

Clinton challenges British geopolitics in Asia

by Jeffrey Steinberg

The Clinton administration has launched a new foreign policy offensive, once again, challenging decades of British geopolitical maneuverings in some of the world's most dangerous hot-spots. As is often the case with this administration, the President has taken a personal role in the most critical new initiatives, and deployed some of his closest and most trusted advisers on preparatory missions in other areas of the globe.

Below, Ramtanu and Susan Maitra provide a report on United Nations Ambassador Bill Richardson's visit to India, in preparation for President Clinton's September 1998 state visit to several South Asia countries. But Richardson's diplomacy extended beyond the India-Pakistan theater. On April 17, he travelled to Afghanistan, where he met with leaders of the Taliban in Kabul, before visiting the north of the country to confer with leaders of the three opposition political-military factions. Richardson was the first American cabinet-level official to visit the country since 1974, and the significance of the Clinton administration's willingness to put its diplomatic status on the line was not missed. Richardson extracted an agreement from all four parties to hold talks in Islamabad, Pakistan on April 27, to work out a cease-fire and prisoner exchange. Formal talks will be supervised by the United Nations and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The Japanese government, at U.S. urging, has agreed to sponsor talks on the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan, a vital factor in any meaningful peace process.

U.S.-Iranian relations

At least one of the three anti-Taliban factions in Afghanistan is closely allied with Iran, and their cooperation in the peace initiative is the latest indication that U.S. cooperation with Iran's new government is moving forward. In fact, two days before Ambassador Richardson showed up in Kabul, Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), the former chairman of the

House Foreign Affairs Committee, delivered a speech before the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, in which he called for a normalization of U.S.-Iranian relations. "There is a new situation in Iran, and I think we ought to take advantage of it," he said. Hamilton called for an official U.S. dialogue with Iran, the end of covert U.S. efforts to overthrow the Tehran government, and dropping economic sanctions against firms trading with it. He dismissed the current policy of containment toward Iran, as "a policy that for 20 years has not worked."

The next day, former U.S. Undersecretary of State for Near East Affairs Robert Pelletreau, who served in the first Clinton administration, commented on Hamilton's speech, in an interview with the *Washington Times*. "Lee Hamilton's statement was the clearest that has yet emerged of the U.S. pursuing a policy of dialogue and engagement with Iran." Pelletreau said that Hamilton's speech "will accelerate the process of reconsidering U.S. policy in the administration and in the Congress."

Other initiatives

Among the other global crisis points where the Clinton administration has renewed or expanded its policy presence are Africa and Southeast Asia. President Clinton's recently concluded historic 11-day visit to five African countries is to be followed, later this year, by a visit from Secretary of the Treasury Robert Rubin, a trusted collaborator. The President's late-June trip to China is a focal point of foreign policy activity, with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright scheduled to visit Beijing at the beginning of May. More than 1,200 Americans, mostly government officials and businessmen, will be travelling to China with the President and Secretary Rubin, in what is expected to be a major advance in United States-China economic cooperation.