

US moves to consolidate new supply routes to Afghanistan

James Cogan
26 January 2009

The commander of US forces in Central Asia, General David Petraeus, announced last week that he had reached an agreement with the Russian government for the transit of "non-military" supplies through its territory to the US and NATO occupation forces in Afghanistan.

Petraeus made a statement from the Pakistani capital of Islamabad on January 20, after visits to the Central Asian republics of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, and a brief stopover in Kabul for talks with Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

According to Petraeus, the agreement will allow essential logistical supplies such as fuel, food and construction equipment to be transited via Russia's rail and road network, through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and into northern Afghanistan—one of the few areas of the occupied country where NATO forces are not facing constant attack from insurgents linked to the former Taliban regime or other Islamist-based resistance organisations.

He told journalists: "It is very important as we increase the effort in Afghanistan that we have multiple routes that go into the country. There have been agreements reached and there are transit lines and transit agreements that now include several countries in the Central Asian states and also Russia."

On Friday, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, speaking during an official visit to Uzbekistan, announced: "We are ready for full-fledged cooperation with all countries on the issue of assuring security in Afghanistan, including the United States. We hope the new US administration will have greater success than the previous one in resolving the Afghanistan issue."

Representatives of NATO and Russia are holding a summit today in which Afghanistan will figure prominently.

The talks are the first to take place since relations were frozen after Moscow's intervention to push back the Georgian invasion of South Ossetia.

The supply route diplomacy is an aspect of the foreign policy of the new Obama administration, which is committed to a dramatic intensification of the Afghan war and a broader assertion of US imperialist interests in Central Asia. This year, as many as 30,000 additional American troops will be deployed to the conflict.

For commanders like Petraeus, who are drawing up the tactical plans for this escalation, the matter of supplies and logistics for their troops in the land-locked country looms large.

For the past seven years, the bulk of US and NATO supplies for the war have been transited via Pakistan, from the port of Karachi through the Khyber Pass and other crossings along the border with Afghanistan.

This route passes through Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and its autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), whose majority ethnic Pashtun population share a common language, culture and religion with the Pashtuns of southern Afghanistan and view the resistance being waged against the US and NATO invasion as their war as well. As was the case during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Pakistani frontier region has provided a safe haven for Afghan guerrillas and a recruitment ground for new fighters.

Under pressure from Washington, the Pakistani government and military have conducted deeply unpopular and costly military operations to try to stem insurgent activity in the FATA. The result has been even greater hatred for the US occupation and greater support for Islamist tendencies that advocate resistance.

Over the past year, the growth of the insurgency has been reflected in increasingly frequent attacks on convoys and supply depots inside Pakistani territory. This month alone, the Khyber Pass has been closed on two occasions due to security concerns, while a crossing north of the city of Quetta was blockaded by tribesmen after military personnel killed a local man.

The spread of the Afghan war into Pakistan is the main factor behind the efforts to develop alternative supply paths.

Throughout the US election campaign, Barack Obama repeatedly insisted that he would order attacks on insurgent targets inside Pakistan—with or without the agreement of the Pakistani government. The Bush administration has been putting Obama's policy into effect since August. Over 30 air strikes have been carried out since by US forces in the FATA, in contempt of Islamabad's protests.

The first attacks under Obama took place last Friday. Homes in the agencies of North and South Waziristan were destroyed by missiles fired by unmanned Predator drones, killing at least 18 people.

From a military standpoint, however, these supposedly "precision" operations have been ineffective. Of approximately 260 people killed, the Pakistani government has estimated that the vast majority were not insurgent leaders or fighters, but Pashtun villagers, including scores of women and children. The attacks have inflamed tribal hostility toward both the occupation of Afghanistan and the collaboration of the Pakistani government with US imperialism.

A full-scale attempt to disrupt insurgent activity in the FATA would require dozens of sorties each day by US and NATO aircraft, in violation of Pakistan's national sovereignty. At a certain point, it would also necessitate ground operations in the rugged terrain along the Afghan border, against the concentrations of Taliban fighters that the Pakistani military has been unable or unwilling to dislodge.

In other words, it would require openly declaring the FATA to be part of the Afghan war theatre. The consequences would be that Pakistan could not reliably be used as a transit route.

A measure of how important the supply question is can be gauged by speculation in American military and foreign policy circles as to whether it even warrants the US taking steps to end its decades-long stand-off with Iran. By far the

shortest and most convenient route into Afghanistan would be overland from the Iranian port of Chahbahar on the Arabian Sea, to the Afghan city of Zaranj.

Indian engineers have just completed the construction of a highway from Zaranj to the town of Delaram, where it merges with the major road network linking the country's major cities. The Indian government financed the project to get around Islamabad's refusal to allow Indian goods to transit through Pakistan to Afghanistan. The US military could use the same route as an alternative to sending supplies through the FATA.

Petraeus spoke last year of the "common interest" shared by the US and the Shiite fundamentalist regime in Tehran in regards to Afghanistan—preventing the return to power of Sunni extremists; stemming drug trafficking; and opening up new trade markets.

The think tank Stratfor, which is close to the US intelligence agencies, commented on January 23: "If an arrangement can be worked out between the United States and Iran, western forces could thus reduce their dependence on the main routes through Pakistan and perhaps avoid the logistical and geopolitical costs of having to transport supplies through Central Asia. The United States could clearly benefit from Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan..."

At present, such "cooperation" does not exist. The Obama administration therefore has little choice but to bargain with Russia if it is going to advance its plans for the subjugation of Afghanistan. Russian President Medvedev has indicated that Moscow will be asking for significant concessions on issues such as the expansion of the NATO alliance and the US missile defence system. If such negotiations become difficult, the Iranian option may become more attractive.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact