

US Defense Secretary Gates warning on South Asia threat

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The US defence secretary has cautioned India and Pakistan that South Asian groups are seeking to destabilise the entire region and could trigger a war between them. Robert Gates said al-Qaeda's "syndicate", including the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as the Pakistan-based group Lashkar-e-Taiba, posed a danger to the region as a whole.

They are trying "to destabilise not just Afghanistan, not just Pakistan, but potentially the whole region by provoking a conflict perhaps between India and Pakistan through some provocative act", Gates said during a visit to New Delhi on Wednesday.

"It's important to recognise the magnitude of the threat that the entire region faces."

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since their independence in 1947.

Tension surged again in 2008 when attackers alleged by India to be members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, attacked the financial hub of Mumbai, killing 166 people.

Gates praised India's response to the attacks, but said: "I think it's not unreasonable to assume India's patience would be limited were there to be further attacks."

New Delhi suspects the Pakistani intelligence service of supporting armed groups that target India and has consistently called on Islamabad to crack down on fighters operating on its soil.

Robust relationship

Gates described India as a vital partner in the struggle against extremist threats and said that he had discussed how to bolster US-India military co-operation. He also lauded India's "extraordinary" financial aid to Afghanistan, while acknowledging the tension this created as both Islamabad and New Delhi vie for influence in Kabul.

"There are real suspicions both in India and Pakistan about what the other is doing in Afghanistan," he said.

"So I think each country focusing its efforts on development, on humanitarian assistance, perhaps in some limited areas of training, but with full transparency for each other, would help allay these suspicions and frankly create opportunities." Gates, after a cultural trip to visit the Taj Mahal on Wednesday afternoon, was to head to Pakistan on Thursday.

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