

US military prepares for Obama's expansion of Afghan war

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The US military and allied forces in Afghanistan are making feverish preparations for an influx of tens of thousands more American troops during the first months of the Obama presidency. Most of the reinforcements will be in place by the end of the harsh Afghan winter, in anticipation of a "spring offensive" in March and April by the burgeoning anti-occupation insurgency led by the Islamist Taliban movement.

General David Petraeus, the architect of the US troop "surge" in Iraq in early 2007 and now head of US Central Command (Centcom), is presiding over the preparations. This week, during a press conference in Italy, he confirmed that at least another "20,000 or so" American military personnel would be deployed to Afghanistan.

The intention is to have at least 55,000 to 60,000 US troops in Afghanistan, as well as the 33,000 troops from various NATO states and other US allies. The head of the NATO-commanded International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), US General David McKiernan, told journalists: "I don't like to use the term 'surge' here, because if we put these additional forces in, it's going to be for the next few years, this three- or four-year period. It's not a temporary increase of combat strength."

McKiernan's deputy, General Michael Tucker, told a Pentagon press briefing this week that an infantry brigade would be sent in January, followed by an air combat brigade to provide more attack and lift helicopters, as well as engineering units, logistics and extra surveillance and intelligence units. Several brigade-size marine formations are expected to make up the main frontline combat reinforcements.

Tucker said: "There's a very huge building campaign that has already begun. We're pushing dirt as we speak to prepare for the arrival of these forces. The Army, Central Command, the Joint Staff is working very closely with us so that we can set the conditions to receive these soldiers and provide adequate housing and infrastructure for them so that it's all set up prior to their arrival..."

"For about the last month-and-a-half, we have done in-depth studies on specifically, to the man, how many billeting spaces, how many helicopter pads, how much force protection we're going to need, how many latrines, how many dining facilities, things of that nature, down to the actual number of boots on the ground, what would be required."

The first US reinforcements, a brigade of the 10th Mountain Division, will be deployed in the vicinity of the Afghan capital, Kabul. The rest, however, are slated for operations in the ethnic Pashtun provinces of southern Afghanistan where US, Canadian, British, Dutch and Australian forces have been engaged in heavy fighting with the Taliban throughout the year.

The UK press reported this week that British commanders expect at least 5,000 additional US combat troops to arrive in Helmand province over the next several months. Additional British troops are being sent following the announcement that the British force in southern Iraq will be reduced from 4,100 to just 400 by June. Special Air Service units are already redeploying to Afghanistan, along with helicopters.

US reinforcements will also be sent to Uruzgan province, where Dutch and Australian troops are fighting, and Zabul, where American units are operating.

The largest boost will take place in Kandahar, the province considered to be Taliban heartland. At the NATO base near Kandahar city, Canadian and American engineers are working overtime to prepare the facilities for as many as 10,000 extra US troops. Within 12 months, according to an engineer officer interviewed this week by the Canadian *Globe and Mail*, the base will have doubled in size. The airport runway is being extended and hangars erected to house dozens of helicopters and aircraft. The expansion will make the airfield the largest in the country, bigger even than the sprawling base that has been constructed at Bagram, in central Afghanistan.

As well as the military reinforcements, the Obama administration will make greater use of private security companies, or mercenaries. On November 26, the US Army began advertising for contractors to provide hundreds of armed guards to protect US bases in Afghanistan, as well as supply routes and transport convoys. The five provinces where the mercenaries will be operating are Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, Zabul and Nimruz—the most volatile in the country. The initial contracts are to begin on January 1 and last for 12 months, with the option of them being renewed for a further three years.

A war without end

The extra troops and mercenaries will be battling an Afghan guerilla force that has been able to increase its activities substantially.

Afghan war analyst Sami Kovenan recorded 11,820 insurgent "violent incidents" this year as of November 23—a 51 percent increase over the same time period in 2007. Attacks in the Kabul area have increased by 62 percent, while even in the predominantly ethnic Tajik and Uzbek north, which had been relatively stable, attacks are up by 54 percent. Taliban

operations extend throughout the ethnic Pashtun tribal region of Pakistan. As the year draws to an end, US supply lines from the port of Karachi through the Khyber Pass between Afghanistan and Pakistan are under threat.

More US and NATO troops have been killed in 2008—277 so far—than in any other year of the now seven-year war. The army and police of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's corrupt and despised puppet government have suffered well over 1,000 fatalities.

This month's report on Afghanistan by the European-based International Council on Security and Development (ICOS—formerly known as the Senlis Council) made a grim assessment of the US-led occupation. It claimed that Islamist insurgents have a permanent presence in 72 percent of the country and are "closing a noose" around Kabul, exerting a degree of control over the main highways out of the city to the east, south and west.

ICOS commented: "Crucially, the Taliban appears to be winning on another front—the battle for hearts and minds. By tapping into a variety of local grievances against NATO-ISAF and the Kabul government, from [opium] poppy eradication and bombings leading to civilian casualties, to high levels of unemployment and chronic underdevelopment despite billions of dollars of aid, the insurgency has succeeded in attracting sympathy beyond its traditional support base and gained a measure of political legitimacy among many Afghans...."

"Underlying the expansion of Taliban presence is the international community's failure to deliver on the many promises of a better life made to the Afghan people in the wake of the invasion. Seven years on, most of the country still lacks basic amenities and the majority of the population struggle to secure necessities such as food and shelter, let alone a sustainable livelihood. Field research by ICOS has presented a picture of acute hardship and deep uncertainty, with the majority of respondents worried about feeding their families."

General Petraeus outlined this week the tactics that will be pursued to try to crush the resurgent Taliban. As was done during the Iraq surge, he intends to order his subordinates to use cash bribes to buy off as many insurgent commanders as can be bought, and systematically seek to slaughter those who cannot. It was important, the general declared, "to separate the irreconcilables from the reconcilable".

Petraeus told journalists: "If they are truly irreconcilables then they must be killed, captured or run out of the country... others, if you do it right, can be embraced, can be made part of the solution instead of a continuing part of the problem, and that means sometimes sitting down across from a negotiating table with people who may have your blood on their hands."

For their part, the Taliban and other anti-occupation groups such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami have not given any signal that they are prepared to enter into talks with either the US military or Karzai's government.

Taliban leader Mullah Omar issued a statement to Karzai on Tuesday that read: "Do not ever presume that in the presence of the occupation forces, the followers of the path of Islamic resistance will ever abandon their legitimate struggle merely on your empty and farcical pledges, material privileges and personal immunity."

Qari Yousaf Ahmadi, a Taliban spokesman, told the Canadian press: "If the Americans are going to send more troops, we are ready for that. They

will have to send more coffins as well for taking their dead bodies back."

In countries that have committed troops, the intractable character of the war in Afghanistan has generated disillusionment in ruling circles as public opposition continues to grow. The Netherlands and Canada have announced that they will be pulling out their forces by June 2010 and December 2011 respectively. Other European states may soon follow.

The despair is shared by figures in the American political establishment. Joe Klein, a well-known correspondent for *Time* magazine and member of the influential Council for Foreign Relations, wrote on Thursday:

"The war in Afghanistan—the war that President-elect Barack Obama pledged to fight and win—has become an aimless absurdity. It began with a specific target. Afghanistan was where Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda lived, harboured by the Islamic extremist Taliban government. But the enemy escaped into Pakistan, and for the past seven years, Afghanistan has been a slow bleed against an array of mostly indigenous narco-jihadi-tribal guerrilla forces that we continue to call the 'Taliban'."

The reality is that curbing terrorism was never the motive for the invasion of Afghanistan. The September 11 attacks were seized upon as the pretext for an intervention into the very heart of Central Asia, a resource-rich region that was part of the former Soviet Union until 1991. Far from being "aimless", the purpose of the ongoing occupation is to establish a US client state and major military bases in a region that is vital for American economic interests.

Obama represents the factions of the American establishment most committed to this neo-colonial agenda. Throughout the election campaign, his candidacy became the political vehicle for a tactical shift in policy—the redeployment of US military assets from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the grounds those nations were the "central front" in the fraudulent "war on terror".

Defense Secretary Robert Gates—chosen by the president-elect to remain in that job and head the seamless foreign policy transition from the Bush to the Obama administration—described the Afghan war on Thursday as "an ideological conflict with violent extremists" that could only be compared with the Cold War. "The last ideological conflict we were in lasted about 45 years," he declared.



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