

British Prime Minister Cameron's Asian tour

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Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari has arrived in Britain for talks on Friday with Prime Minister David Cameron. A Pakistani official said that Zardari was intent on “plain talking” during the discussions, following Cameron’s comments in India last week in which he implicitly accused Pakistan of “exporting terrorism.”

Speaking during a visit to Bangalore, Cameron declared that “we cannot tolerate in any sense the idea that this country [Pakistan] is allowed to look both ways and is able, in any way, to promote the export of terror whether to India, whether to Afghanistan or to anywhere else in the world.”

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh backed Cameron and called on Pakistan to “honour its commitment” that its territory “will not be allowed to be used for terrorism.”

In protest, Pakistani intelligence officials cancelled a counterterrorism summit in London with their UK counterparts. The meeting was scheduled to be held during Zardari’s visit.

While supporting the thrust of Cameron’s statement, many in British political and media circles opined that the Tory leader had made a mistake in speaking so openly. His “undiplomatic” remarks, it was suggested, were the result of inexperience.

But Pakistan was not the only country Cameron offended during his four-day visit to Turkey and India. Speaking earlier in the week in Ankara, Cameron attacked those countries opposing Turkey’s membership of the European Union, suggesting that they were motivated by anti-Islamic prejudice.

Cameron told Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan that given “what Turkey has done to defend Europe as a NATO ally and what Turkey is doing today in Afghanistan alongside our European allies, it makes me angry that your progress towards EU membership can be frustrated in the way it has been. I believe it’s just wrong to say Turkey can guard the camp but not be allowed to sit inside the tent.”

Although he did not name names, Cameron’s targets were Germany and France, which oppose Turkey’s membership of the EU. His condemnation of “those who don’t differentiate between real Islam and the extremist version” was taken as a not-so-coded attack on French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Cameron also drew the ire of Israel. At the same press conference, the prime minister described Israel’s assault on the Turkish-flagged Mavi Marmara aid ship to Gaza, during which nine peace campaigners were killed, as “totally unacceptable,” adding that “Gaza cannot and must not be allowed to remain a prison camp.”

In response, the Israeli ambassador to London, Ron Prosser, declared that the people of Gaza are the “prisoners” of Hamas,

which controls the territory after having been elected to office.

For the *Financial Times*, the problem with Cameron’s statements was that his tone “has been excessively needy.” The newspaper continued, “He has been too ingratiating to his hosts—such as his cringe-making talk about the UK approaching India with humility. The not so subtle implication is that post-colonial Britain is in desperate need of help.”

To ascribe Cameron’s remarks to “immaturity” or excessive “neediness” misses the broader picture. Cameron had previously spoken of the need to develop a more “realistic” appraisal of the UK’s national interests in a changing global environment.

Noting that British sales to the so-called “Bric” countries—Brazil, Russia, India and China—total less than its exports to Ireland, he has argued that Britain cannot simply rely on past historical ties if it is to continue to “punch above its weight” globally.

This is especially the case under conditions where the global economic crisis has profoundly impacted the interests of British capital. After two decades of paeans to the “free market,” the British government was forced to nationalise a large part of the banking system in order to prop up the City of London. Having “socialised” the debts of Britain’s wealthy, the government is now imposing major austerity measures, including cuts of up to 25 percent in public spending.

The influential Chatham House (Royal Institute of International Affairs) is just one of a number of think tanks involved in trying to evaluate the long-term consequences. Its briefing paper, “Rethinking the UK’s International Ambitions and Choices,” makes clear the concerns of the British bourgeoisie.

The rise of economies such as India and China, “growing competition for natural resources,” the “perceived flaws of the Anglo-Saxon economic model,” the UK’s cuts in public spending—possibly including defence—coupled with the danger of rising global protectionism have all placed Britain’s “global role” under “serious pressure,” the document states. In response, the UK must champion global free trade and drum up international investment.

Cameron’s visit to India was billed as the largest trade mission there since the days of the British Raj. Accompanied by a 67-strong delegation, including government ministers and FTSE 100 chief executives—numbering Barclays Bank, BAE Systems, Rolls Royce and Standard Chartered—the delegation called for the opening up of India’s financial and retail sector to global competition and agreed to establish an India-UK CEOs’ Forum and India-UK Infrastructure Group to promote business links.

But the issue is not one of trade alone. As the Chatham House briefing paper notes, “Given the great benefits that the UK derives

from stable and open global markets ... the capacity to project military capabilities far from its shores will remain a vital insurance policy for the country.”

It is this “insurance policy”—particularly as it relates to Afghanistan, Iran and Britain’s wider geo-political ambitions in Asia—that were central to Cameron’s tour.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Simon Tisdall commented, “Clues as to what lies behind Cameron’s ... candour may be found in his discussions with Barack Obama in Washington” prior to his trip. “[T]he so-say British positions” he had “vigorously espoused” in Ankara and Bangalore are mostly America’s, too, Tisdall noted, and he asked whether “Obama saw him coming, wound him up, and sent him off to spread the word, much in way George Bush used [Tony] Blair.”

Whatever the specifics of Obama and Cameron’s talks, the British prime minister didn’t need “winding up.” On crucial issues of foreign policy, London and Washington’s interests are the same.

Cameron’s attack on Islamabad was, in part, aimed at diverting from evidence of widespread atrocities by the occupying forces in Afghanistan—revealed in US army battlefield reports published by WikiLeaks—by shifting the focus to allegations in the documents of Pakistani support for the Taliban.

More broadly, they marked a stepping up of demands led by Washington for Pakistan to intensify its clampdown on Taliban-aligned groups in the country’s Pashtun-speaking border regions with Afghanistan, so as to stabilise the pro-US regime in Kabul. In so doing, Cameron also underscored Britain’s support for US efforts to cultivate India as a counterweight to Chinese influence in the region.

To this end, in 2008 the Obama administration agreed the Indo-US nuclear accord, under which India is allowed to purchase nuclear fuel and advanced civilian nuclear technology, despite it having developed nuclear weapons in defiance of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Having been refused a similar deal, Pakistan had subsequently agreed that China could build two new nuclear reactors in the Punjab region, sparking US objections.

Significantly, during Cameron’s visit it was announced that Britain is to supply civil nuclear technology and expertise to India. In another major deal, Britain’s BAE Systems agreed a \$1 billion contract with India’s Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL) for the licensed production of 57 military jets.

According to reports, Cameron also pressed the Indian government to be “more vocal” in supporting United Nations sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programme.

In July, India’s foreign minister visited Tehran to discuss possible involvement in a pipeline project that would supply Iranian gas to Pakistan and India. Washington has opposed the project.

The *Financial Times* cited one unnamed British official querying ominously, “What good are energy projects and pipelines if Iran is in flames?”

As for Turkey, Britain has long supported Ankara’s inclusion in the EU as a means of diluting the influence of Berlin and Paris. But an additional impulse for Cameron’s declaration of solidarity

is the efforts of the major powers to isolate and weaken Iran.

In May, the Obama administration instigated new sanctions against Iran by the UN Security Council. The resolution—which torpedoed a deal brokered by Brazil and Turkey to revive plans for Iran to exchange low-enriched uranium for fuel rods for its research reactor in Tehran—was regarded by both countries as a humiliating slap in the face. Israel’s attack on the Mavi Marmara later that month further soured relations.

Cameron’s statements in Ankara were aimed at bringing Turkey back onside, so as to use its influence in the Middle East as a go-between in forging an international coalition against Tehran. His veiled attack on Germany and France mirrored the recent complaint by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates that Turkey may have been “pushed by some in Europe” away from the West and into closer partnerships with countries like Iran and Syria.

The confrontation between the imperialist powers and Iran is escalating. Last month the EU, Canada and Australia imposed hefty new sanctions on Tehran—including a ban on investment in its oil and gas sector. At the weekend, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that while diplomatic efforts to pressure Iran were ongoing “the military options have been on the table, and remain on the table.”

Efforts to incorporate Turkey into the moves against Iran also account for Cameron’s comments on Gaza.

Interviewed in the *Jerusalem Post*, Britain’s ambassador to Israel, Tom Phillips, said that Israel’s blockade of the Gaza strip was “unsustainable, very difficult ... and counterproductive.” Not only had the blockade “severely undermined” the “legal economy” in Gaza, he said, strengthening Hamas, it had created a “popular mood” in Britain and elsewhere against Israel.

This now needed to be addressed, especially as “finding a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian debate would help Western interests in the region.”

Cameron was careful not to suggest that Israel should be held to account for its massacre on the Mavi Mamara, much less its actions in Gaza. His was an appeal for a change in tactics by Tel Aviv so as to facilitate a rapprochement with Turkey, and the Arab countries in general.

Turkish/Israeli relations “are of incalculable value” for the Middle East, he said. “No other country has the same potential to build understanding between Israel and the Arab world.”



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