

Top US general hints at refocused “war on terror” in Afghanistan

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Since 2001, the Bush administration has used a purported threat of terrorism to justify the predatory invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and the establishment of US control over the resources and territory of both countries. At the same time, the so-called war on terror has served as the pretext for a massive expansion of the US military and the activities of intelligence agencies, as well as major inroads into the democratic rights and civil liberties of the American people.

The Democratic Party and its candidate Barack Obama do not oppose either the propaganda or the militarist agenda of the Bush White House. The Obama campaign, however, is serving as the mouthpiece for sections of the American establishment who believe the focus of military operations has to shift from Iraq to Afghanistan, where US and NATO forces are suffering setbacks in the face of a growing insurgency in the ethnic Pashtun southern provinces that border Pakistan.

To justify the deployment of thousands of additional troops to the Afghan war, Obama has repeatedly declared that the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, not Iraq, is the “central front in the war on terrorism”. Al Qaeda and the Taliban, he has stated, have “reconstituted themselves” in the region.

Comments this month by the US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, are an indication that this tactical shift in US foreign policy is already underway. He told the Associated Press on July 18: “There are unsubstantiated rumours and reflections that perhaps some foreign fighters originally intended for Iraq may have gone to the FATA [Pakistan’s Federally Administrated Tribal Areas that border Afghanistan].” He alleged: “There is some intelligence that has picked this up, but it’s not solid gold intelligence.”

The general concluded: “They’re not going to abandon Iraq. They’re not going to write it off... But what they certainly may do is start to provide some of those resources that would have come to Iraq to Pakistan, possibly Afghanistan. We do think they are considering what should be the main effort.”

Petraeus was the military architect of the “surge” of US troops to Iraq last year and has been given considerable influence over government policy by the Bush administration. He effectively has the power to decide when and how many US troops are withdrawn from the Iraq theatre. He is currently preparing a recommendation on troop levels, which he will

present in October before assuming command of Centcom—the US military Central Command which is responsible for operations throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, including Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Last Wednesday, Petraeus’s statements were reinforced by the Iraqi ambassador to the US, Samir Sumaida’ie. Also speaking to the Associated Press, he declared: “We have heard reports recently that many of the foreign fighters that were in Iraq have left, either back to their homeland or going to fight in Afghanistan. Afghanistan now seems to be more suitable for Al Qaeda fighters.”

The claim that Al Qaeda-linked foreign fighters are focusing their efforts on fighting US and NATO forces in Afghanistan may well become the official justification that Petraeus gives to recommend to the Bush administration that combat brigades scheduled to rotate into Iraq deploy instead to Central Asia.

The refocus on Afghanistan, however, has nothing to do with combating terrorism. Rather, it stems from the geo-political importance of Central Asia to the American financial and corporate elite.

Factions of the American ruling class were advocating some form of intervention into Central Asia soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 opened up the region to potential US dominance. The calls for action grew as Central Asian states with major reserves of oil, natural gas and other crucial resources began coming under the sway of US rivals such as Russia and China.

The September 11, 2001 attacks—which were assisted by a security stand-down in the US that has never been explained—provided a pretext for the invasion of Afghanistan and the establishment of US bases not only there, but in surrounding countries as well. Plans were unveiled by mid-2002 to pipe natural gas from Turkmenistan, through Afghanistan to Pakistan. Other lucrative corporate ventures involving US companies were being mooted.

The invasion of Iraq, however, and the necessity to maintain a massive US military force to suppress the Iraqi people, resulted in a major diversion of military, economic and political resources away from US ambitions in Central Asia.

The US and NATO forces in Afghanistan have not had enough personnel to establish control over the former

strongholds of the Taliban. Pipeline projects have not proceeded due to the lack of security. President Hamid Karzai's government is dominated by corrupt and brutal warlords and drug barons who are despised by millions of Afghans. The population remains mired in poverty despite promises of reconstruction and aid. The US reliance on air strikes has resulted in numerous civilian deaths, provoking even greater hatred of the occupation.

The outcome has been the steady growth of the anti-US and anti-government insurgency. In the broader region, US influence has waned. The main Central Asian states have entered into even closer political and economic relations with Russia and China than before 2001.

Obama's candidacy speaks for the layers of the American establishment who believe the Iraq war was a strategic mistake that has prevented US imperialism from achieving a hegemonic position in Central Asia. A renewed focus on Afghanistan will be part of an aggressive reassertion of US interests in the region, justified again with hysteria over the resurgence of Al Qaeda.

To the extent that the Afghanistan-Pakistan border is a magnet for Islamic extremists, US policy over more than three decades bears the responsibility. The obvious precedent for Islamists travelling today to fight alongside Pashtun tribesmen against a foreign force in Afghanistan is the US-backed insurgency against the Soviet occupation from 1979 to 1988.

In the 1980s, the Reagan and first Bush administrations hailed the Afghan and international Islamist guerillas as "freedom fighters". The US and its proxies, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, supplied them with vast quantities of money and arms. Pashtun warlords such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani received millions of dollars from the CIA. It is estimated that as many as 100,000 Islamists from around the world, including Osama bin Laden, played some part in the decade-long war.

The ongoing influence of radical Islam in Afghanistan and Pakistan was the by-product. The Taliban emerged out the *madrasses* or religious schools in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, which were funded by Middle Eastern oil money and indoctrinated young men with the ideology of jihad or holy war. Various Islamist organisations in Pakistan were spawned by the nexus between the Afghan insurgency and Islamic extremism. Al Qaeda—Arabic for the "base"—formed in the Afghan training camps established with CIA and Saudi government funds.

The bases, communications networks and supply lines straddling the Afghan-Pakistan border that were developed in the guerilla war against the Soviet Union are now focused on fighting the US and NATO forces.

The Pakistani press published claims last week that Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani was presented with a report on July 20 alleging that more than 8,000 foreign militants are now in the FATA region. A government spokesman refused to confirm the claim to the *News International*, but apparently

conceded there were at least 1,000 foreign fighters.

The *News International* account on July 21 claimed that young Islamist militants have travelled to Afghanistan and Pakistan from the US, Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Canada and Australia, as well as from across Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. A source claimed some were moving to Afghanistan from Iraq, crossing illegally across Iran.

The *News International* stated: "According to some Afghan sources, foreign fighters are welcomed not only in the Pakistani tribal areas but also in eastern, southern and western Afghanistan. The rising number of civilian casualties has created a lot of hatred and resentment against foreign security forces in these Afghan and Pakistani areas. Angry locals believe that the foreign fighters are coming to avenge these killings."

The article also noted: "Most of these western Muslims tell their Afghan and Pakistani hosts that they will take not only their revenge from the occupying forces, but they will also take revenge for the sacrilegious cartoons of their prophet from Western governments who encourage such cartoonists in the name of freedom of expression."

Any attempt to crush the Islamist groups taking part in the Afghan insurgency necessarily raises the prospect of extending US military operations into Pakistan. The deployment of Pakistani troops by pro-US dictator General Pervez Musharraf into the autonomous tribal regions has failed to prevent guerillas from using the frontier as a safe haven. Instead, it has inflamed the population and created rifts in the armed forces. The Pakistani government has been forced to all but surrender large areas of the FATA to Islamist warlords who are sympathetic to the Taliban.

A major factor in the ultimate humiliation of the Soviet army in Afghanistan was its inability to shut down the insurgent bases and supply lines inside Pakistan. The same strategic conundrum now confronts the US military.

Obama has repeatedly stated that as president he would be prepared to order unilateral US attacks over the Afghan-Pakistan border if the Pakistani government will not or is incapable of curbing guerilla activity. Any intervention into Pakistan, however, will provoke mass opposition and resistance. Policies are being set in motion that threaten to trigger years of bloody carnage in Central Asia.



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