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Defense Chief Shrugs Off Objections to Drones

By **GARDINER HARRIS**

NEW DELHI — Defense Secretary [Leon E. Panetta](#) brushed aside concerns on Wednesday that drone strikes against leaders of Al Qaeda in [Pakistan](#) violate that country's sovereignty.

"We have made clear to the Pakistanis that the United States of America is going to defend ourselves against those who attack us," Mr. Panetta said. "This is not just about protecting the United States. It's also about protecting Pakistan. And we have made it very clear that we are going to continue to defend ourselves."

On Monday, a [Central Intelligence Agency](#) drone strike in Pakistan's tribal belt [killed Al Qaeda's deputy leader, Abu Yahya al-Libi](#), American officials said. Such strikes have infuriated Pakistani officials, who have demanded that they end. But the Obama administration considers them a highly effective tool in the battle against Al Qaeda.

Mr. Panetta's remarks, delivered Wednesday during a question-and-answer session after a speech here at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, show yet again how strained the relationship between Islamabad and Washington has become.

He chuckled along with his audience about Pakistan's lack of warning before the United States killed Osama bin Laden in a raid last year near a huge Pakistani Army base. "They didn't know about our operation," Mr. Panetta said to laughter. "That was the whole idea."

Joking with a group of high-level Indians about a raid that has been keenly embarrassing to Pakistani military leaders is not likely to be received warmly in Islamabad. But Mr. Panetta made clear that the United States and [India](#) both have troubled relationships with Pakistan.

"Just as India views the relationship with Pakistan as complicated, so do we," Mr. Panetta said. "And it is."

India and Pakistan have fought three wars and still have a tense face-off over disputed boundaries. That Mr. Panetta would compare the American relationship with Pakistan with

that of India's may represent a new low in the administration's assessment of its ties with Pakistan.

"It's important that you try to make what progress you can in dealing with Pakistan in trying to resolve your differences," Mr. Panetta said. "The same is true for the United States."

Mr. Panetta came to India in hopes of further strengthening the military relationship between India and the United States. But India has long been less enthusiastic than the Americans about closer ties, in part because of worries that such bonds would anger the Chinese, who, like the Pakistanis, also share a disputed border with India.

"Today, we have growing economic, social and diplomatic ties that benefit both of our nations, but for this relationship to truly provide security for this region and for the world, we will need to deepen our defense and security cooperation," Mr. Panetta said. "This is why I have come to India."

Mr. Panetta is near the end of a swing through Asia during which he has promised to enhance the American military's presence in the region despite budget constraints at home. This will be accomplished in part by increasing the share of Navy ships in the Pacific Ocean while lowering them in the Atlantic, he said.

The change is widely seen as an attempt to check China's growing clout and posturing in the region. The United States sees India as a crucial partner in that effort.

On Tuesday, Mr. Panetta held what the Americans described as "productive meetings" with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Shivshankar Menon, the national security adviser. In his speech on Wednesday, Mr. Panetta said that when he worked for President Bill Clinton in the 1990s, the relationship between the two countries was strained. But he noted that President Obama had called the American relationship with India one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century.

"We will expand our military partnerships and our presence in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia," Mr. Panetta said. "Defense cooperation with India is a linchpin in this strategy."

Mr. Panetta pledged to streamline rules to make trade in military hardware between the United States and India "more simple, more responsive and more effective." He also urged India to change its own regulations regarding "nuclear liability legislation," a reference to a longtime call by Washington for India to change its laws to make it easier for American companies to develop civilian nuclear reactors in India.

One small step in the intricate dance involving the United States, India and China was an agreement announced on Tuesday to allow the United States to resume efforts to recover the remains of about 400 airmen from [World War II](#) lost in 90 aircraft crashes in northeastern India near the Chinese border. Bad weather led to the cancellation of the searches in 2009. India has been considering whether to allow them to restart since then.

“The ability to return heroes to their loved ones is something that America deeply, deeply appreciates,” Mr. Panetta said.