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Unclear if Pakistan offensive serves US interests

By Daphne Benoit – 9 hours ago

WASHINGTON (AFP) — Pakistan's offensive against Taliban militants has won praise from Washington but may bring little benefit to US forces in neighboring Afghanistan, experts and US officials say.

Having pressed Pakistan to take on Islamist militants on its soil, Washington has hailed Islamabad for its anti-Taliban military campaign launched in April.

But Islamabad has not targeted Washington's main enemies -- Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders on the Pakistani border -- and instead has directed its assault on Pakistani Taliban, officials and analysts say.

Pakistan's interests "don't necessarily align 100 percent with the US as well as allies' interests," said a US defense official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Pakistani forces are focusing on the Taliban commander Baitullah Mehsud and his network, blamed for a wave of attacks that have killed nearly 2,000 in the nuclear-armed nation in the past two years.

"It appears as though Pakistan still has the same policy as before and continues to differentiate between the 'good Taliban,' being the ones who attack US and NATO forces, ... and the 'bad Taliban,' like Baitullah Meshud, being the ones who attack the Pakistani government," said Malou Innocent of the CATO Institute.

The problem is that "at a strategic level Pakistan and the US are not on the same page," Innocent said. "Until US lawmakers recognize that, we are going to be in Afghanistan in perpetuity."

Islamabad remains reluctant to move against Afghan Taliban, such as militants led by Mullah Omar or the Haqqani network, as it views them as useful in countering the influence of its arch-enemy India in Afghanistan, analysts said.

"Indians do have an influence in Afghanistan and Karzai has a friendly relationship with India," said Caroline Wadhams, national security analyst at the Center for American Progress.

"They are scared that the US will get out of Afghanistan and that Afghanistan becomes more and more of an Indian satellite.

"So they keep these groups of Afghan Taliban around that are attacking into Afghanistan to stem the growing influence of India in Afghanistan," she said.

President Barack Obama's administration insists the Pakistan offensive serves US interests, though not necessarily delivering a direct benefit in Afghanistan, where 56,000 US troops are serving along with about 34,000 allied foreign troops.

"The Pakistani extremist threat was a very urgent threat, very close to Islamabad and extending in geography," said a senior US defense official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Islamabad's army operations have put pressure on members of the Al-Qaeda network allied with Pakistani Taliban and cut off a potential safe haven in the Swat Valley, the official said.

"There are some groups that we'd like the Pakistanis to take more action against, for example the Afghan Taliban, but we share a common interest against the Pakistan Taliban," he said.

US officials acknowledge the army assault in the Swat Valley has had no effect on the movement of militants across the border into Afghanistan from bases in Pakistan.

While Washington has welcomed plans by the Pakistan army to open up a second front in South Waziristan, some analysts say the move in the lawless tribal belt could push militants over the border to neighboring Afghanistan.

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