

DELAY IN PUBLISHING AFGHAN WAR “PROGRESS” REPORT FORCES PANETTA INTO “CLARIFICATION” MODE RE SAFE HAVENS IN PAKISTAN

By law, the Department of Defense is required to prepare reports on “progress” in the war in Afghanistan twice a year. The first report for 2012 was published (pdf) in April, so one would expect the second report to follow in October. Even though this second report was provided to Congress around that time, it was not published (pdf) until yesterday. It seems likely to me that the Obama administration did not want the public to be reminded so close to the November elections just how big a failure the war effort in Afghanistan has become, and so release of the report was significantly delayed, first by the election and then presumably to allow time for more panty-sniffing in the Petraeus-Broadwell-Allen-Kelley scandal.

It turns out that delaying important reports before releasing them has consequences. Pakistan took exception to a claim in the report regarding safe havens for terrorists in Pakistan and whether Pakistan is cooperating in taking action against those terrorists. From the Express Tribune:

Pakistan on Tuesday rejected as ‘baseless’ the latest US report accusing Islamabad of undermining security in Afghanistan by allowing safe havens for insurgents.

A Pentagon report released on Monday said that Pakistan is persistently undermining security in Afghanistan by

permitting safe havens for insurgents and its failure to effectively combat the flow of improvised explosive devices (IED) materials.

The October 2012 report, published by the US Department of Defense (DoD), is from the period of April to October of this year. The report says, "The insurgency's safe havens in Pakistan, the limited institutional capacity of the Afghan government, and endemic corruption remain the greatest risks to long-term stability and sustainable security in Afghanistan."

However, a senior security official told *The Express Tribune* on Tuesday on condition of anonymity that "as the drawdown approaches, the US appears to make Pakistan a scapegoat to cover up its own failures in Afghanistan."

The accusations and Pakistan's response continue:

The DoD report stated that the insurgency in Afghanistan receives support including sanctuary, training infrastructure, operational and financial support from within Pakistan. "The availability of sanctuary inside of Pakistan enables key elements of the insurgency to remain potent and threatening, including the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Taliban Network."

But Taliban havens across the border in Pakistan, the limited capacity of the Afghan government and "endemic corruption" posed the greatest risks as the US prepares to pull out troops by the end of 2014, the Pentagon said.

Reacting to the Pentagon assessment, the official insisted that Pakistan had not permitted any "terrorist sanctuaries" on

its soil. "If they (US) have any evidence about safe havens, they should share with us," he added.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta was forced into issuing the equivalent of a Nixon-era "that statement is no longer operational" response to Pakistan. From Dawn:

Pakistan has signalled its readiness to deal with terrorists operating within its borders as well as with those who cross over to Afghanistan, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said on Tuesday.

The statement followed a clarification by officials of the Defence and State Departments of a Pentagon report that tended to create an impression that Pakistan was still allowing terrorist safe havens in Fata to operate.

The officials said the report was old and since then Pakistan had carried out several "complementary operations" with Afghan and Nato forces against the terrorists.

"We are more encouraged with the fact that they want to take steps to try to limit the terrorist threat within their own country and obviously the threat that goes across the border" to Afghanistan, Mr Panetta told reporters travelling with him to Kuwait.

He said that army chief Gen Ashfaq Parvez Kayani had "indicated a willingness to try to put more pressure on safe havens".

While "actions have to speak louder than words, I do believe they're in a better place because they understand the kind of threats they should deal with," Mr Panetta added.

The next paragraph from Dawn sums up the

problem:

A Pentagon report, released to the media on Monday but sent to Congress three months ago, had alleged that terrorist safe havens in Fata were preventing US and allied forces from dealing a “decisive defeat” to militants inside Afghanistan.

Delaying the report may have allowed the Obama administration to hide their war failures from the glare of media attention just prior to the election and during the sex scandal, but it resulted in a serious misstatement on the state of relations with Pakistan on the very important issue of chasing terrorists within Pakistan. The Dawn story provides more detail on the combined DoD/State Department briefing meant to “clarify” the accusations against Pakistan and cites the briefing to say the report apparently was prepared before July when relations with Pakistan on pursuing terrorists improved. That stands out as fairly interesting, since the report is meant to cover the time through the end of September. As desperate as the Defense Department has been to find good news to put into these “progress” reports, the failure to note improved relations with Pakistan on a key issue is yet another profound failure from Panetta’s operation. The improvement occurred during the reporting period and yet, even with the delay in publication, the report did not include this vital piece of information.