

US to double military forces in Afghanistan

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US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Michael Mullen announced Saturday that the Pentagon will nearly double the number of US troops engaged in the occupation and colonial-style war in Afghanistan. The announcement is in line with the policy advanced by Democratic President-elect Barack Obama to shift American military resources to the “real front” in the “global war on terrorism.”

Mullen made official the military “surge” that is to be conducted in Afghanistan under Obama during a late-night meeting with reporters in Kabul. He put the number of additional troops to be dispatched to the country, which has been under US occupation for the last seven years, at between 20,000 and 30,000. The figure corresponded with an earlier request made by the senior US military commander of all foreign occupation forces in Afghanistan, Gen. David McKiernan. There are presently approximately 31,000 US troops in the country along with nearly 35,000 other foreign troops under NATO command.

What was most significant about Mullen’s announcement was the time frame for the beefed-up US deployment. While Pentagon spokesmen had previously stated that the buildup would be carried out over 18 months, Mullen indicated that the aim was to have all of the additional troops in-country by the coming spring.

“We’re looking to get them here in the spring,” he said, “but certainly by the beginning of the summer at the latest.”

The speeding up of Washington’s plans to escalate the war is an indication of the increasingly serious crisis confronting the American-led occupation. The past year has been the bloodiest since the US first attacked Afghanistan in October 2001 at the beginning of “Operation Enduring Freedom.” Nearly 290 US, British, Canadian and other foreign troops have been killed in Afghanistan in 2008, a 25 percent increase over the previous year. Another 1,000 members of the Afghan regime’s security forces have also been killed. The

number of civilian casualties has been put at 2,000, but the real death toll is undoubtedly significantly higher.

Most of the US reinforcements will be sent to the southern province of Helmand, considered a stronghold of the Taliban which was initially ousted by the US invasion. According to some reports, however, American forces may also be sent to Logar and Wardak provinces, on the outskirts of Kabul, for fear that the insurgency is threatening the Afghan capital.

A spokesman for NATO urged the alliance’s European members to follow Washington’s example and dispatch more of their own troops for the fighting. “We want to ensure that as the US increases we have a proper balance between what the Americans are doing and what the other allies are doing--both for military and political reasons,” said the spokesman, James Appathurai.

“(NATO) Secretary General (Jaap de Hoop Scheffer) would like to see an increase, not only from the Americans, but also from other allies, in particular the Europeans, to ensure we have a political, as well as a military, sharing of burdens within this mission,” he added.

European governments, however, have been reluctant to significantly increase their own deployments.

In his remarks in Kabul, Admiral Mullen made it clear that the escalation of the US-led war would result in increased casualties. Referring to US plans to bolster occupation forces in the south, the US military chief commented: “That’s where the toughest fight is. When we get additional troops here, I think the violence level is going to go up. The fight will be tougher.”

A spokesman for the Taliban concurred with this assessment. “They now want to send more troops to Afghanistan,” said Yousuf Ahmadi. “The Russians also sent that many troops but were badly defeated,” he added, referring to the decade-long Soviet occupation of Afghanistan which began in 1978.

“When the US increases its troop levels to that of the Russians, they will also be cruelly defeated,” warned Ahmadi. “More troops--that means there will be more

targets for the Taliban.”

Mullen made it clear that the partial withdrawal from Iraq proposed by the incoming Obama administration is not a turn away from militarism, but rather an essential pre-condition for escalating the killing in Afghanistan.

“Available forces are directly tied to forces in Iraq,” he said. “As we look to the possibility of reducing forces in Iraq over the course of the next year, the availability of forces to come here in Afghanistan will increase.”

According to one estimate, the “surge” in Afghanistan will increase the monthly costs of the US war there from \$2 billion to at least \$3.5 billion.

Appearing on ABC television’s “This Week” program Sunday morning, Vice President-elect Joseph Biden stressed the importance of the Afghanistan war for the incoming administration. “I think what is clear from the outset here is that we have a situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan that is urgent,” he said. “It implicates India. It also implicates a whole lot of other very complicated issues.”

Biden added, “I think that the Afghanistan-Pakistan track is a very immediate concern where we are in the process of getting down clearly what our priorities are, what our policy need be, from the day we are sworn in.”

While Obama, like Bush before him, has cast the escalating war in Afghanistan as a crusade against “terrorism,” the reality is that the US intervention is aimed at advancing American geo-strategic interests and thus carries with it the threat of a far wider and more dangerous war.

This was spelled out in an article posted Saturday by *Asia Times* entitled “All Roads Lead Out of Afghanistan”.

Written by a former Indian diplomat, Ambassador M.K. Bhadrakumar, the article makes clear that the US presence in Afghanistan is part of a broader “Great Central Asia strategy” which is aimed at “rolling back Russian and Chinese influence in the region.”

Bhadrakumar argues that, while the US war in Afghanistan has gone very badly, this broader effort has enjoyed a certain success, with the Pentagon managing to establish a “long-term military presence” in the country. Moreover, he points out that Washington is using the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan as the pretext for seeking new US military bases in Central Asia.

He also reports that US-Russian tensions are escalating sharply over Washington’s plans to develop a new supply route for its forces in Afghanistan that would run through the former Soviet republics in the southern Caucasus and

Central Asia, with cargo being offloaded in the Georgian Black Sea port of Poti and winding its way through Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

There are ample reasons for seeking a new supply route, given recent ambushes in which insurgents have decimated supply columns from Pakistan heading to the Khyber Pass. Popular anger in Pakistan over the military supplies for US occupation forces engaged in killings on both sides of the border erupted last Thursday in a protest of over 10,000 people in the northwestern city of Peshawar. The protesters demanded an end to the Pakistan government’s collaboration with the US war effort.

If Washington succeeds in developing its new supply route, Bhadrakumar notes, it will have “consolidated its military presence in the South Caucasus on a long term-basis,” while at the same time being in a position to convert this supply route into “a Caspian oil and gas corridor bypassing Russia.”

Russia’s military chief of staff, Gen. Nikolai Makarov, warned against Washington’s plans in a speech last week, complaining that the US is “planning to establish military bases in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.” Makarov added, “The US has encircled all the world’s regions with military bases.”

Tehran also took note of the impending US buildup in the region, which it sees as a threat to its own interests. Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki used a press conference Monday to comment on Mullen’s announcement and warn that an increased troop presence would not bring peace or stability to Afghanistan. “Regional countries vigilantly follow developments in Afghanistan, particularly the new policies adopted by foreign forces,” Mottaki said.

The escalation in Afghanistan championed by Obama and promoted by the US establishment as Washington’s “good war” threatens to ignite tensions that could lead to a disastrous armed conflict with other regional powers, including both Iran and Russia.



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