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## Taliban: 60 Miles from Islamabad

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US Foreign Policy: in Outer Space by Ru Freeman Yesterday's NYT editorial expresses, yet again, the concern within America's corridors of power regarding the threat of the Taliban's imminent advance upon Islamabad and its intention to take over a nation which isn't simply trying to acquire nuclear energy for peaceful endeavors (as Iran claims), but actually possesses nuclear weapons. The article repeats Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton's concern that Pakistan was "abdicating to the Taliban," and that the U.S. has been wrong in their policy of assuming that General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani was in control of the situation.

The distress within the American camp is understandable. As the NYT puts it, "like Pakistan, Washington cannot afford to waste any more time figuring out the way forward - not with the Taliban 60 miles from Islamabad." Under the Taliban, as confirmed by the new wave of fundamentalist reform sweeping the Swat Valley which was conceded to them, terror reigns supreme and much of it is against women and the twin pursuits of learning and the expression of joy. America's concerns are that the Taliban is gaining not merely in strength but in the land mass available to it from which its forces can and will "launch attacks on American and NATO forces in Afghanistan." All this is true. What is less true is the assertion that Pakistani brass and civilian government officials do not know what they are doing or are a few peas short of a full pod. The arrogant assumption that it is only Washingtonians who know how the world should turn, apparently caught the flight from the Bush Administration to the Obama administration during that glittering inauguration. For starters, how many pundits within the State Department speak Urdu? Next, how many understand the culture within Pakistan? How many believe that the only "fix" necessary is an infusion of cash - being debated right now in Congress - and poorly thought out press releases from the rank and file of Senate committees and sub-committees? Does South Asia or any other region, or indeed, our intimately intertwined world, have any issue that can be treated in isolation, or is it not true that there should be not merely "an integrated strategy for dealing with both Afghanistan and Pakistan" but one that deals with the whole of South Asia? I say all this because right around the corner from Pakistan, another battle is raging between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the mother of modern terrorism. Under the LTTE, thousands of Tamil people in whose name they ostensibly took up arms, have been forced to give up their children and women to be trained as child soldiers and suicide bombers respectively. They have lived in deprivation, cut off from the rest of the country where a multi-ethnic, multi-religious ecumenical society has and continues to thrive in peace. The Sri Lankan military spent a year picking its careful way through the Eastern Province, once LTTE territory, now liberated, cleared of mines, its refugees resettled and engaging in traditional industry and full participants in the political process. It is now doing the same in the North. As of today, a single stretch, 4 square kilometers in size, remains under LTTE control. A unilateral ceasefire by the Sri Lankan government two weeks ago yielded but a trickle of civilians who were, instead of being allowed to leave, forced at LTTE gunpoint to reinforce its bunkers. At the end of the ceasefire and with the breach of LTTE positions, satellite imagery shows the civilians streaming in columns toward the government run safety zone. In a few days, Sri Lanka, which has been crippled by the terrorism of the LTTE and Sri Lankans of all ethnicities who have lost innumerable lives at their hands, could be free at last of that menace. The world could be a better place. So, why does the United States continue to speak with a forked tongue? On the one hand, it is concerned about the "fragile democracy" in Pakistan, and urges the Pakistani government to engage in an all-out assault on the Taliban. On the other, it demands that the robust democracy within Sri Lanka should submit itself to further assault by its own and, by the FBI's own definition, equally ruthless and as proscribed, terrorist organization by declaring another ceasefire and amnesty for the LTTE? Does this not seem both misguided and supremely stupid? And as if that in itself were not sufficient, in a NYT article yesterday by Thomas Fuller (&#160;'From Sandy Strip in Sri Lanka, Tales of Suffering,' 4/25/09) the first relatively responsible piece of reporting on Sri Lanka to come from the mainstream media in recent times, there is no mention of the United States or the United Nations offering assistance to first, aid the local medical personnel to care for the influx of refugees, or second, assist the government in its tactical strikes against the terrorists who have, thus far, refused to surrender. What we get, instead, is the ongoing cry that the Sri Lankan government grants more visas to foreign doctors. Even the physicians interviewed for the piece are foreign. This, even though Sri Lanka has a thriving free public health care system with highly trained medical professionals, a large number of whom are now involved in providing care to the stricken in the North and almost all of whom speak English and have access to telephones! It is a cry echoed by the Clinton State Department even though its parent organization, the Obama Administration, has since of late, clamped down on visas to foreign nationals seeking employment here, including those foreign nationals who are students in American universities at the present time! The golden rule for writers, "show, don't tell," applies to foreign policy as well. If President Obama wishes to have a coherent foreign policy, he should not make the mistakes of his predecessors of having good terrorists and bad terrorists. There should be no concessions made to terrorists and every concession made to civilians and to democratically elected representatives of those civilian populations. In other words, if he wants to be taken seriously in Pakistan, he needs to do more than pronounce its name correctly; he needs to invest in personnel who understand the country and its multi-layered tribal loyalties so that he can comprehend the thinking that goes into Pakistan's domestic policy viz-a-viz the Taliban. If he wants to engage Afghanistan, he needs to secure the faith and respect of his allies by reciprocating with faith and respect, and the strongest of those allies in the region, at present, is Sri Lanka. It is too bad that the only statement of reason came from none other than The Washington Times in a Sunday editorial, (&#160;'Tigers At Bay' 4/26/09), but it is perhaps just another wake-up call to our new President. If he treats his friends as foes, particularly in a climate when the might of Asia is rising - and Japan, China and India are strong supporters of the Sri Lankan government - then they may well decide that they should go ahead and deserve the label. The world may still love Obama, but there is a very thin line between love and hate. Ru Freeman is an author and activist. Her political journalism and cultural criticism has appeared

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internationally. Her novel, A Disobedient Girl, will be published in English and in translation in July, 2009. Courtesy: [commondreams.org](http://commondreams.org)