

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2668
October 29, 2009

Secretary Clinton's Visit to Pakistan: Into the Crucible

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U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Pakistan comes as the country faces a wave of terrorist attacks and a surge in anti-American sentiment fueled by sensitive language contained in recently enacted U.S. aid legislation for Pakistan. In the wake of a major bombing that killed over 100 in the northwest city of Peshawar on the day of her arrival, Clinton sought to convey a message of support for Pakistan as it battles extremists while also signaling that U.S. interests in the country stretch beyond the fight against terrorism.

While Clinton's visit could help calm some of the current tensions in the U.S.–Pakistan relationship, it must be followed by concrete and consistent U.S. aid programs that are visible to average Pakistanis and directly address the myriad socio-economic challenges Pakistanis face. Building a successful long-term U.S.–Pakistan partnership also requires the U.S. to demonstrate that it will remain committed to stabilizing Afghanistan and preventing the country from being engulfed by violent Islamist extremists that would then project influence into Pakistan.

Rebuking Terrorism. Clinton delivered a forceful message against the Peshawar attackers, calling them cowards and challenging them to test their ideology within the Pakistani democratic process. She further asserted that “they know they are on the losing side of history... But they are determined to take as many lives with them as their movement is finally exposed for the nihilistic, empty effort it is.” Surprisingly, the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani Tali-

ban, and al-Qaeda later denied involvement in the Peshawar attack, claiming their groups do not explode bombs in bazaars and mosques and blaming “elements who want to defame Jihad and refugees.” They likely calculated that the massive bombing, which killed mainly women and children, could backfire on them and their support base in Pakistan.

Secretary Clinton also addressed head-on Pakistani ambivalence toward addressing the challenge from terrorism. During a raucous exchange at a university in Lahore, Clinton said Pakistan had no choice but to take on the terrorists militarily. “If you want to see your territory shrink, that is your choice,” she chided.

In a more subtle admonition of Islamist extremism, Clinton visited a Sufi shrine in Islamabad, where a suicide bomber had struck in 2005. Her visit is symbolically important because most Pakistanis adhere to the Barelvi school of Islamic thought, which draws from Sufi traditions of religious tolerance and encouragement of a deeply spiritual form of Islam. Clinton's visit is a reminder that the extremists conducting attacks are seeking to impose a way of life on Pakistani citizens that is

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm2668.gfm

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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alien to their own traditions of Islam and aspirations toward constitutional democracy.

Calling the terrorists “destroyers, not builders,” Clinton also unveiled a \$125 million energy aid package to rebuild Pakistan’s electricity production capacity. She further committed the U.S. to reviving a moribund strategic dialogue started under the Bush Administration.

Give and Take. Clinton has attempted to address the seeds of Pakistani distrust of America while at the same time asserting American foreign policy goals and interests. “This is a two-way street,” she declared, before noting that “if we are going to have a mature partnership, where we work together, then there are issues that not just the United States but others have with your government and with your military security establishment.” She was likely referring to reports about continued aid from Pakistani intelligence agencies to the Afghan Taliban, an issue raised in General McChrystal’s assessment on Afghanistan.

Clinton won high marks in Pakistan a few months ago when she affirmed during congressional testimony that the U.S. had treated Pakistan poorly in the past. This statement apparently met a deep need among Pakistanis for the U.S. to acknowledge that it had made mistakes in its past policies toward the region.

Follow Through: The Key to a Successful Partnership. Clinton’s visit was a positive first step toward breaking down the mutual suspicion and misunderstanding that has increasingly characterized U.S.–Pakistan ties. Although the leadership in both countries understands the importance of continued cooperation, divergent perceptions about the

causes of terrorism in the region have contributed to these increased tensions.

It will take time and patience to drain the deep reservoirs of Pakistani anger and resentment toward the U.S. and to change a tendency among Pakistanis to blame U.S. policies for the terrorist backlash in the country. Specifically:

- The Obama Administration will need to follow up Clinton’s promises of broad strategic engagement and commitment to Pakistani prosperity with concrete and consistent aid programs that touch the lives of average Pakistanis and minimize losses to corruption; and
- Even more important to establishing a successful U.S.–Pakistan partnership will be whether America commits to stabilizing Afghanistan.

One Pakistani audience member asked Secretary Clinton directly if the U.S. would abandon Afghanistan again like it did after the Russians left the country in 1989. It is unfortunate that the ongoing White House debate on U.S. strategy in Afghanistan has reinforced doubts about U.S. commitment to this crucial region and forced some of America’s partners to consider hedging their bets.

If President Obama truly wants to see Pakistan succeed as a prosperous and democratic nation free of terrorism and extremism, he must clarify U.S. commitment to the region by giving his military commanders in Afghanistan the troops and resources necessary to implement the comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy he laid out on March 27.

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