

Taliban attack greets US Defense Secretary Mattis in Afghanistan

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US Defense Secretary James Mattis had two principal objectives in visiting South Asia this week: to oversee implementation of Trump's new, more aggressive Afghan war strategy and to press India to integrate itself even more fully into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China.

In separate meetings with Mattis, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the country's new defence minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, reaffirmed New Delhi's readiness to serve as a veritable frontline state for American imperialism in its anti-China offensive.

Mattis and his Indian interlocutors discussed expanding Indo-US military-strategic cooperation across the Indo-Pacific region and especially in the Indian Ocean, where they are already sharing intelligence on Chinese ship and submarine movements and where the US is eager for India to take on a bigger role in "securing" the shipping lanes that convey much of the oil and other resources that fuel China's economy. Mattis, Modi, and Sitharaman also discussed putting more energy into expanding weapons co-development and production.

At the talks' conclusion, India once again parroted the US line on the South China Sea dispute, insinuating that China is a threat to "freedom of navigation and over flight," when in reality it is Washington that is arrogating the right to station an armada off China's shores. And New Delhi joined the US in painting North Korea as a grave threat world to peace. This under conditions where the US has deliberately stoked the Korean conflict to place pressure on China, and Mattis has repeatedly joined Trump in making provocative and ominous threats to annihilate the people of North Korea.

But if the Indian-leg of Mattis' trip went very much according to the Pentagon's script and wishes, this was not true when the US Defence Secretary flew on to Afghanistan.

American imperialism's failure to establish a stable client regime in Afghanistan despite 16 years of brutal counter-insurgency war was highlighted by a bold attack the Taliban mounted on Kabul International Airport, shortly after Mattis landed there Wednesday.

The Taliban said it had expressly targeted Mattis, who as head of the Pentagon's Central Command from 2011-13 was directly responsible for the conduct of the US war in Afghanistan

The Pentagon, for its part, has sought to downplay the significance of Wednesday's attack. It insists the defence secretary was never in danger and had left the airport—which bristles with NATO personnel and is supposed to be one of the most secure and fortified places in Afghanistan—before the Taliban launched its rocket-grenade assault.

Even US media reports have conceded that the attack, which forced the closure of the airport for most of the day, was a rude reminder of the embattled character of Afghanistan's corrupt and widely despised pro-US government. The Taliban reportedly controls outright or has a major presence in at least 40 percent of the impoverished Central Asian country, higher than any time since the US invaded in 2001.

For several hours after the airport attack, gunfire could be heard as an elite Afghan military unit sought to hunt for the Taliban attackers, whom they claimed were holed up in buildings adjacent to the airport. Ultimately, US air strikes were called in, leading to civilian casualties, including the wounding of six members of a single family.

The Pentagon has sought to blame the civilian casualties on a malfunctioning missile, but local residents seethed with anger over the US military's treatment of the Afghan people

"US troops dropped bombs on a residential area," Mohammed Amin told *Al-Jazeera*. "How can they say it was mistake? We understand one time, two times, but not forever! They kill us, civilians, and call it a mistake all the time."

Haji Rabbani, whose family members were injured by the US air strikes, told Agence France-Presse, "They do not target the enemies in front of their eyes—they target our house and kill our people."

Recent UN reports have pointed to the major role that US air strikes have played in a surge in civilian Afghan war casualties.

While in Kabul, Mattis met with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, as well as US military leaders, to discuss implementation of the new war strategy Trump announced in late August.

It calls for an open-ended, i.e. permanent, US occupation of Afghanistan; for the deployment of thousands more US and NATO troops beyond the current 11,000 American and 13,500 NATO forces; and for US commanders to be given a free hand in conducting air strikes and Special Forces operations, setting aside the limited restrictions placed on them due to mounting Afghan protests over civilian casualties and abuse.

At a press conference, Mattis denounced the Taliban as “terrorists,” while providing next to no details on what was discussed in his various meetings. “I don’t want to tell the enemy exactly what we are doing,” said Mattis,” adding that his objective is to always “have a compelling battlefield advantage over anything the Taliban tries to mass against” American and Afghan government forces.

A further key element in the new US strategy is to bully Pakistan into attacking any and all Taliban “safe-havens” in its Afghan borderlands.

This has included threats to slash or terminate payments to Pakistan for its logistical support of US-NATO forces in Afghanistan, to end all US arms sales, and to encourage India, Pakistan’s arch-rival, to play a greater role in Afghanistan. Some Trump aides have suggested the US renounce Pakistan’s status as a “Major Non-NATO US ally” and even more menacingly declare it a state-sponsor of terrorism.

Mattis did not include Pakistan on the itinerary of his South Asia trip, although Afghanistan was an important topic in his discussions with the Indian prime minister and defence minister. New Delhi announced its support for Trump’s Afghan policy almost as soon as it was announced.

This is not only because the Modi government wants to ingratiate itself with Washington. India has its own ambitions to use an expanded economic and strategic presence in Afghanistan as a means of laying claim to a share of Central Asia’s energy resources. It also views any further souring of US-Pakistani relations as a boost to its own drive to bully and isolate Islamabad and compel it to acknowledge India as the regional hegemon.

The US threats have caused much anger and trepidation in Pakistani ruling circles. In the immediate aftermath of Trump’s speech outlining his new Afghan war policy, several military and government spokesmen defiantly said that were Washington to ever act on its anti-Pakistan threats, Islamabad would respond by expanding its military-strategic partnership with China and turning toward Russia.

In recent weeks, however, this bravado has been replaced

by somber warnings from within the establishment that Pakistan must persist in trying to prevent further deterioration of its relations with Washington, because it cannot afford to be deprived of US support in the event its fragile economy tanks.

Pakistan has provided pivotal logistical support to the US occupation of Afghanistan for the past 16 years and has razed much of its Federally Administered Tribal Areas to suppress Taliban allied groups. But fearful of Washington’s ever warmer strategic embrace of its arch-enemy India and anxious to ensure it has a say in any political settlement of the Afghan War, the Pakistani military has maintained covert ties with sections of the anti-US insurgency in Afghanistan, especially the Haqqani Network.

Speaking in New York on Tuesday, Pakistan Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif pleaded for understanding from Washington. Asif pointed to how the US had “used and discarded” Pakistan in its “proxy war” with the Soviet Union, including enjoining Islamabad to organize and arm the mujahideen in Afghanistan. “Don’t blame us for the Haqqanis or the Hafiz Saeeds [leader of the LeT, an Islamist militia active in the anti-Indian insurgency in disputed Kashmir],” implored Asif. “These were people who were your darlings just 20 to 30 years back. They were being dined and wined in the White House and now you say ‘go to hell Pakistanis’ because you are nurturing these people.”

Asif’s comment were self-serving, but he touched on a key truth. The US “war on terror” is a fraud. Washington has repeatedly used Islamist militia and terrorists as its proxies in regime-change wars, including currently in Syria.

US imperialism seized on the 9-11 events—whose perpetrators were almost all Saudis, not Afghans, and who had ties to Saudi intelligence—to invade Afghanistan, so as to establish a strategic beachhead in oil-rich Central Asia. Sixteen years on, it continues to view Afghanistan as an important strategic “prize” for which it is ready to shed “blood and treasure” because of Central Asian oil and Afghan mineral wealth. But even more importantly, because of Afghanistan’s proximity to many of its most important strategic rivals—Russia, China, and Iran.

Thus the slaughter in Afghanistan grinds on, with Trump now giving the Pentagon the green light to prosecute the war with even more ferocity and callous indifference to the Afghani people.



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