

US Defense Secretary Panetta threatens ground intervention into Pakistan

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Speaking in Kabul yesterday, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta threatened Pakistan with a ground intervention if it did not crush forces in Pakistan fighting US occupation troops in Afghanistan.

Panetta singled out the so-called Haqqani network, a militia in Pakistan's North Waziristan region that mounts raids on US forces across the Afghan-Pakistani border. He said, "Haqqani safe havens still exist on the other side of the border. Pakistan has to take action [to stop] allowing terrorists in their country to attack our forces on the other side of the border. We are reaching the limits of our patience here."

He continued, "It is difficult to achieve a secure Afghanistan as long as there is a safe haven for terrorists in Pakistan from which they can conduct attacks on our forces. ... The United States will do whatever we have to do to protect our forces."

Asked if the US might send ground troops from Afghanistan to attack targets in Pakistan, Panetta refused to rule it out. "I'm not going to go into particulars," he said. "It's about protecting our forces and trying to urge the Pakistanis to take the steps they have to take to control the situation."

Panetta spoke alongside Afghan Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak, who called for joint action by the US-backed Afghan puppet regime and the Pakistani government in Islamabad. "I do hope," he said, "that gradually they will come to the conclusion to cooperate with us. If that cooperation starts, we will be able to disrupt their command and control, disrupt their training, disrupt their weapon recruitment and also will be able to eliminate or capture their leadership. Without doing that, I think our endeavor to achieve victory will become much more difficult."

Panetta's trip to Kabul was part of a larger Asian tour that also took him to Singapore, Vietnam, and

India—part of the US "pivot" towards deploying the majority of its armed forces in the Asia-Pacific region in order to confront China.

While in New Delhi, Panetta said he was going to Kabul to be briefed by the top US commander in Afghanistan, Marine General John Allen, to see how confident Allen felt about facing the threat to US operations from the Taliban and Haqqani network forces.

The Pentagon is preparing for an initial withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan when the Obama administration scales down the "surge" of troops it began in 2009. Some 23,000 US troops are set to leave Afghanistan by the end of September, leaving about 68,000 in the country.

Panetta's inflammatory comments in Kabul highlight the reckless and aggressive character of his tour and Washington's broader policy in the region. Designed to assemble a US-led anti-China coalition in Asia, Panetta's tour began with a prominent visit to India—China's main competitor in the region and a bitter rival of Pakistan. Declining to visit Pakistan, Panetta flew directly to Kabul, where he threatened Pakistan, China's main ally in South Asia, with new attacks.

US officials have repeatedly alleged that Pakistan works with the Haqqani network, which is led by Jalaluddin Haqqani, an asset of US and Pakistani intelligence during the 1980s Soviet-Afghan war. Admiral Mike Mullen described the Haqqani network as a "virtual arm" of Pakistani intelligence at congressional hearings last year.

The US has responded with an escalating series of drone attacks in Afghan-Pakistani border regions, with eight strikes in Pakistan's northwest frontier areas in the last two weeks alone. US defense officials told the

Christian Science Monitor yesterday that “the recent increase in drone strikes on insurgents in Pakistan is due in part to frustration with Islamabad.”

This follows the revelation in a May 29 *New York Times* article that President Obama personally selects targets for assassination by drone attack in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, drawing up a “kill list” on “Terror Tuesday” meetings with military and intelligence officials. (See: Obama’s role in the selection of drone missile targets). Adult male victims of drone attacks are automatically counted as “militants” so as to decrease the number of civilians listed as killed by US operations.

Islamabad has so far refused to launch a military assault on North Waziristan along the lines of the 2009 assaults it carried out under pressure from Washington in the Swat Valley, Lower Dir and Buner districts. This attack displaced millions of Pakistanis from their homes—the largest exodus of civilians in the Indian subcontinent since the 1947 partition of British India to form the states of India and Pakistan. Pakistani officials have reportedly told Washington they cannot attack North Waziristan for fear of unleashing an uncontrollable tribal war.

Pakistani officials fear rising domestic opposition to their ties to the US and their collaboration with Washington’s “war on terror.” Since the beginning of last year, US-Pakistani relations have been roiled by a series of US provocations: the fatal shooting of two Pakistanis in Lahore in January 2011 by CIA contractor Raymond Davis, who was released by Islamabad; Washington’s violation of Pakistani sovereignty in May 2011 in a cross-border raid to assassinate Osama bin Laden; and a November 2011 US raid on a Pakistani border post that killed 24 soldiers.

With popular outrage in Afghanistan and Pakistan mounting over US strikes, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay ended a four-day visit to Pakistan yesterday in an attempt to defuse the situation. She commented, “Drone attacks do raise serious questions about compliance with international law. ... I see the indiscriminate killings and injuries of civilians in any circumstances as human rights violations.”

Pillay had no intention of trying to end Washington’s escalating terror campaign of assassination by drone, however. She did not even call for a halt to the attacks, but stressed “the importance of investigating such cases

and ensuring compensation and redress to the victims.”

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton responded by saying that the US would not abandon drone attacks, cynically claiming that the US seeks to “ensure precision and avoid the loss of innocent life.”

In fact, the indiscriminate and criminal character of the US policy of assassination is inherent in its very method—targeting individual leaders in tribal areas of Pakistan or Afghanistan with powerful Hellfire missiles, which destroy entire villages.



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