

Hillary Clinton touts “smart power” in pursuit of US imperialist aims

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At her confirmation hearing Tuesday, Senator Hillary Clinton offered few specifics as to the policies that she would pursue as the Obama administration's secretary of state, but suggested that she would pursue the same objectives as those that have driven US military aggression over the past several years, albeit with some largely cosmetic modifications.

She also made clear that her espousal of the importance of diplomacy did not imply a reduction in military violence. "We will lead with diplomacy because it's a smart approach," she said at one point. "But we also know that military force will sometimes be needed."

In her appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Clinton was showered with praise both by fellow Democrats and by Republicans. Not long ago, the former first lady was vilified by the Republican Party. She herself once described her husband's Republican opponents as a "vast right-wing conspiracy." But such animosity has been cast aside. As Obama's designee for secretary of state, she is clearly seen as a reliable defender of the same interests as those pursued by the Bush administration.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the confirmation hearing was the studied indifference to the most explosive ongoing international conflict—the war in Gaza.

Neither Democratic nor Republican senators showed any inclination to probe her views on the unfolding catastrophe in Gaza. Those who expressed any opinion—including Clinton herself—uniformly supported the Israeli onslaught against the 1.5 million Palestinians trapped in the impoverished territory.

"The president-elect and I understand and are deeply sympathetic to Israel's desire to defend itself under the current conditions and to be free of shelling by Hamas rockets," Clinton declared in her opening statement.

She referred to "the tragic humanitarian cost of conflict in the Middle East," declaring herself "pained by the suffering of Palestinian and Israeli civilians." Under conditions in which nearly 1,000 Palestinians had been killed compared to three Israeli civilians, the meaning of such sentiments is clear.

Similarly, the foreign relations committee chairman, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, affirmed, "Israel has all the right in the world and we are totally supportive of the patience

they've shown, the forbearance, over 10,500 rockets, the fact that Hamas broke the ceasefire."

Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer of California voiced the view that "the outbreak of violence in Gaza reminds us that Israel continues to face grave threats to its very existence from never-ending rocket attacks."

Republican Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina added, "We have spoken about Israel, and I think there's widespread agreement of our support there, but it appears to be naive and illogical to continue... diplomacy and calls for peace with governments that are publicly opposed to the existence of Israel."

In response to the one direct question from Kerry on the issue, Clinton adopted the same position as Obama, insisting that to voice any opinion could undermine the current policy of the Bush administration, which has given its full support to the Israeli war on Gaza.

"We are at a point where the current administration is working very hard behind the scenes and in front of the scenes and we don't want to say or do anything that might interrupt or undermine what they are doing," said Clinton.

Nonetheless, she repeated that she and Obama "do support Israel's right to defend itself and we do understand and appreciate what it must be like to be subjected to rocket attacks."

There could be no clearer green light from the incoming administration to the Israeli government to continue the slaughter.

Clinton offered few specifics in response to questions on Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and other areas of the globe where the US is actively intervening, stating repeatedly that the incoming administration would conduct "policy reviews." She sought to draw an oblique distinction between the outlook of the incoming administration and that of its predecessor by declaring that "foreign policy must be based on a marriage of principles and pragmatism, not rigid ideology."

Nonetheless, what little specifics she gave indicated fundamental continuity with the foreign policy aims of the Bush administration. This was made even clearer by her repeated references to working out the incoming administration's policy in consultation with Secretary of

Defense Robert Gates, Central Command chief Gen. David Petraeus and Gen. Douglas Lute, the national security advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan, all of whom are Bush appointees who are being kept at their posts.

On Iraq, she indicated that the Obama administration's troop withdrawal policy would be carried out "in the context of the status of forces agreement" negotiated by the Bush administration, which is being interpreted by the Pentagon as allowing an indefinite continuation of America's military occupation, albeit with reduced forces.

When asked by Senator Russell Feingold (Democrat from Wisconsin) about Obama's campaign pledge to withdraw US combat troops from Iraq within 16 months, Clinton was evasive, saying only that the Obama administration intended to remove combat troops "safely and responsibly, as soon as possible."

Like Obama, she indicated that US troops withdrawn from Iraq would be redeployed to Afghanistan, adding that Washington would press other NATO members to boost their own contributions to the occupation force.

On Iran, she refused to specify whether the incoming administration would engage in direct negotiations with Teheran. Instead, she echoed the Bush administration's allegations that the Iranian government is engaged in the "sponsorship of terrorism" and the "pursuit of nuclear weapons" and repeated twice its standard warning that "no option is off the table," including US military action against Iran.

She also indicated that the new administration could seek the imposition of "no-fly zones" in the Darfur region of Sudan as part of a stepped-up intervention in the oil-rich African nation under the mantle of "human rights."

Under questioning, Clinton backed away from the pledge she made during the Democratic presidential primary campaign to ban the State Department's use of private security contractors such as Blackwater to protect State Department employees. Co-sponsoring legislation to that effect, she described such outfits at the time as "private mercenary firms" and referred to such incidents as the massacre of 17 people in Baghdad's Nisoor Square last year as having "undermined the mission" in Iraq.

On Tuesday, however, she allowed that Washington still had need for its mercenaries. "Our civilian employees need to be protected," she said. "As we withdraw our troops, we have to get assurances of their protection by Iraqi troops, or we have to use contractors."

Clinton repeatedly proclaimed that her aim was to employ "smart power" in pursuit of US interests. This catch-phrase has been employed by Republicans and Democrats alike to indicate the need to repackage American imperialist policy as less unilateral in order to refurbish Washington's image following the decline of American prestige and influence under the Bush administration.

Earlier this year, the Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), set up a commission

to promote "smart power" headed by Richard Armitage, former second-in-command in the Bush administration's State Department, and Joseph Nye, a Harvard professor and former assistant secretary of state for security affairs in the Clinton administration.

In its report, the commission offered a definition of this concept: "Smart power is neither hard nor soft—it is the skillful combination of both. Smart power means developing an integrated strategy, resource base and tool kit to achieve American objectives, drawing on both hard and soft power. It is an approach that underscores the necessity of a strong military, but also invests heavily in alliances, partnerships and institutions at all levels to expand American influence and establish the legitimacy of American actions."

In other words, the "change" promised by the Obama administration is not a turn away from American militarism and wars of aggression, but rather the implementation of policies aimed at legitimizing these practices.

The only mildly adversarial exchanges at Tuesday's hearing came over the international fundraising activities of the nominee's husband, former President Bill Clinton, whose charitable foundation has taken in large donations from various gulf sheikdoms, foreign businessmen and lobbyist groups. Recent press reports have indicated that in several instances, Hillary Clinton advocated as a US senator on behalf of some of her husband's donors.

While Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the foreign relations panel, pressed for either an end to foreign donations or a fuller and more timely disclosure of future donations to the foundation than is called for in a memorandum of understanding worked up by the Obama transition team, for the most part Republicans approached the issue very gingerly.

The one exception, Senator David Vitter, a Louisiana Republican, ended his inquiries by conceding that he did not want to "beat a dead horse."

None of the committee's members indicated that they would vote against the nomination, which will be sent to the full Senate on Thursday and will likely be approved by the time Obama takes office on January 20.



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