

US dead set against 'Islamic bomb': William Cohen

The US opposes any 'Islamic (nuclear) bomb' and is worried what will happen to Pakistan without President Pervez Musharraf at the helm of affairs, says former secretary of defence William S. Cohen.

Here on a five-day visit, Cohen also said that while Washington prayed for democratic rule in Pakistan, 'one may anticipate that another strong military man may come forward should Musharraf not be there'.

In an exclusive interview with IANS, Cohen, who headed the Department of Defence from 1997 to 2001 under Bill Clinton, reiterated that India's nuclear weapons could not be compared to those of North Korea or a bomb Iran might want to develop.

'We don't want to see an Islamic bomb being developed,' he said, speaking about concerns over the nuclear ambitions of Pyongyang and Tehran.

Pointed out that an 'Islamic bomb' already exists in Pakistan, he said: 'And there is always concern about that. We are thankful that President Musharraf has been working with the US, and I know this from my own experience when I was Secretary of Defence.'

'He was very helpful in impeding, in stopping a major terrorist operation from occurring. He has been committed to that. We always worry about what happens without him.'

'Musharraf is someone who is strong to control any leakage of that technology in the hands of messianics or motivated by other concerns.'

Musharraf, Cohen pointed out, 'is always at risk. So we are concerned about that (Pakistani nuclear weapons). The fact is that they have it. We worry about it.'

He said Washington was trying to encourage Musharraf with a view to marginalising Islamic extremists in Pakistan.

'It should be of concern to everybody if the extremists were to gain power (in Pakistan). India has to be concerned; the US has to be concerned.'

What if Musharraf ceased to be Pakistan's ruler?

'We have hopes there will be a return to democratic rule. That continues to be our hope; whether it becomes a reality remains to be seen. One may anticipate that another strong military man may come forward should Mush not be there.'

Lack of democracy, he warned, would only end up encouraging extremism.

Cohen, who will be meeting a range of Indian business and political leaders, said although Cold War suspicions between [New Delhi](#) and Washington had not completely disappeared, bilateral relations were getting stronger and stronger.

India's nuclear arsenal, he went on, could not be compared to North Korea's nuclear weapons.

'India has gone on record against Iran getting (nuclear) weapon... I don't think people in the US associate India with North Korea or Iran. They see India as a democracy, a country we want to have strategic relationship with.'

Cohen said it would be in India's interests to see that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons, notwithstanding the historic relationship between New Delhi and Tehran.

Once Iran went nuclear, the Saudis and Egyptians might want to have a nuclear weapon. 'There will be more and more countries developing the nuclear weapon and the risk of it getting into the hands of terrorist groups becomes greater.'

Cohen denied that the US was courting India so as to contain China - an assessment that he said was 'completely off the mark'.

'China cannot be contained,' he declared. 'We are not able to contain China; our assessment is to engage china.'

He underlined that it was in Washington's interests that India should also have good relations not just with the US but with Japan, Australia and China as well.

Cohen admitted candidly that the US war on Iraq had greatly hurt America's standing in the world. 'There is no question that Iraq has impaired the reputation of the US,' he said, but expressed the opinion that the image could still be redeemed.

He was also confident that the US policy on Iraq was going to change as the current strategy was simply not working.

'We have been unable to control the insurgency, it takes different forms... We have to change our strategy... The American people have patience, but it is not infinite.'

The Iraq war had also forced the US to neglect other parts of the world. 'Iraq has consumed much of our resources and energy.'

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