

EU-Pakistan: changing ties

By Javier Solana

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Today, EU leaders are welcoming President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan to Brussels for the first-ever EU-Pakistan summit.

This summit signals a step towards change in relations between the EU and Pakistan, moving from a relationship that has been mainly about trade to a strategically focused partnership embracing security, democratic governance, humanitarian and development assistance and regional and global issues. Together we will set an agenda for closer cooperation between the EU and Pakistan, a crucial player in Asia and a vital partner for Europe.

A secure and stable Pakistan, anchored in the international security environment, is essential for the people of both Pakistan and Europe. Our long-term, high-level political engagement will be focused on addressing the root causes of violent extremism and radicalisation and on combating the terrorism that has caused more suffering to the people of Pakistan than of any other country in recent years.

The latest string of terrorist attacks in Peshawar, Lahore and Nowshera has taken a terrible toll of victims. The images we have seen from the Swat region of women being flogged, girls' schools being burned down and terror being sown amongst the local population illustrate the scale of the challenge.

Europeans are also threatened, not least by radicals who train in the camps set up by extremist organisations on Pakistani soil with the intention of striking western targets. The EU cannot be a bystander in the face of such suffering and of such fundamental threats to the security and stability of Pakistan, the wider region and Europe. The security challenges are closely linked to the situation in Afghanistan, which shares a lengthy border with Pakistan. As long as Al Qaeda and Taliban extremists continue to operate on both sides of the border it will be very difficult to bring lasting stability to Afghanistan or to prevent the instability from spilling over into Pakistan.

The recent military operations against militant extremists reflect Pakistan's determination to fight terrorism on its own soil. We welcome this. The fight against terrorism and militant extremism is a joint endeavour and part of the newly enhanced relationship between the EU and Pakistan. We will be working together to help improve Pakistan's counter-terrorism capacity in law-enforcement and criminal justice.

The European Union is acutely aware of the need to alleviate the suffering of the hundreds of thousands of civilians forced to flee the recent fighting in the north-western region of Pakistan after the Taliban terrorised the local population and openly challenged the authority of the Pakistani state. The survival of democracy in Pakistan, as well as Pakistan's peaceful coexistence with India, are increasingly threatened by the militant extremists. Central Asia, Iran and India are also feeling the impact of the insurgency in Afghanistan on their own security with mounting concern. It is vital to promote stronger cooperation within the region and to turn borders that divide into lines that connect, for example to supply goods and energy. The European Union has extensive experience of promoting economic regional integration and it hopes to share some of this for the benefit of Pakistan and the wider region.

Bringing economic stability and development to Pakistan is vital in order to tackle the root causes of poverty and conflict. We know that a strong trading relationship is linked to economic prosperity and stability. The EU is already Pakistan's top trading partner and we will help Pakistan pursue economic diversification and develop its capacity to trade more effectively, with a view to a possible free trade agreement in the future.

At the same time, the EU has pledged financial assistance to Pakistan of 485 million euros by 2013. This should create opportunities for the millions of young Pakistanis who seek to build their own future. Much focus will be placed on the education sector, the single-most important source of prosperity for future generations. The fundamental rights of women in Pakistani society will be targeted in European development programmes.

The EU's engagement with Pakistan is long-term. This is in our mutual strategic interest. It is

also part of the efforts of the wider international community that have been revitalised by President Obama and supported so eloquently in his address to the Muslim world in Cairo.

The writer is EU high representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy.