US commander in Afghanistan lobbies for more troops

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Less than six months after Barack Obama ordered 21,000 additional American soldiers to Afghanistan, and barely two weeks into the first major offensive by the reinforcements, General Stanley McChrystal, the newly-appointed US commander, has launched a lobbying drive for a substantial further increase in troop numbers.

The military is using the US media as the conduit for its demands. On Friday, the *Washington Post* published a report in which unnamed Defense Department officials and military officers essentially spelt out what McChrystal will recommend when he delivers an operational review of the Afghan war to the Obama administration at the end of August. The basic thrust of his assessment is being thoroughly leaked in order to prepare public opinion for another escalation of the conflict.

The current plan in Afghanistan provides for the beefed-up US force to spearhead a series of operations over the next 12 to 18 months, largely destroy the Taliban militarily and terrorise the population in southern Afghanistan into ending political support for the insurgency. Instead, McChrystal has already concluded that the Taliban resistance to the US/NATO occupation and the pro-US Afghan government cannot be defeated with the number of troops at his disposal.

According to the *Post*, McChrystal intends to request the deployment of thousands of American trainers and the commitment of billions more dollars to carry out a massive expansion in the size of the Afghan Army over the next several years. An unnamed senior officer told the *Post* last month that the view in the military was that as many as 30,000 more US troops were needed, on top of the 68,000 already deployed.

McChrystal has reportedly advised Defense Secretary Robert Gates that an Afghan Army of at least 270,000 soldiers is also required. At present, its strength is just 85,000 and there are less than 50,000 police. A military officer, said to be close to McChrystal, told the *Post*: "There are not enough Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police for our forces to partner with in operations." Another official declared that without an increase in the Afghan security forces, "we will lose the war".

The military has launched its lobbying campaign in the media confident that the Obama White House and the Democratic Party-controlled Congress will fall in behind its demands.

Obama has committed his administration to the establishment of a US client state in Afghanistan and selected McChrystal to ensure that this is accomplished. In Iraq, the general commanded the special forces operations that were responsible for the assassination or capture of thousands of alleged insurgent leaders and fighters and are credited with playing a major role in neutralising resistance to the US occupation.

An official told the *Post* that McChrystal has a "halo effect" in Washington and can ask for what he wants. The argument that the general and the Defense Department will make to Obama, the *Post* reported, is that "if you only have one or two years to change the opinion of the [Afghan] people", then "let's get on with it".

The emphasis on building a loyal local military force is undoubtedly part of the overall military strategy in Afghanistan, as it has been in every previous colonial war. It also has a considerable political and utterly deceptive dimension. It is aimed at providing Obama and the Congress with the cynical pretext that they are sending more combat troops to the conflict only in order to assist the Afghan Army take over responsibility for fighting the Taliban.

The leaking of McChrystal's conclusions should be taken as a warning. Under conditions in which 130,000 troops are

still in Iraq, providing further forces for Afghanistan will require the mobilisation of more National Guard and reservist units and greater efforts to cajole economically-distressed American youth to enlist in the military.

The push for more troops also underscores the unstated premises in the White House and the Pentagon—of which the vast bulk of the American people have no real knowledge. It is accepted as a *fait accompli* that US governments will be waging a war in Afghanistan and the border regions of Pakistan for a least the next five to ten years and possibly longer. At the same time, tens of thousands of American troops will be occupying Iraq.

The US-led force in Afghanistan has fought a low-level counter-insurgency war for close to eight years against armed supporters of the former Taliban regime. It has never had sufficient strength, however, to crush the resistance. Outside the major cities, the Taliban controls most of the ethnic Pashtun-populated southern provinces and enjoys a significant degree of popular support. Its fighters are able to move relatively unhindered across the border into the Pashtun-populated north-west of Pakistan, where they have safe havens, supply centres and recruitment grounds.

The Pakistani government, under US pressure, is assisting the occupation by ordering its military into a series of major offensives in the north-west to attempt to drive out the Taliban and sympathising organisations.

There is little likelihood, however, that other NATO governments will substantially increase their military contributions to the Afghan war. The British Labour government is facing a storm of political criticism over the rising number of casualties being suffered by British forces. Canada and the Netherlands have announced that they will withdraw their combat units from southern Afghanistan over the next two years. The governments of Germany, France, Spain and Turkey have resisted their troops being used in combat in the volatile south, due to the extent of domestic opposition.

The only alternative is to send more American forces and to attempt to bribe more Afghans to fight and die for a foreign occupation and the geo-political domination of their country by US imperialism and its allies.

The current lack of loyal Afghan forces is exemplified by the offensive underway in the Lower Helmand River Valley by 4,000 US marines and British troops. Just one 650-strong battalion of the Afghan Army was available to take part and there are essentially no local police in the area. The occupation forces will have to hold and secure a substantial geographical area where the Taliban enjoys local sympathy and can wage a continuous campaign of guerilla attacks.

McClatchy Newspapers reported on the weekend that McChrystal believes “western countries might well find it more attractive to spend money on expanding the Afghan Army than on keeping their own forces in Afghanistan”. The general stated: “You could have a lot more Afghan national security force capacity for the cost of coalition forces so far from home.”

McChrystal envisages a force of low-wage local mercenaries. Their training, equipment and wages would have to be entirely paid for—indefinitely—by the US and NATO governments. Rory Stewart, director of the US-based Carr Center on Human Rights Policy, estimated this month that 400,000 Afghan troops and police would cost at least $2 billion to $3 billion per year. This is a pittance compared with the cost of a comparable number of Western troops but far beyond the capacity of the puppet Afghan regime. The annual budget of President Hamid Karzai’s government is little more than $800 million.

Such a build-up of the Afghan Army, even if possible, would most likely take at least five years to complete. In the interim, American troops will bear the brunt of the killing and dying.

In an interview with McClatchy Newspapers, McChrystal spelt out the indifference of the military establishment to the opposition to the war among the American people and the cost of spending billions more on imposing US domination over Afghanistan. “If I change my calculus based on what I think economic or political things are,” he said, “then they are not benefiting from an absolutely untainted recommendation from me. I am not uninformed about the realities of the world. But what I am trying to do is be able to say ‘this is what I think it will take’.”