the US under a Sharif government, the two countries will need to work together as best as they can. Washington, in particular, will be required to manage the bilateral relationship very adroitly.

Islamabad knows that the US is heavily dependent on having unimpeded access to Pakistan's roads to move some 100,000 containers of military hardware out of Afghanistan in the lead-up to its exit from the country in December next year.

Accordingly, the Americans will be limited by how much they can push back on the issues of the drones and the Pakistan Taliban.

It will be important to observe the Pakistan army's position on these issues because its stance will be critical in having a stable bilateral relationship between Washington and Islamabad in the long term.

Claude Rakisits is associate professor in strategic studies in the School of Humanities and Social Studies at Deakin University