

What is behind US-Taliban talks?

29 October 2008

Yesterday the *Wall Street Journal* reported on US plans to open direct negotiations with Taliban leaders in Afghanistan. The fact that the *Journal*, a conservative financial paper, broke the story shows that it was not a journalistic exposé, but a deliberate public declaration of a shift in state policy.

According to the *Journal*, "The US is actively considering talks with elements of the Taliban, the armed Islamist group that once ruled Afghanistan and sheltered al-Qaeda, in a major policy shift that would have been unthinkable a few months ago." It reported that such talks were included in a "draft recommendation in a classified White House assessment of US strategy in Afghanistan."

These plans seek to address a serious deterioration of the US position in Afghanistan. Violence has spread through the country and into neighboring tribal areas of Pakistan, whose US-backed government has been discredited by its acquiescence in US bombings and ground incursions into Pakistan against Taliban militants. The US war on the Taliban has also antagonized important US allies that helped the US organize the Taliban militias in the interests of US pipeline politics in the mid-1990s: the Saudi clerical establishment and Pakistan's powerful military espionage agency, Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI).

Notwithstanding US "war on terror" rhetoric, which portrays the Taliban as monsters, US-Taliban talks are not new. The 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan deployed relatively few troops and the US occupation of the country has depended on manipulating Afghanistan's fractious tribal elite. A State Department official told the *Journal*: "We and the Afghans negotiate with the tribes every day on the district level. Sometimes they're Taliban or their supporters. Often they say: 'If we get what we want, we'll lay down our arms.'"

The *Journal* also reported that officials of the US-

controlled Afghan regime had negotiated with Taliban representatives "in recent weeks in Saudi Arabia."

US officials have, however, been constrained in their attempts to create a workable Afghan policy by restrictions on negotiations with the Taliban. An intelligence official told the *Journal*, "some US officials quietly conducted informal outreach to Taliban leaders, but the military was more interested in taking them into custody." The leaking of plans for US-Taliban talks is a signal to opinion-makers, as well as to observers abroad and particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, that Washington will no longer impose such limits on itself.

The change in US imperialism's ruling personnel—with the impending presidential election and the promotion of General David Petraeus to head the US Central Command, giving him authority over US forces in Afghanistan—provides US policy makers the opportunity to carry out a certain recalibration of the "war on terror."

Petraeus' history is particularly significant in this regard. He is being sent to Afghanistan to replicate there the "surge" operation he oversaw as commander of US forces in Iraq.

In Iraq, he bought off local proxies--Sunni tribesmen in Anbar province, parts of the Mahdi Army and Sunni militias in larger cities. Then, with a "surge" of US troops throughout Iraq--Anbar province, then Baqubah, Baghdad, Basra, etc.—American forces massacred those who refused to ally with them. Following the deaths of untold thousands of Iraqis and hundreds of US troops, Iraqi resistance to the US occupation has decreased. US media and political circles have hailed the surge as a great success.

Now the surge is to come to Afghanistan. At least 12,000 more US soldiers will soon arrive there. The *Journal* notes that Petraeus publicly endorsed the policy of US talks with the Taliban. In an October 8 speech on Afghan policy at the Heritage Foundation

think-tank, he said, "You have to talk to enemies. You want to try to reconcile with as many of those as possible while then identifying those who truly are irreconcilable."

Petraeus will accordingly oversee a policy of carefully sorting out Afghan tribal leaders and making each one the proverbial offer they cannot refuse. For militia leaders who align themselves with US military policy there will be suitable rewards. For "irreconcilables" there will be air strikes and special operations raids.

This policy shift is particularly significant in that the candidate now considered the likely winner, Democrat Barack Obama, has long attacked the Bush administration for being distracted from the war in Afghanistan and called for strikes against targets in Pakistan.

The *Journal* noted that both presidential candidates, Obama and Republican John McCain, were supporting US-Taliban talks, helping "ensure that the policy is put in place regardless of who wins next month's elections."

This underscores a central reality of the 2008 US elections: With the likely victory of Obama, more tactically adept but no less ruthless representatives of the US ruling class will come to power.

Alex Lantier



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact