

Tillerson delivers stern warning to Pakistan

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US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Pakistan on Tuesday, the first high-level visit by a Trump administration official to what was once the principal US ally in South Asia.

Tillerson delivered a stern message to Pakistan's political and military leaders reiterating the sharp criticism meted out to Islamabad by President Donald Trump in his August announcement of the new US strategy for prevailing in its 16 year-long war in Afghanistan. In that speech, Trump placed Pakistan "on notice" for harbouring terrorist "safe havens" and warned that if it did not bow to US demands and quickly mend its ways Washington would downgrade relations with Islamabad and otherwise take reprisals.

Tillerson's visit to Islamabad was part of a South Asia tour that saw him also meet with Afghan and Indian leaders. He had two principal objectives. The first to implement the new Afghan war strategy, which aims to gore the Taliban into accepting a Washington-designed "negotiated settlement" that would leave the basic elements of the US-installed neo-colonial regime in Kabul intact.

Tillerson's second main objective was to further cement the Indo-US military-strategic alliance. This, as he made clear in a speech last week to the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), is directed at forcing China, if need be through war, to accept US-hegemony over the Indo-Pacific region. (See: Tillerson calls for "dramatic deepening" of Indo-US alliance.) A key element in Washington's frustration with Pakistan is that it has responded to the burgeoning Indo-US partnership by expanding its own alliance with Beijing.

In Islamabad, Tillerson told interim Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi that Pakistan is "so important regionally to our joint goals of providing peace and security to the region." Abbasi replied by saying, "The US can rest assured that we are strategic partners in the war against terror and that today Pakistan is fighting the largest war in the world against terror."

In touting the unending military occupation of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Abbasi was implicitly rejecting Washington's accusations that Pakistan is maintaining covert ties to the Taliban and "selectively" targeting Islamist militias.

According to a statement from the US embassy in Islamabad, in his talks with Pakistan's principal political and military leaders, Tillerson demanded Pakistan "increase its efforts to

eradicate militants and terrorists operating within the country."

Testifying before the Pakistan Senate the following day on the talks with Tillerson, Pakistan Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif said that "things which due to diplomatic norms couldn't be said were discussed during these talks."

Asif said the US was seeking to blame Islamabad for the spread of Taliban control over much of Afghanistan, but the Pakistani leadership had told him, "There will only be room for improvement [in the Afghan situation] if Washington accepts their defeat, their failures in Afghanistan." This, he said, "they are not ready to accept."

Asif told the Senate that the civilian and military Pakistani leadership is united in affirming that there is no military solution to the Afghan conflict and that a political settlement is required, adding "The current government will not accept any dictation from the US."

He said Pakistan had informed Tillerson that its influence on the Taliban is diminished and had urged Washington to work with other "influential players in the region" whose role is "indispensable" in creating a broad-based government and ending the war, including China, Turkey and Russia.

Pakistan's venal ruling elite has relied heavily on Washington for military, economic and political support and would like nothing more than to resume its traditional role as satraps for American imperialism. But it has been rattled by Washington's strategic embrace of its arch-rival India and the readiness of the US to shrug off its warnings that the arms deals and other strategic favours America has lavished on New Delhi have overturned the regional balance of power, fuelling a nuclear-arms race.

In response, Islamabad has scaled back its cooperation with the US in the Afghan War, including rescinding a carte blanche for drone strikes in FATA, and by reaching out to Beijing for closer ties.

China, likewise fearful of the Indo-US alliance, has reciprocated.

To prod Pakistan into doing its bidding and underline that Washington is determined to change the rules of the game in its dealings with Islamabad, Trump announced in his August speech that the US will press India to take a larger role in supporting the Afghan government—through economic assistance, military supplies, and by training Afghan security forces, albeit, at least for the moment, only in India.

This has outraged Pakistan, which accuses India of using Afghanistan to provide covert support to Islamist militia opposed to the Pakistan government, the so-called Pakistan Taliban, and to Baluchi national-separatist insurgents. The Pakistani leadership reiterated to Tillerson Tuesday that increased Indian involvement in Afghanistan constitutes a “red line.”

But, as Tillerson made clear during his subsequent visit to New Delhi, Washington remains determined to use India to goad Pakistan.

Abbasi was joined in his talks with Tillerson by Foreign Minister Asif, the head of the army General Qamar Javed Bajwa, and the head of Pakistan’s premier intelligence agency, the ISI, Lt. Gen. Naveed Mukhtar. The latter said the delegation had been organized so as to show “the leadership is united in the message it is sending.”

Underscoring the frosty character of US-Pakistani relations, Tillerson spent just 4 hours in the country before departing for a visit to India that was spread over three days.

As Pakistani officials noted, the logistics of Tillerson’s preceding, previously unannounced, trip to Afghanistan shed light on the severe crisis facing the US occupation. The US Secretary of State didn’t take the risk of visiting Kabul. Instead, he summoned the heads of the puppet government in Kabul, President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, to meet him at the infamous Bagram military base. A crude attempt by the Afghan government to claim the meeting was held in Kabul, not a US military bunker, by doctoring a press photograph, was quickly exposed.

While in Afghanistan, Tillerson sharply criticized Pakistan. He said the US has “made some very specific requests [to] Pakistan in order for them to take action to undermine the support that the Taliban receives and the other terrorist organisations receive in Pakistan.” The former Exxon CEO then made clear these requests have a sting attached, saying the new US war strategy “is a conditions-based approach, and so our relationship with Pakistan will also be conditions-based.”

The US is already partially withholding “war coalition” payments from Pakistan to bully it into taking more aggressive action against the Taliban, specifically the Haqqani Network. There are also unofficial threats to strip Islamabad of its status as a “major non-NATO ally” of the US and even label it a state sponsor of terrorism, which would almost certainly entail sanctioning at least some government and/or military leaders.

Recently the two-countries collaborated in a rescue operation in Pakistan that freed a US-Canadian family taken hostage by the Haqqani Network in Afghanistan in 2012. The US followed this up with a series of deadly drone attacks in the Afghan-Pakistan border region, prompting nervous warnings from Islamabad that the US should not attack its territory. There is massive opposition in Pakistan to US drone strikes, which for years terrorized and wrought death and destruction on FATA villagers.

Washington, however, has reiterated its threats to use drones to target Taliban and Haqqani Network forces inside Pakistan if Islamabad fails to deploy its military against them.

At the same time, tensions between Kabul and Islamabad are rising, including as the result of reciprocal bans on the entry of trucks from the other country. Kabul, which does not recognize the Durand Line as its border with Pakistan, has taken violent objection to Islamabad’s fencing of the border. Above all, Kabul is rhyming with New Delhi in charges that Islamabad is a “state sponsor of terrorism.”

In a new blow aimed at Islamabad, Afghan President Ghani announced this week that his country will not participate in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) unless Pakistan opens its borders for trade between India and Afghanistan. This dovetails with Washington’s own newly-articulated opposition to China’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR) infrastructure initiative, of which the CPEC is part.

In recent weeks, Washington has publicly opposed the CPEC, citing the same pretext as New Delhi: that it crosses territory disputed between India and Pakistan.

Emboldened by US strategic support, India, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP, has increased military and diplomatic pressure on Pakistan, including labelling it the “mothership” of international terrorism. In fall 2016, Modi publicly boasted about “surgical strikes”—Special Forces raids—inside Pakistan, declaring that the days of Indian “strategic restraint” were over. This precipitated a months-long war crisis. To this day, Indian and Pakistan troops routinely exchange deadly artillery barrages across the Line of Control that separates Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir.

Were war to erupt it would be the first ever war between nuclear-armed states and, given the increasing polarization of regional geopolitics into rival India-US and Pakistan-China blocs, would immediately raise the prospect of intervention by other nuclear powers.



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