

US prepares new escalation of Afghanistan intervention

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The chief official overseeing US policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, arrived in Brussels Monday to brief NATO representatives on the Obama administration plans for the region, amid press reports that the US intends to push aside Afghan President Hamid Karzai and supplant him with an unelected "czar" to take charge of the vast new influx of military and economic aid for the US puppet regime.

The British newspaper the *Guardian* reported Sunday that the US planned to appoint an Afghan "prime minister" who would bypass Karzai and his corrupt government in Kabul. In addition, the formula for distribution of the aid will be changed to divert money from the capital to the provinces, to avoid the siphoning off of funds by Karzai's clique.

According to the *Guardian* report, "A revised role for Karzai has emerged from the White House review of Afghanistan and Pakistan ordered by Barack Obama when he became president. It is to be unveiled at a special conference on Afghanistan at The Hague on March 31."

Several names have been suggested for the central administrative post, including interior minister Mohammed Hanif Atmar, and the former finance minister, Ashraf Ghani. The American press has also recently published flattering accounts of Gul Agha Shirzai, governor of Jallalabad province, and Mohammed Halim Fidai, governor of Wardak province, promoting them as regional leaders who were more effective wielders of power than Karzai.

A high-ranking Pentagon official told the *Los Angeles Times* March 19 that Defense Secretary Robert Gates was strongly in favor of shifting the focus of US efforts from Kabul to the provinces, particularly in the south and east of the country where the war with insurgent forces is most intense. Press Secretary Geoff Morrell said, "Building a strong central government in Afghanistan is counter-

cultural, counter-historical."

Holbrooke denied the report that the US would openly move against Karzai, in remarks to reporters upon his arrival in Brussels, claiming, "It doesn't reflect any views that I am aware of in the government I work for and it's certainly not a universal NATO plan or anything." A Karzai spokesman in Kabul also called the report "nonsense."

But there is no denying the growing US disdain for the man who has been for more than seven years the principal American puppet in Kabul. Karzai was installed as president in early 2002, then won a landslide victory in a US-run election two years later. His term officially expires in May, but he is currently favored to win reelection in the poll set for August 20.

President Barack Obama cancelled the regular secure videoconferences that Bush used to hold with Karzai, and did not even make a phone call to the Afghan president until four weeks after his inauguration. Obama ordered a major escalation of the US military presence in Afghanistan, adding 17,000 troops to the 38,000 already in place, with only the barest pretense of consultation with his opposite number in Kabul.

US press reports, citing unnamed American government officials, have connected two of Karzai's brothers to corruption in Afghanistan. Ahmed Wali Karzai, head of the provincial council in Kandahar, the country's second-largest city, has been linked to drug trafficking, while Mahmoud Karzai, a US citizen and restaurateur, has become one of the richest men in his native country, with interests in banking, real estate and the country's main cement plant.

Despite Holbrooke's denial, it is clear that the Obama administration regards Karzai as an obstacle to its policies in the region. Holbrooke himself called the \$800 million spent on poppy eradication in Afghanistan—much of it diverted to government officials and drug traffickers,

sometimes the same people—"the most wasteful and ineffective program I have seen in 40 years."

In his interview Sunday night with the CBS television program "60 Minutes," Obama made no reference to the Bush administration's claims to be promoting democracy and economic development in Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries in the world. Instead, asked what the US mission was in Afghanistan, Obama replied, "Making sure that Al Qaeda cannot attack the US homeland and US interests and our allies. That's our No. 1 priority."

Significantly, Obama made no reference to the Taliban, the main target of US military action in the country. There have been a series of reports suggesting back-channel talks with the Taliban or other insurgent groups are under way.

The *Observer*, the sister newspaper of the *Guardian*, reported Sunday on "a radical new

initiative to bring the Taliban into the Afghan political process," quoting the US ambassador to Afghanistan declaring that the Obama administration "would be prepared to discuss the establishment of a political party, or even election candidates representing the Taliban, as part of a political strategy that would sit alongside reinforced military efforts."

William Wood, the outgoing US ambassador, said other possibilities included changing the Afghan constitution as part of negotiations with Taliban forces, and possible prisoner releases. "Insurgencies, like all wars ... end when there is an agreement," he told the newspaper. While rejecting any Taliban-ruled enclave in the country, he added, "There is room for discussion on the formation of political parties ... for elections. That is very different from shooting your way into power."

The *Observer* reported there were at least four attempts at exploratory negotiations with various factions of the anti-Kabul insurgents, including meetings with representatives of former prime minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and militia leader Jalaluddin Haqqani, who head two of the largest groups fighting the US and UN occupation forces, and with a group of former Taliban officials.

Whatever the immediate course of action in relation to Karzai himself, the Obama administration has clearly decided on a major escalation of the US intervention in Afghanistan and in the wider region, including the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. In addition to the 17,000 troops which have begun arriving in the country, there is an enormous increase in US military construction. According to one report, the Army Corps of Engineers is

now the second largest employer in Afghanistan, after the national government, and commands as much as 60 percent of the country's construction industry, with plans to spend \$4 billion this year and an even greater sum next year, largely to make the rural areas more accessible to US military forces.

The real target of the US escalation is the Pakistan border region, which Holbrooke singled out as the biggest concern of Washington policy-makers. He told the *Christian Science Monitor*, in an interview in Brussels, that the military and political situation in Afghanistan was actually not as bad as in the Pashtun-populated tribal regions on the Pakistan side of the mountainous border region, where Taliban strength has grown rapidly in the past year. "The heart of the problem for the West is in western Pakistan," he said.

Another top US adviser, Australian counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen, told the *Washington Post*, in an interview published Sunday, that the greatest US fear was an outright collapse of the Pakistan government. "We're now reaching the point where within one to six months we could see the collapse of the Pakistani state, also because of the global financial crisis, which just exacerbates all these problems," he said. "The collapse of Pakistan, Al Qaeda acquiring nuclear weapons, an extremist takeover—that would dwarf everything we've seen in the war on terror today."

Kilcullen has been a key aide to General David Petraeus, the US commander in Iraq in 2007-2008 who now heads the US Central Command, with jurisdiction over the entire Middle East and Central Asia.

At the same time, CIA Director Leon Panetta was in India and Pakistan over the weekend for talks with top officials in each country.



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