

Obama set to launch military “surge” in Afghanistan

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President Barack Obama is set to formally authorize the dispatch of 10,000 to 12,000 additional US combat troops to Afghanistan, the beginning stage of a military "surge" that will likely add 30,000 more soldiers and Marines over the next 12 to 18 months, doubling the US occupation force to 60,000. Obama's announcement of the initial complement of three combat brigades, to begin deploying in April, could come this week.

The first stage of the escalation is bound up with a strategic overhaul of US policy in the region that will initiate a vast expansion of military violence and increase the focus on exterminating the popular resistance to the neocolonial occupation of Afghanistan, both in Afghanistan and the neighboring regions of Pakistan.

In response to a growth of the anti-US insurgency in both Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan and an increasingly dire security situation for US and NATO troops and the US-backed puppet government in Kabul, Obama and Pentagon officials are calling for setting more "limited" objectives while warning of a "long and difficult fight" in a war that has already lasted more than seven years.

Behind the talk of limited objectives are plans to dispense with the pretense of "nation-building" and the establishment of democracy and, in Obama's own words, engage in "more effective military action."

As Obama's secretary of defense, Robert Gates, told the Senate Armed Services Committee on January 27 in a statement dripping with cynicism, "This is going to be a long slog, and frankly, my view is that we need to be very careful about the nature of the goals we set for ourselves in Afghanistan. If we set ourselves the objective of creating some sort of Central Asian Valhalla over there, we will lose, because nobody in the world has that kind of time, patience and money."

In other words, the much expanded US military force will concentrate its efforts on drowning the insurgency in blood, whatever the cost in Afghan and Pakistani lives and US troop casualties. This was already indicated when the US launched a new missile strike inside Pakistan within days of Obama's inauguration that killed 19 Pakistani civilians.

It is further underscored by Obama's decision to appoint as US ambassador to Kabul a former top military commander in the country, Lt. Gen. Karl W. Eikenberry, described by the *New York Times* as a "highly unusual choice." Eikenberry served two stints in Afghanistan, the most recent an 18-month command tour that ended in 2007. He is known for advocating a sharp escalation of US military strikes in the border regions of Pakistan which are used by Taliban, Al Qaeda and other anti-US Islamist forces as safe havens and staging areas for strikes against US and

NATO forces in Afghanistan and supply convoys crossing the Khyber Pass separating the two countries.

With Eikenberry's expected approval by the Senate, four of the administration's most influential voices on Afghan policy will be active or retired generals, including Gen. David Petraeus, chief of the Central Command, Gen. David McKiernan, the top US commander in Afghanistan and Gen. James L. Jones, a retired Marine Corps officer who is Obama's national security adviser.

Some sense of what is to come can be seen in the proposal made last month by NATO's senior military commander, Gen. John Craddock of the United States, that NATO troops shoot alleged drug traffickers without waiting for proof of any involvement with the Taliban or other insurgent forces. In a country whose main crop is opium, upon which large sections of the impoverished population depend for survival, this would amount to a license to kill Afghan civilians at will. The proposal was made in a confidential letter to Gen. Egon Ramms, a German officer who heads the NATO command center responsible for Afghanistan, and came under heavy criticism from German political circles. It was eventually scuttled by McKiernan and others, according to an exposé published last month by the online edition of *Der Spiegel* magazine.

The bulk of the additional US troops are to be deployed to Afghanistan's major opium-producing region in the south, in an effort to cut off the main source of funds for insurgent forces, and its eastern border region with Pakistan.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported Wednesday that Pentagon officials said troops will be deployed along the Helmand River Valley; along the two main highways of southern Afghanistan, which have been hit by growing numbers of roadside bombs; in two provinces outside Kabul where insurgent activity is on the rise; and along the Afghan-Pakistan border.

Asked on a Sunday news program if US troop casualties would rise, Vice President Joseph Biden replied, "I hate to say it, but yes."

Various news outlets have reported the adoption by the Joint Chiefs of Staff of a classified report, part of the Obama administration's review of policy in Afghanistan, that essentially calls for the military to drop efforts at reconstruction and "nation-building" and instead devote all of its resources to attempting to wipe out the Taliban and other insurgent forces and destroy Al Qaeda safe havens in Pakistan. The recommendations have reportedly been approved by Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and seen by Gates.

The new strategy means a further widening of the war into Pakistan. As

the *Washington Post* put it on Wednesday, "Afghanistan and Pakistan are to be treated as a single theater of war and diplomacy..."

This was underscored in a speech Monday to the Reserve Officers Association by Joint Chiefs Chairman Mullen, who emphasized halting the use of Pakistan border regions as staging grounds for insurgents to mount attacks into Afghanistan. "We cannot accept that Al Qaeda leadership, which continues to plan against us every single day," has a "safe haven in Pakistan" and "could resume one in Afghanistan," he said.

The expanded war is to be not only more deadly, but also long. According to *FOXNews.com*, Gen. George Casey, chief of the Army, reportedly told Obama during a meeting at the Pentagon last week that there are no "quick fixes" in Afghanistan and the strategic review should be looking "at where the military expects to be in 10 years" in Afghanistan.

The US military escalation comes amidst a deepening crisis for the US occupation. On Monday, in a quarterly submission to Congress on conditions in Afghanistan, the Pentagon reported that "the spring and summer of 2008 saw the highest levels of violence" since the US invasion in 2001. "The Taliban regrouped after its fall from power and has coalesced into a resilient and evolving insurgency," the report concluded.

Among the findings in the report:

* Between January and December 10, 2008, 132 US personnel in Afghanistan died as the result of hostile action, up from 82 in 2007, an increase of 60 percent.

* Attacks by Taliban insurgents increased by a third last year, assaults along the country's major highway increased by 37 percent, and "The security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated in several areas of the country since the last report" six months ago.

* Insurgent surface-to-air fire rose 67 percent. Car bombs and attacks in Kabul have also increased.

* A resurgent Taliban is challenging the Kabul government for control of the south and east of the country, "and increasingly in the west."

An article in the current edition of *Newsweek* magazine entitled "Obama's Vietnam" cites a report released last month by the London-based International Council on Security and Development which states that the Taliban "now holds a permanent presence in 72 percent of Afghanistan, up from 54 percent a year ago." The report notes that insurgent forces are moving closer to Kabul and that "three of the four main highways in Kabul are now compromised by Taliban activity."

The article cites a briefing to Democratic congressional leaders last month by Center for Strategic and International Studies analyst Anthony Cordesman, who said, "The development of Afghan security forces has been a badly managed, grossly understaffed and poorly funded mess."

The worsening security situation for the US is despite a sharp increase in American air strikes. "In 2004, the US Air Force flew 86 strike sorties against targets in Afghanistan. By 2007, the number was up to 2,926—and that doesn't count rocket or cannon fire from helicopters," wrote the author, Fareed Zakaria.

The result has been a rapid rise in civilian casualties. In what is certainly a major underestimation, the United Nations reports that civilian deaths

have climbed from 929 in 2006 to close to 2,000 in 2008, with civilian deaths climbing by 60 percent in 2008.

The growth of insurgent strength has forced the Afghan government to postpone scheduled presidential elections from the spring of this year to August 20. A top election official said that of the 364 districts around the country, 84 are not safe enough to hold elections.

On Tuesday, militants destroyed a bridge in northwest Pakistan that lies on the main supply route for US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, temporarily halting the shipments of food, gas and military equipment into the country. On Wednesday, insurgents torched at least ten trucks that were stranded near the Khyber Pass connecting Pakistan and Afghanistan as a result of the bridge having been wrecked. These attacks are the latest in a series of increasingly bold assaults on the route used to move 75 percent of supplies for US and NATO troops in Afghanistan.

US efforts to develop alternate supply routes through the former Central Asian Soviet republics were dealt a blow this week when the president of Kyrgyzstan said his government had decided to close the last remaining American air base in Central Asia. The base at Manas airport outside of the capital Bishkek is a key transport point for US troops into Afghanistan and a staging ground for tanker planes used to refuel American military jets. The US said it was seeking to renegotiate the terms of its lease of the base with the Kyrgyz government.

The dispute with Kyrgyzstan is indicative of rising tensions across the region, in this case between the US and Russia, which just agreed to loan the former Soviet republic \$2 billion and has worked to counter US efforts to extend its military sway in the traditional Russian sphere of influence in Central Asia.

The response of the Obama administration to Washington's deepening crisis in Afghanistan is to escalate the killing and widen the war into Pakistan, threatening a far greater military conflagration.



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