

# US declares India a “lynchpin” in its Asian strategy

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During his visit to India last week, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta called for a further deepening of military and strategic ties between the two countries. The US and India have been developing a close strategic partnership for more than a decade.

As Panetta explained in a speech to the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), US ties with India take on special importance as part of the Obama administration’s “rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific region”—a strategy that is aimed at encircling China and undercutting its influence throughout the region.

“In particular, we will expand our partnerships and our presence in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia,” Panetta said. “Defence cooperation with India is a lynchpin in this strategy.”

Panetta visited India after attending the Shangri-la security conference in Singapore, where he announced that the US intends to place the majority of its naval forces in the Asia-Pacific region over next decade. The build up, along with stronger ties with regional allies, will inevitably heighten tensions with China.

The heightened naval presence is aimed at ensuring US domination of key shipping routes that China depends on to transport energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa. The US regards India’s growing naval power as an important factor in preventing China from expanding its strategic influence in the Indian Ocean.

In his talks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Panetta “underscored the link India plays

between East and West Asia and how the United States views India as a net provider of security from the Indian Ocean to Afghanistan and beyond.”

Panetta also met with Defence Minister A. K. Antony and National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon to discuss further increasing collaboration between the military forces of the two countries. In the past year, more than 50 joint defence exercises and other events have been held. Cumulative Indian purchases of US military hardware has increased from virtually zero a decade ago to \$US8.5 billion. Intelligence sharing has also increased.

The US defence secretary encouraged India to play a more prominent role in Afghanistan after the formal withdrawal of US and NATO combat forces by the end of 2014. While praising India’s assistance for Kabul so far, he urged additional support, “through trade and investment, reconstruction and help for Afghanistan’s security forces.”

The growing Indian presence in Afghanistan is already antagonising regional rival Pakistan, which regards Afghanistan as essential for its own security. As Washington’s relations with Pakistan have deteriorated, the Obama administration has put greater stress on its strategic partnership with India and supported a greater role for India in Afghanistan.

Panetta took the opportunity in New Delhi to insist that the US would continue its drone attacks on “terrorists” inside Pakistan. Dismissing Islamabad’s objections that the illegal attacks were a violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty, Panetta said, “[T]his is about our sovereignty as well.”

The Pakistan government, which has turned a blind eye to the US use of drones, is facing widespread public opposition, particularly in areas bordering Afghanistan where the attacks have resulted in significant civilian casualties. Islamabad is undoubtedly concerned that the drone raids also set a precedent for India to carry out its own attacks on so-called terrorist training camps inside Pakistan.

Panetta complained that the US relationship with Pakistan was “often times frustrating.” Islamabad has not yet reopened NATO supply routes which the US has relied on to support its occupation of Afghanistan. By voicing his criticisms of Pakistan in New Delhi, Panetta reinforced the point that Islamabad should toe Obama’s line, or face the prospect of greater US support for rival India.

During Panetta’s visit, India agreed to allow a US team to search for the remains of American troops killed in air crashes during World War II in the north-east of the country, near India’s border with China. Around 400 US servicemen are still missing from 90 planes that crashed while flying supplies to support Chinese troops fighting Japanese forces.

While Panetta described the project as “humanitarian”, he is well aware that the presence of US personnel in the disputed border areas will only heighten tensions with China. A US search team had to leave the area five years ago because India did not want to antagonise China. Now India appears willing to ignore any Chinese objections.

India is still attempting to balance between the US and China, with which it has developed a burgeoning economic relationship. Indian External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna recently took part as an observer in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Beijing—a bloc involving China, Russia and several Central Asian republics. He declared that India attached “the utmost importance and high priority” to its relations with China.

There are clearly concerns in Chinese ruling circles about India’s strategic partnership with the US. The

hard-line *Global Times* wrote “that the US is sparing no efforts in forging a semi-circle of alliance against China.” The newspaper appealed to India to set its own agenda and use the “opportunity to break up the US intention to contain China.”

The tense relationship between China and India was underlined in April when the state-owned Indian oil company, ONGC, ended its oil exploration operations in the South China Sea. The company had begun the joint project with Vietnam in disputed waters with China. While ONGC declared the decision was taken for “commercial considerations”, undoubtedly Beijing’s warnings against the drilling played a role.

The US has deliberately exacerbated tensions in the South China Sea by declaring that it has “a national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation”—that is, the continued ability of its warships to sail through what are strategically sensitive waters for China. Washington’s intervention has encouraged Vietnam and the Philippines to assert their territorial claims more strongly.

Panetta’s trip to New Delhi to strengthen military ties with India is one aspect of a comprehensive strategic build-up in the Indo-Pacific region that has increased the danger of conflict with China.



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