

# US “surge” in Afghanistan threatens wider war

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The US and NATO are planning to create new supply lines from the Central Asian republics to occupation forces in Afghanistan, according to recent media accounts. The move comes in preparation for an expected doubling of US military personnel in Afghanistan under the Obama administration, and in response to an increasing number of attacks on its main supply route from Pakistan.

Currently, over 80 percent of all supplies for US and allied troops are unloaded at the Pakistani port of Karachi and then shipped northwards across Pakistan to Peshawar, ultimately arriving in Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass, the narrow mountain artery between the two countries.

As opposition to the US military among tribes in both Afghanistan and Pakistan has grown, attacks on supply convoys have become increasingly common. In a particularly bold attack, in December a large number of militants stormed supply depots in Peshawar, a Pakistani city of three million on the southern side of the Khyber Pass, destroying over 300 Humvees and trucks set for delivery to NATO forces in Afghanistan (See: "Insurgent attacks on NATO trucks highlight US military crisis in Afghanistan.")

The Pakistani military has responded to the degenerating security situation by occupying the Khyber Pass and carrying out reprisals against the tribes in the region. However, Islamabad's efforts will do little to allay Washington's concerns over the supply of material for its forces. It is doubtful that the Pakistani military will be able to reestablish control in the region, where fighters hostile to the US, and purportedly sympathetic to the Taliban, enjoy widespread support. Moreover, the survival of the Pakistani regime itself is in doubt, as a deepening economic and social crisis fuels popular hatred of the

pro-American policies of the government.

The situation in US-occupied Afghanistan is even worse. The Karzai regime is universally hated, while militant attacks have taken place with increasing regularity and impunity throughout the nation. To cite one example, an Afghan tribal leader, Mullah Salam, from Musa Qala who last year announced his support for Karzai, has been the victim of repeated assassination attempts. Recently, a group of 30 fighters attacked Salam's house, killing more than 20 of his bodyguards.

It is in response to the tenuous nature of its main supply route through Pakistan, and in preparation for the intensification of the war in Afghanistan, that the US has stepped up efforts to gain cooperation among the former Soviet Republics along Afghanistan's northern border—Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. It is also working to cut supply deals with Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea state of Azerbaijan, and Russia.

The proposed expansion of the US supply routes for the Afghanistan war from Central Asia and the Caucasus is an ominous development. It reflects the expansionist and hegemonic aims of the US, which is determined to project its military, economic, and political influence into Central Asia at the expense of its main rivals in the region, China, Russia and Iran.

This was spelled out in a recent article in *Asia Times Online* by career Indian diplomat M K Bhadrakumar ("All roads lead out of Afghanistan"). "The US is robustly pushing for an increased military presence in the Russian (and Chinese) backyard in Central Asia," he writes, "on the ground that the exigencies of a stepped-up war effort in Afghanistan necessitate precisely such an expanded US military presence."

According to a recent account in the *New York Times* ("US to Widen Supply Routes in Afghan War") the US

is trying to win concessions from the Central Asian countries, especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, by promising that shipments will be run by commercial enterprises and will not include weapons. Separately, NATO is attempting to work out an agreement whereby Russia would lift its ban on the transport of weapons via its airspace to Afghanistan.

However, the supply lines are only a first phase. The General Staff of the Russian armed forces, General Nikolai Makarov, who, according to Bhadrakumar "couldn't have spoken without Kremlin clearance," has recently "revealed Moscow had information to the effect that the US was pushing for new military bases in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan."

As Bhadrakumar points out, the problem confronting the US is that there is currently no credible alternative land route to Afghanistan that does not traverse the territory of a rival power—either Russia, China, or Iran. The US may be preparing an alternative Caspian route that would pass through Georgia on the Black Sea, where the US is in the final stages of establishing a defense agreement, to Azerbaijan on the Caspian, and then the Central Asian states. This could also serve as an oil and gas route independent of Russia, and potentially expand NATO into the Caucuses and Central Asia, if European powers agree upon the necessity of a US-led defense of vital energy supplies.

The attempt to expand US influence in Central Asia comes after years in which its position in the region declined. The US used the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 to launch the predatory war against Afghanistan. At the time, it was able to gain support from several Central Asian countries. But soon the US position eroded.

Rival organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) reasserted themselves. In 2005, Uzbekistan expelled US forces. Among the Central Asian states, currently only Kyrgyzstan allows the US to operate military bases on its territory.

During his campaign for the presidency, Barack Obama made the expansion of the US war in Afghanistan his central foreign policy objective. In so doing, he spoke for a section of the political establishment that believed the Bush administration's

overriding emphasis on the war in Iraq had come at the expense of its position in Central Asia vis-à-vis China and Russia. The need for additional troops in Afghanistan has since become a consensus policy within the American ruling elite.

The US attempt to reverse its fortunes in Central Asia is being driven by very definite geo-strategic interests that will be pursued all the more aggressively under an Obama administration. Current Bush Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, who has been retained in the same position by Obama, outlines such a deepening war in the current issue of *Foreign Affairs*.

"To be blunt," Gates writes, "to fail—or to be seen to fail—in either Iraq or Afghanistan would be a disastrous blow to U.S. credibility, both among friends and allies and among potential adversaries ... Afghanistan in many ways poses an even more complex and difficult long-term challenge than Iraq—one that ... will require a significant U.S. military and economic commitment for some time."

The escalation of the US presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia stands as another warning that the economic crisis is exacerbating geopolitical tensions, posing the threat of a far wider and more destructive war.

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*The author also suggests:*

US looks for other Afghan supply routes



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