

Pakistanis challenge Clinton over drone attacks, US bullying

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During a three-day visit to Pakistan last week, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pressed Pakistan's government and military to do even more to support the US drive to subjugate Afghanistan and secure a strategic foothold in oil-rich Central Asia.

Specifically, she urged Islamabad to extend the current military offensive against Taliban-aligned militias beyond South Waziristan, a Pashtun-speaking tribal agency bordering Afghanistan.

Under heavy pressure from Washington, Pakistan since October 17 has been mounting a three-pronged assault on South Waziristan involving 30,000 troops, helicopter gunships and F-16 jets.

According to aid agencies, the fighting has displaced a further 200,000 people, most of them poor villagers. The Pakistani military is notorious for its use of indiscriminate artillery assaults and bombing, frequently flattening whole villages to "liberate" them from the Taliban.

Leaders of the Pakistan People's Party-led coalition government and opposition leader Nawaz Sharif publicly praised Clinton, the Obama administration, and Washington. Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi called the secretary of state "a friend of Pakistan" and said her visit was a "loud and clear message" of US solidarity with the Pakistani people.

But Clinton encountered widespread popular anger over the US's treatment of Pakistan—its support for a succession of military dictatorships, its bullying and repeated violations of Pakistani sovereignty, and readiness to push Pakistan toward civil war in pursuit of victory in the Afghan war.

During a GEO television program Friday, in which Clinton took questions from the audience, she was twice challenged over the US's practice of mounting Predator drone strikes in Pakistan. These strikes, which

have become routine since Obama became president, are a flagrant violation of Pakistan's sovereignty. They have frequently resulted in a heavy loss of civilian lives and constitute an illegal program of assassination.

One Pakistani woman told Clinton the drone attacks constituted "executions without trial." Another challenged Clinton to define terrorism, asking in what way the US drone attacks differ from the bombing of a Peshawar market the day that Clinton arrived in Pakistan. "Is it [terrorism], the killing of people in drone attacks?" she asked.

A GEO television interviewer subsequently told Clinton the fighting now raging in Northwest Pakistan "is not our war. It is your war." The audience burst into applause when she added, "You had one 9/11. We are having daily 9/11s in Pakistan."

Earlier the same day, one of a dozen people from Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with whom Clinton met, told her, "Your presence in the region is not good for peace, because it gives rise to frustration and irritation among the people of this region." Later he added, "Please forgive me, but I would like to say we've been fighting your war."

Pakistanis also repeatedly asked Clinton about the growing presence of armed Blackwater/Xe Services personnel in Pakistan, and about the massive embassy complex the US is now building in Islamabad, a complex said to be second in size only to that the US has erected in Baghdad.

On Thursday, when Clinton met at a Lahore college with a specially selected audience of university students drawn from across Pakistan, she was repeatedly forced on the defensive. According to the *New York Times*, "One after another they lined up to grill Mrs. Clinton about what they see as the dysfunctional relationship

between Pakistan and the United States... She got tepid applause from the students... some of whom groaned when she defended American policies.”

The *Times* report further notes that Clinton “praised the army at every opportunity.”

Clinton is the highest ranking Obama administration official to visit Pakistan. The ostensible purpose of her visit was to address and meet with ordinary Pakistanis as well as government, opposition, military and business leaders, so as to overcome a “trust deficit” in US-Pakistani relations. By “reaching out” to a broad section of Pakistanis, Clinton was trying to put some distance between the current administration and that of George W. Bush, which to the dismay of ordinary Pakistanis feted the dictator General Pervez Musharraf.

As part of her “charm offensive,” Clinton made a few pro forma concessions about “mistakes” and oversights, and repeatedly proclaimed that the US has the interests of the Pakistani people at heart. She also decried what she called distortions of the intent and meaning of a recent US law, the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009, also called the Kerry-Lugar bill, which provides \$1.5 billion per year in US economic assistance to Pakistan for the next five years, if Pakistan fulfils Washington objectives in respect to the pacification of Afghanistan and nuclear non-proliferation.

The secretary of state denied that the legislation in any way constitutes interference in Pakistan’s internal affairs.

The reality is that the Pakistani-US “partnership” has for decades been a conspiracy against the Pakistani people, in which Washington has used the Pakistani state, above all its military, as a linchpin of US’s imperialist interests in the Middle East, Central and South Asia. And the venal Pakistani bourgeoisie has been more than willing to offer its services, although, like any mercenary, it haggles over the price and resents the arrogance and cut-throat manner of its overlords.

In the case of the Pakistani elite, there are all manner of resentments and concerns that the US drive to subjugate Afghanistan has destabilized the shaky Pakistan federal state, increased the already yawning gulf between the people and the ruling class, and is undercutting Pakistan in its rivalry with India. The latter fear is compounded by the US’s courting of

India—as epitomized by the Indo-US nuclear accord—as a strategic counterweight to a rising China.

For most of the first two days of her visit, Clinton stuck to her brief of trying to charm Pakistanis by making a show of listening to them. But the extent of the popular hostility appears to have piqued her. Late Thursday, she lashed out at the Pakistani establishment, telling a group of journalists, “I find it hard to believe that nobody in your government knows where [the Al Qaeda leadership] are, and couldn’t get to them if they really wanted to.”

The next day she publicly urged the extension of the current counter-insurgency offensive. “With [the] initial campaign in Swat and now in South Waziristan finished,” Clinton told a town hall meeting of Pakistani professional women, “I think the Pakistani military would have to go on to root out other terrorist groups or else they could come back to threaten Pakistan.”

While Clinton did make several economic assistance announcements, she rejected two long-standing demands of the Pakistani elite: that the US remove tariffs on textiles, the country’s most important export, and that it prod India to make concessions to Pakistan in respect to Kashmir.

During his campaign for the presidency, Obama suggested a possible quid pro quo in which the US would assist Pakistan in arriving at a settlement with India over Kashmir in return for Pakistan doing the US’s bidding in the Afghan war. But when India reiterated its fierce opposition to any US involvement in mediating the Indo-Pakistani dispute, the Obama administration quickly backed off.

Clinton said of the Indo-Pakistani dispute, “It is clearly not for us to dictate solutions.” And with that Obama administration’s colonial-style plenipotentiary flew on to the Middle East.



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