

US and Pakistan hold “strategic dialogue,” but frictions persist

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The US and Pakistan are holding their first ever ministerial-level “strategic dialogue.”

Yesterday at the formal opening of the Washington talks, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton claimed that they constitute a “new day” in US-Pakistani relations. “For the past year,” said Clinton, “the Obama administration has shown in our words and deeds a different approach and attitude toward Pakistan.”

In reality, the “dialogue” constitutes a continuation and deepening of the decades’ long patron-client relationship between US imperialism and the venal Pakistani bourgeoisie—a relationship that has seen Pakistan’s bloated military-intelligence apparatus serve as a tool of US interests in Central, South and West Asia and Washington promote Pakistan’s armed forces as the country’s premier institution.

The enduring character of the US-Pakistan relationship is exemplified by the leading role that General Ashfaq Kiyani, the current head of Pakistan’s armed forces, is playing in the talks. Although the Pakistani delegation is officially led by Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, even the *New York Times* had to concede that Kiyani “has driven the agenda for the talks” and “will be the dominant Pakistani participant.”

Prior to Wednesday’s opening of the “strategic dialogue,” Pakistan’s Chief of Armed Services held talks with the head of the US military’s Central Command, General David Petraeus, the head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, and US Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

Last week, Kiyani convened a meeting of the secretaries of the various Pakistani government departments involved in this week’s talks, including the secretaries for finance, foreign affairs, energy, education, and transport, and did so apparently without even bothering to consult President Asif Ali Zardari or Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.

Under the Pakistan People’s Party-led civilian government, as previously under the US-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan is providing critical logistical support to the US war in Afghanistan. Indeed over the past year, Islamabad has dramatically increased its involvement in what Washington has renamed the AfPak War.

Eleven months ago, when Zardari and other top Pakistani officials visited Washington, they came under intense pressure from the Obama administration to “do more” to choke off support for the Taliban and other anti-US insurgents in Afghanistan from

the predominantly Pashtun-speaking areas of north-west Pakistan.

Subsequently, Islamabad mounted massive military offensives in South Waziristan and the Swat Valley region of the North West Frontier Province. These offensives uprooted more than 2 million people from their homes and resulted in heavy civilian casualties as the Pakistani military used carpet bombing and indiscriminate shelling to suppress Taliban-aligned militias.

The US, meanwhile, stepped up its campaign of predator drone strikes, dramatically increasing their frequency and extending them beyond the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Hundreds of civilian have been killed in these strikes, which are mounted in flagrant violation of Pakistani sovereignty.

While popular support for the social and political program of the Taliban and Taliban-aligned militias is limited outside of Pakistan’s impoverished tribal areas, there is intense hostility toward Washington among the Pakistani people because of its wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan and its role in sustaining a succession of right wing military dictatorships in Islamabad.

In her opening remarks at yesterday’s talks, Clinton conceded, that the US and Pakistan “have had our misunderstanding and disagreements in the past,” adding that “there are sure to be more disagreements in the future, as there are between any friends, or frankly, any family members.”

Clinton’s counterpart, Qureshi urged Washington to play a “constructive” role in resolving Pakistan’s six decades old dispute with India over Kashmir and to provide Islamabad “non-discriminatory” access to energy.

The latter was a reference to Pakistan’s oft-repeated demand that the US grant it a civilian nuclear deal along the lines of that Washington concluded with India in 2008. Under the Indo-US nuclear accord, India—like Pakistan a non-signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and a country that developed nuclear weapons in defiance of the regulatory regimes fashioned by the permanent UN Security Council members—has gained the right to purchase foreign-made civilian nuclear technology, enabling it to press ahead with plans to dramatically expand nuclear power generation and, even more importantly, concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on the development of nuclear weaponry.

Both Qureshi’s requests will undoubtedly illicit hollows of outrage from India, Pakistan’s arch rival.

Pakistan’s foreign minister signaled that Islamabad is also

looking for arms, increased economic assistance, especially in meeting the country's water- and power-shortages, and greater access to US markets for Pakistani products.

"Pakistan," said Qureshi, "is committed to doing its part to facilitate the world community's effort for peace and stability in Afghanistan. We hope the world community will be equally responsive to our legitimate concerns and help advance our common interests."

Prior to his arrival in Washington, Qureshi had spoken much more bluntly. On March 18, he told a media briefing about the forthcoming talks, "We have already done too much ... Pakistan has done its bit, we have delivered; now it's your (the US) turn. Start delivering."

Returning to the same theme later in the press conference Qureshi declared, "We have been talking a lot. The time has come to walk the talk."

The Obama administration has made much of the fact that last year it secured Congressional approval of legislation providing Pakistan with \$1.5 billion in annual economic assistance for the next five years. But this amounts to less than \$10 per Pakistani per year.

The Pakistani elite resents the extent to which the US is seeking to control the distribution of this aid money, as well as the increased oversight it is insisting on in respect to the dispersal of money from the Afghan War Coalition Support Fund. According to Islamabad, Washington is currently \$1.5 billion in arrears on the payments it makes to the Pakistani military for expenses occurred in assisting the US occupation of Afghanistan.

In recent weeks, top Obama administration and Pentagon officials have gone out of their way to laud the Pakistani military's and government's support for the US war in Afghanistan. They claim that there is a new level of cooperation between the Pentagon and the Pakistani military and that this indicates a shift in the latter's attitude toward the Taliban. (The Taliban originally took power in Afghanistan under Pakistani patronage and Islamabad has been loathe to sever all ties with it for fear that India will consolidate its influence over Kabul at Pakistan's expense.)

In testimony before Congress yesterday, Gates and Mullen termed Pakistan's military campaign against Taliban-aligned groups in Pakistan "exceptional." Earlier Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke had dismissed claims, including from the UN's former top representative in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, that Pakistan's recent arrest of Afghan Taliban leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, was aimed at closing off a back-door channel of negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban, so as to ensure that Islamabad plays a major role in any Afghan "peace settlement." Speaking last week, Holbrooke said the US was "extremely gratified that the Pakistani Government has apprehended the number two person in the Taliban."

US officials now claim to have a greater appreciation of Pakistan's claims to a strategic stake in Afghanistan. The commander of the US Central Command General Petraeus recently said that Pakistan "has an interest [in Afghanistan] that is somewhat different than ours, and that is their strategic depth ... [T]heir strategic depth is and always has been for a country that's

very narrow and has its historic enemy to its east (i.e. India)."

In what also constitutes a shift, Secretary of State Clinton now says that the US is willing to consider Pakistan's request for a civilian nuclear deal akin to that granted India. Until now, Washington has always briskly rebuffed Pakistan's calls for such a deal, insisting that the Indo-US nuclear accord is unique.

But as Clinton added, agreeing to talk about something is a far cry from agreeing to it.

The crisis-ridden Pakistani elite is trying to leverage its role in the Afghan war to win concessions from its US paymasters. But, the flights of rhetoric notwithstanding, the Obama administration will be driven by the economic crisis and the imperatives of its geopolitical strategy to continue to drive a hard bargain with Islamabad.

For years, Pakistani officials have been seeking access to advanced US military equipment, including missile-launching drones and advanced helicopters. But Washington has spurned their appeals. In advance of the opening of this week's strategic dialogue, Pentagon Press Secretary Geoff Morrell cautioned reporters, "I would not look ... for there to be some great announcement about any hard items that are being produced as the result of the conversations."

The US-Pakistani strategic dialogue is only adding to apprehensions in India that Washington is sacrificing its interests in pursuit of closer ties with Islamabad. From the opposition benches and the Indian press there are all manner of voices complaining that the Obama administration has downgraded Indo-US ties (in contrast with the Bush administration which actively courted India as a counterweight to China). In particular, they fear that India, which has lavished aid on Kabul, will be denied a significant role in any future political settlement in Afghanistan. They also complain that while the US has prevailed on Islamabad to crack down on Taliban-aligned elements it has not shown any such resolve in pressing Pakistan to end its support for the insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir.

In an attempt to push back against Islamabad and disrupt US-Pakistani ties, New Delhi has mounted a vigorous campaign to label Pakistan the epicenter of world terrorism and issued veiled threats of a cross-border strike in the event of a further terrorist attack inside India.

The US's aggressive foreign policy has added a new explosive dimension to the historic Indo-Pakistani rivalry. Holbrooke was forced to concede this when he recently summed up what he called the "American policy dilemma" in South Asia. "Both in New Delhi and Islamabad, people come up to us and say, 'Oh you're pro-the other country, you're favoring one country over the other'."



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