

# ISAS Brief

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## Hillary Clinton's Visit to Pakistan: An Exercise in Trust Deficit Reduction

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### Abstract

The United States' Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, paid a recent three-day visit to Pakistan at a time when terrorism perpetrated by the Taliban-Al-Qaeda forces was wrecking havoc in the country. The United States and Pakistan are allies in the fight against the terrorists, but between themselves, they suffer a trust deficit. This paper examines the nature of the trust deficit and its implications for the fight against terrorism.

### Introduction

The three-day visit by the United States' Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, to Pakistan from 28 to 30 October 2009 took place during a very critical juncture in Pakistan. During this period, the Taliban-Al-Qaeda forces sharply accelerated their terrorist campaign against Pakistan, while within the Pakistani political circles and sections of the power elite, serious doubts were expressed about the United States' commitment to Pakistan's security and sovereignty. At the same time, the Americans continue to be sceptical about Pakistan's approach to the Taliban-Al-Qaeda nexus.

### Intensity of Terrorist Attacks

It is to be noted that although the Taliban had been relentlessly carrying out select and indiscriminate terrorist attacks in Pakistan since 2005, the level and intensity of those outrages have been increasing every year since then. The year 2009 may, thus, turn out to be the worst, of which the month of October could be the bloodiest, as more than 300 fatalities took place during a short period of only 31 days.

The frequency of the attacks this year has increased in proportion to the success of Pakistan military's operations against the Taliban which started from May 2009 onwards, when the first determined offensive was launched in Taliban-occupied Swat. The dramatic upsurge in the attacks in October 2009 occurred before Operation *Rah-e-Nijat* (Path to Deliverance) was set

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in motion on 17 October 2009 to defeat and dislodge the *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* from its strongholds in South Waziristan.

On the day Mrs Clinton arrived (28 October 2009), the deadliest bomb blast of the month took place in Peshawar. It claimed 118 lives, including those of many women and children. More than 500 people were injured. The bomb had been placed in a car in one of the busiest localities, the Meena Bazaar, a women-only shopping area. However, the Taliban leader, Hakeemullah Mehsud, and his deputy, Qari Hussain, notorious for specialising in training suicide bombers, denied that they were behind the outrage. They asserted that their targets were never women and children, but the United States and its lackey, the Pakistani government.

Mehsud and Hussain instead blamed Blackwater Worldwide, a private American security firm, for masterminding the bomb blast in the capital of the North-West Frontier Province. It is to be noted that Blackwater Worldwide has lately established itself in Pakistan in a big way, apparently to protect United States diplomats and other officials serving in Pakistan and those who are likely to arrive later, to constitute the bureaucracy that will supervise the implementation of the Kerry-Lugar economic and military aid package.

The Kerry-Lugar Bill commits the United States to provide US\$7.5 billion of economic and military aid to Pakistan over the next few years, while simultaneously imposing an elaborate monitoring mechanism to keep track of funds and the efficacy of various inputs in the struggle against the Taliban-Al-Qaeda duo. A huge ruckus was created by the right-wing Pakistani media, populist intellectuals and Islamists when the Bill was passed by the United States Congress. It was alleged that the Kerry-Lugar Bill was a sinister plot to step-by-step gain economic, political and military control over Pakistan. One of the main authors of the Bill, Senator John Kerry, as well as United States President Barack Obama's special adviser on Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, visited Pakistan to allay Pakistani concerns about the Bill (*The Daily Times*, 20 October 2009). Both of them asserted that the Bill, in no way, imposes preconditions or compromises Pakistani sovereignty.

### **Conspiracy Theories Abound**

In any event, the proliferation of the Blackwater Security personnel's activities in Pakistan fits in very well with the conspiracy theory about a United States' bid to usurp Pakistan's sovereignty. What credence such theories merit is always an open question. There is a widespread feeling in Pakistan, even among those who are not rabid anti-Americans, that the United States is a fair weather friend. In any case, contemporary Pakistan is fertile soil for real and imagined conspiracies. However, from a political and security point of view, the chasm between the United States' and Pakistan's perceptions about each other's intentions and objectives is a matter of great bafflement because it lays bare a very intriguing and worrying reality – that the actors who are formally allied to each other and are involved in fighting terrorism do not have mutual trust and confidence in each other. No doubt, a lack of an agreed strategy and concomitant coordination and prioritisation of tasks is apparent the way the two sides have been conducting the military campaign against a declared common enemy.

To illustrate this, an author and analyst of Pakistan, Shuja Nawaz, who heads the South Asian section of the Atlantic Council in Washington D. C., deplored in a recent article that the Americans were not providing required weaponry to Pakistan to fight the Taliban in rugged

and difficult territory as Waziristan (*Foreign Policy*, 20 October 2009). Moreover, according to other Pakistan sources, when the military launched Operation *Rah-e-Nijat* and entered South Waziristan, instead of sealing all entry and exit routes into Waziristan, the Americans did just the opposite in that they removed scores of security check posts on the Afghanistan side of the Pak-Afghan border (*The Daily Times*, 20 October 2009).

Such a decision allegedly helped the Taliban infiltrate from Afghanistan into South Waziristan as well as escape from there into Afghanistan. The Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, took up this issue with the top United States commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley A. McChrystal, urging him to seal the border. It is not clear what General McChrystal said in return. Moreover, the American Congress passed a special Bill that requires “efforts to track where United States military hardware sent to Pakistan ends up, as well as a warning that the aid must not upset ‘the balance of power in the region, – a reference to tensions between Pakistan and India’ (*The Daily Times*, 24 October 2009). President Obama has put his signature to the Bill and now it is a law.

On the other hand, the Americans have been expressing concern and criticism of Pakistani behaviour. They allege that Pakistan is restricting its military operation only to South Waziristan, where the Pakistani Taliban are entrenched and perceived by Pakistan as a threat to its security and existence.<sup>2</sup> However, Pakistan has shown no inclination to go after the Taliban in North Waziristan or in the capital of Baluchistan, Quetta, where, according to the United States, the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda leadership are hiding.

### **Significance of Mrs Clinton’s Visit**

Considered in light of these perplexing and confusing behaviour patterns of two supposedly close allies – the United States and Pakistan – Mrs Clinton’s visit was of utmost importance to gauge the state of the United States-Pakistan relationship at present. Just before she left Washington D. C., the correspondent of Pakistan’s leading newspaper, *The Dawn*, interviewed her. When asked to comment if it was fair on the part of the United States to demand a Pakistani military unit to use certain a weapon on the Afghan border and leave it behind when the unit is transferred to another place, she responded by saying that, ‘A lot of military equipment is ‘fungible’ and mobile and can be used in different places’ (*The Dawn*, 28 October 2009). Pakistan interpreted this as a move to accommodate Indian concerns about Pakistan acquiring modern weapons.

Consequently, when Mrs Clinton addressed Pakistan’s newspaper editors in Lahore on 29 October 2009 and asserted that the leadership of Al-Qaeda was hiding in Pakistan, it greatly disturbed many Pakistanis but she insisted that her accusations were based on the information she had at her disposal. She remarked that, “I find it hard to believe that nobody in your government knows where they are and couldn’t get them if they really wanted to. Maybe that’s the case; maybe they’re not gettable. I don’t know...As far as we know, they are in Pakistan” (*The Daily Times*, 30 October 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> The Taliban were Islamists who came to power in Afghanistan in 1996, but fell from power when the United States launched a military campaign against them in October 2001 in retaliation to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. They dispersed and hid on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Those belonging to the Pakistani side of the border later embarked on military confrontation with the Pakistani state and came to be known as the Pakistani Taliban represented by the *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* while those who fight the United States-North Atlantic Treaty Organization-Afghan government forces are known as the Afghan Taliban.

Now, in terms of diplomatic praxis, it was perhaps too blunt an accusation to be made publicly by a visiting high-ranking diplomat of a country allied to a host country in an ongoing major violent conflict. However, Mrs Clinton only expressed an opinion that had for quite some time been ventilated by United States think-tanks and State Department functionaries. I received similar views from several United States analysts during my visit to Washington D. C. in July 2009.

However, the overall thrust of Mrs Clinton's interactions with the public as well as the government and military was that fighting terrorism and defeating the Taliban-Al-Qaeda forces were in the best interest of Pakistan; that the United States would fight terrorism side by side with Pakistan; and, therefore, there was no reasonable ground to suspect bad faith from her country. She particularly committed to American assistance in bolstering Pakistan's counter-insurgency capabilities.

Mrs Clinton went on to propose a set of practical measures to improve Pakistan's fiscal and economic performance, urging Pakistan to expand its tax base and to modernise the taxation system. She also announced funding for several educational and developmental projects, including help in solving Pakistan's serious problem with energy shortage. The regular load-shed brings production to a standstill and causes great discomfort to citizens, especially during the summer. The bottomline of her message to the Pakistani power elite was that both sides will engage in a serious strategic dialogue.

She also urged a resumption of the India-Pakistan dialogue which has remained more or less suspended after the Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008. India is now a strategic partner of the United States and, following the nuclear deal that was agreed between them in 2009, it enjoys a special relationship with the latter. The Obama presidency is viewed with some anxiety in India but both President Obama and Mrs Clinton have assured the Indians that the United States would not interfere in the relationship between the two South Asian rivals and both must resolve their disputes through bilateral negotiations.

It is too early to say if her visit helped reduce the trust deficit which exists between Pakistan and the United States, but there cannot be any doubt that the Taliban-Al-Qaeda forces will not be defeated if they pursue secretive nationalist agendas against a common enemy, which is truly regional and global. Both Pakistan and the United States are interdependent though it cannot be denied that, because of the United States' status as a superpower and its long and intimate involvement with Pakistan, it obviously enjoys the upper hand.

## **Conclusion**

A careful scrutiny of the events in the last one or two years suggests that the United States has been able to persuade Pakistan to assume an active role in combating terrorism. Indeed, Pakistan's own experience of dealing with the Taliban has played a major role in changing the attitude of the Pakistani military but the United States pressure has been an important factor in strengthening Pakistan's resolve to take on the Taliban. One can imagine that the most important objective of the United States in Afghanistan and Pakistan is to capture or kill the leadership of Al-Qaeda as the organisation is believed to be promoting terrorism worldwide. As far as the United States' position on the Taliban is concerned, there is some confusion as to whether it wants to eliminate its leadership and destroy its networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The United States' policy will become clearer once a legitimate government comes to power in Afghanistan. If the Americans decide to dispatch a large

contingent of troops as requested by the United States military commanders in Afghanistan, then, most probably, the objectives could be beyond the destruction of Al-Qaeda.

At present, the situation remains highly equivocal and that generates anxiety and fear in all sides fighting the Taliban-Al-Qaeda forces. Within Pakistan, although public opinion has increasingly turned against them, within the state and society they continue to enjoy the sympathy of Wahabi and Deobandi Muslims. That too needs to be changed but all such developments will take some time. Right now, the struggle for Pakistan's survival remains a paramount concern.

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*The Daily Times*, Lahore, Pakistan.