

US defence secretary warns Pakistan to end NATO supply blockade

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US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel, visiting Pakistan this week, warned Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif that a protest blockade of one of the two supply routes across the country to NATO occupation forces in Afghanistan must be ended. If not, Pakistan will lose hundreds of millions of dollars of “Coalition Support Fund” cash it receives from Washington in return for supporting the US-led military operations in Afghanistan.

Sharif immediately acquiesced to the demand, assuring Hagel of the safe passage of supplies, underscoring the neo-colonial relationship that Washington maintains with Pakistan. It remains to be seen, however, how Sharif will meet his pledge.

Hagel was in Islamabad on December 9, following a two-day visit to Afghanistan, where he met top US military officers. Hagel’s trip to Islamabad was the first by a US defence secretary since his predecessor, Robert Gates, went in 2010. As well as Sharif, Hagel met the recently appointed army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Raheel Sharif, delivering the same blunt message on the Afghanistan supply routes.

The route from Karachi to Kabul via Torkham has been blocked since November 23 in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on the instructions of the province’s Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI)-led government. The blockade was established in a bid to contain the mass protests that erupted after a US drone attack on a seminary killed six people in the province’s Hangu district on November 21. Earlier, on November 1, another drone strike killed Pakistan Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud, also triggering protests.

By taking the drone killings beyond the frequently targeted north-western tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, these attacks marked a further extension of the Obama administration’s CIA-run drone war, which violates international law as well as the

sovereignty of Pakistan.

Deeply mired in a financial crisis, and running low on foreign currency reserves, the Sharif government is desperate to ensure the continued flow of Coalition Support Fund money. It is also seeking US support for a financial bailout from the International Monetary Fund.

Hagel demanded action against the Haqqani network, which operates from Pakistan’s North Waziristan region and is allegedly responsible for high-profile attacks in Kabul on NATO and Afghan government positions. “The security of our forces is paramount,” Hagel said. “The Haqqanis pose a threat.”

Sharif responded by ritualistically expressing “Pakistan’s deep concern over continuing US drone strikes,” which have killed thousands of civilians, including women and children. However, he made no call for an end to the strikes, instead describing them as “counter-productive to our efforts to combat terrorism and extremism on an enduring basis.”

In November 2011, the previous Pakistani government was forced to block supplies across the country to NATO forces in an attempt to placate mass outrage after a US gunship attack on two Pakistani military posts near the Afghan border killed 24 soldiers. The blockade was lifted after several months, following intense diplomatic and financial pressure, accompanied by open threats of ground intervention by then US secretary of defence Leon Panetta.

Yesterday the Pakistani daily, *Dawn*, reported that Sharif met with the country’s army chief to discuss “security and other issues pertaining to national importance.” The indication was that they discussed the ways to fulfil the assurances given to Hagel.

In parliament on Tuesday, States and Frontier Province Minister Abdul Qadir Baloch sought to play

down the drone strikes, saying that while they were a “violation of sovereignty,” political leaders should “not get emotional or overlook ground realities.” This was a thinly veiled reference to the binding relationship with the US. Baloch accused the PTI of calling the blockade in order to win “political mileage.”

The PTI has no fundamental opposition to US imperialism. Its leader, former cricket star Imran Khan, met NATO diplomats on December 6 to explain his position and request that it be conveyed to the US, expressing his desire to work closely with Washington.

Hagel’s bullying of the Sharif government is of a piece with the Obama administration’s ultimatum to Afghanistan to sign a “bilateral security agreement.” This would retain nine strategically located US bases beyond next year’s formal withdrawal of most troops, and provide ongoing legal immunity for the US military.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who is scheduled to leave office following a presidential election in April, has sought to ensure his own security, as well as to cut a favourable deal, by posturing against the US plans. Hagel said he decided not to meet Karzai in Afghanistan because, “I don’t think there was much left that was ambiguous about what we want to see go forward.”

Hagel was referring to US National Security Advisor Susan Rice’s meeting with Karzai just two weeks earlier, in which she issued a threat: either sign the agreement with Washington immediately, or face the withdrawal of all US military forces and a cut off of Western funding by the end of 2014. (See: “US ultimatum on permanent occupation of Afghanistan”)

While Washington wants to reposition a considerable portion of its troops stationed in Afghanistan, it rules out losing military/intelligence bases in the landmass that borders Iran to the west, China to the northeast and former Soviet republics to the north. James Dobbins, the US special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last Tuesday: “We’re nowhere near a decision that would involve our departing Afghanistan altogether.”

After more than a decade of the so-called “war against terrorism” in Afghanistan, which was extended into Pakistan, US imperialism confronts the hostility of the overwhelming majority of the people on both sides of the border. However, the corrupt ruling elites of both

countries, despite occasional rhetoric, have no opposition to US domination of the region. The US intervention has escalated regional tensions, including between India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. While the Sharif government fears the mass opposition to the war, the Pakistani ruling elite is also concerned about losing its sphere of influence in Kabul to arch-rival India. Islamabad has complained that the US is backing India to play a bigger role in Kabul, as part of the strengthening of Washington’s strategic alliance with New Delhi.

Above all, Washington wants to shore up its strategic relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan as part of its war preparations in the Asia-Pacific. The Obama administration regards Afghanistan as a critical base in the struggle against US imperialism’s principal rivals, including China.



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