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Defense Secretary Gates Visits India, Pakistan

During a news conference held in New Delhi, India, on January 20, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned that al-Qaeda, and what he called its "syndicate" in South Asia, could provoke a new war between India and Pakistan.

During his India visit, reported VOA news, Gates was pessimistic about the security situation in what he described as a "very dangerous region." While speaking to reporters in New Delhi, he warned that a syndicate of terrorist groups under the al-Qaeda umbrella — with each benefiting from the successes of the others — plans to destabilize the region through further attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.



Relations between India and Pakistan have been strained since the November 2008 attack on Mumbai, India's commercial capital, which has been blamed on the Pakistani-based Lashkar-e-Taiba group. That attack killed more than 160 people. During his visit, Gates praised India's statesmanship and restraint following the attack, but cautioned that such restraint cannot be expected again, if India suffers a similar assault. ?? "I think it's not unreasonable to assume that Indian patience would be limited were there to be further attacks," said Gates.

Gates also pointed out that both nations harbored suspicions about the other's military activities, stating: "Let's be honest with one another here. There are real suspicions in both India and Pakistan about what the other is doing in Afghanistan."

Then next day, Bloomberg news reported, at the start of an unannounced visit to Pakistan, Gates announced his agenda and indicated he would encourage Pakistan to extend the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda following what he called its "very successful military operations" that have broken up a major Taliban haven in the tribal region of South Waziristan, in northwest Pakistan.

While enroute to Pakistan, Gates told reporters that his talks with Pakistan's civilian and military leaders will focus heavily on the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, its long-term implications, and Pakistan's key role in its success. ?? "The Pakistanis have accomplished a great deal in the past year or so," he was quoted as saying by the American Forces Press Service. He said that successful military operations in the west "have caused al-Qaida and some of the other terrorists we have been concerned about flee their safe havens," thereby helping the effort in Afghanistan. "We have heard about plans to move into" North Waziristan later this year, Gates also told the reporters. "I'd like to explore those with them."

Also during the onboard press briefing, Gates said that a purpose of his visit was to emphasize — both with government officials and the Pakistani public — that the United States would not abandon the region as it had done in the past, as when Soviet troops left Afghanistan in 1989. ?? "The main focus of my visit is ... to provide reassurances that we are in this for the long haul and intend to continue to be a partner of theirs for far into the future," Gates said.??



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In an editorial he wrote for the Pakistani English-language newspaper, *The News*, Gates recognized that the increased U.S. presence in Afghanistan will lead to more attacks in Pakistan, and he said it is important to remember that terrorists in both countries operate as part of a broader, coordinated organization, noting: ??“Only by pressuring all of these groups on both sides of the border will Afghanistan and Pakistan be able to rid themselves of this scourge for good — to destroy those who promote the use of terror here and abroad.”

A report in the *Washington Post* noted that Gates, in his meetings with Pakistani officials, would raise concerns about "manifestations of anti-Americanism," including the reported harassment of U.S. citizens in the country and a clampdown on visas.

The *Post* cited as one reason for the surge in anti-Americanism in Pakistan the increase in missile strikes on Pakistani territory by unmanned CIA-operated drones. There have been a dozen drone attacks since December 30, when a suicide bomber killed eight people at a CIA base in eastern Afghanistan.

Because of numerous civilian casualties resulting from the drone attacks, there has been an increase in public anger. And while the Pakistani government officially protests the attacks as a violation of its sovereignty, it has in practice acquiesced to them.

As Gates attempted to persuade the Pakistanis to take a more aggressive stance against the various militant groups that have set up shop along the nation’s western border with Afghanistan, Major General Abbas, head of public relations for the Pakistan army, told the BBC during a press event in Islamabad on January 21: "We are not going to conduct any major new operations against the militants over the next 12 months. The Pakistan army is overstretched and it is not in a position to open any new fronts. Obviously, we will continue our present operations in Waziristan and Swat."

The BBC’s correspondent in Islamabad, Syed Shoaib Hasan, called the comments “a clear brush-off to top US officials.” Hasan added that Pakistan’s reluctance to widen its military operations against the insurgents “also threatens to render ineffective an expanded coalition troop deployment in Afghanistan, as the Taliban over the border would be relieved of any pressure from the Pakistan army.”

If Secretary Gates (and by extension, the Obama administration) views his mission as to convince Pakistan and other “allies” in our war on terrorism to shoulder a larger share of the burden, such efforts would seem as just as futile as the rest of our Middle East military operations.

It is obvious that our presence in the Middle East is unwanted, and only serves to increase tensions and fuel the recruiting efforts of al-Qaeda and other militant groups.

Photo of Secretary Robert Gates: AP Images



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