

# Pentagon to Obama: Send more troops or lose war in Afghanistan

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13 August 2009

The stage has been set for the Obama administration to announce another major escalation of the war in Afghanistan, amid warnings that the Taliban insurgency has to be stemmed over the next 12 to 18 months to avoid the risk of a humiliating US defeat.

General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, is continuing to use the American media to condition public opinion to accept the dispatch of more troops and the allocation of more money to bolster the occupation. The commander was due to present a review of the war to the White House this week but it has been delayed until after the August 20 Afghan presidential election.

In a weekend interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, extracts of which were published on Monday under the dire headline “Taliban Now Winning,” McChrystal declared the conflict was at a “critical and decisive moment.” The Taliban, he said, was “a very aggressive enemy right now” and the occupation forces had effectively 12 months to stop their “momentum” and “initiative.”

While McChrystal did not spell out his plan, unnamed officials who have taken part in the review provided details to the *Wall Street Journal* of what is likely to be proposed. These include:

- \* Funding to nearly double the size of the Afghan government army from 135,000 to 240,000, and the police from 82,000 to 160,000.

- \* The long-term deployment of up to 10,000 additional US troops to function as trainers and overseers for the expansion of the Afghan security forces. Most analysts agree that the process would take at least five years to complete.

- \* The short-term deployment of between two and eight additional combat brigades—amounting to

anywhere between 10,000 and 60,000 troops and support and logistics personnel—to enable coordinated offensives against Taliban strongholds. The *Wall Street Journal* highlighted concerns in the military that insurgents had largely escaped during the current US operation in Helmand Province due to the lack of troops.

Another leak this week to McClatchy Newspapers indicated that McChrystal also intends to ask for a major increase in US government employees in various advisory functions. The civilian contingent in Afghanistan was predicted to grow from 560 in late 2008 to 1,000 by the end of this year and up to 1,350 by mid-2010. Essentially, their role will be to run entire departments of the puppet government in Kabul.

McChrystal’s views are believed to be strongly backed by the head of Central Command, General David Petraeus, who was responsible for the US surge in Iraq.

The thinking in US ruling circles was spelt out this week by Anthony Cordesman, senior foreign policy analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Cordesman was invited by McChrystal to assist in the preparation of his review and had recently returned from Afghanistan. On August 10, he published his conclusions in a column in the British-based *Times*, headlined “More Troops, Fewer Caveats—Let’s Get Serious.”

Cordesman condemned the Bush administration for failing to take the Taliban insurgency seriously until 2007 and criticised NATO states for failing to provide enough troops and for placing limits on their use. Washington and NATO, he declared, had allowed “the enemy to take the initiative for more than half-a-decade.”

He also labeled the Afghan government of President

Hamid Karzai as “corrupt, grossly overcentralised, lacking in capacity and virtually absent in large parts of Afghanistan.” He blasted international reconstruction and aid in Afghanistan as “a dysfunctional, wasteful mess that is crippled by bureaucratic divisions.”

The result, Cordesman declared, was that “the Taliban have gone from a defeated group of exiles to a force that has threatened to defeat NATO and the Afghan government.” The insurgency had increased the number of districts under its control from 30 in 2003 to 160 by the end of 2008, and its attacks on occupation forces had soared by 60 percent between October 2008 and April 2009. Seventy-five US and NATO troops were killed in July, the highest number of the entire war, and hundreds more were wounded. So far in August, another 27 soldiers have lost their lives.

Cordesman’s proposed remedy was the dispatch of “three to nine additional combat brigades” on top of the 21,000 troops already ordered by Obama this year, the doubling of the Afghan army and police, a purge of corrupt elements from the Afghan government, an overhaul of the “divided, grossly inefficient and corrupt international aid effort” and greater action against the Pakistani border tribes that are aiding the Afghan insurgency.

The US and NATO governments, he also insisted, “will need to be more honest with their peoples” and make clear that the war in Afghanistan would require “a long-term commitment.” There is common agreement among pro-war analysts like Cordesman that while the next 12 months will be crucial militarily in pushing back the Taliban, it will take five to 10 years to completely stabilise Afghanistan as a pliant US client state.

As well as thousands of casualties, the financial cost of the war will be enormous. Since 2001, Afghanistan has already cost the US Treasury some \$223 billion. Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution told the *Washington Post* this month that the cost of military operations alone would more than likely balloon to \$100 billion over the coming year. Bing West, a former assistant defense secretary, conservatively estimated that, in addition, “Afghan forces will need \$4 billion a year for another decade, with a like sum for development.”

Despite the crisis confronting the US budget, a further escalation of the war is likely to pass through

Congress with little difficulty. In May, 17 Democratic and Republican senators on the Armed Services Committee signed a joint letter to Obama calling for the doubling of the Afghan Army—which would necessarily involve the dispatch of more US trainers.

This week, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham called on the Democratic majority in both houses of Congress to join with the Republicans in responding favourably to a request for more war funding. “Let’s not ‘Rumsfeld’ Afghanistan,” he declared, referring to Bush administration Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who notoriously insisted that the Iraq occupation could be carried out with less than half the troops recommended by senior generals.

Graham appealed to the Democrats: “Let’s not do this thing on the cheap. Let’s have enough combat power and engagement across the board to make sure we’re successful. Quite frankly, we’ve got a lot of ground to make up.”

The most significant response to the steady leaking of McChrystal’s plans has been that of the Obama administration. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and National Security Advisor Gen. James Jones have stated on a number of occasions that the president has “not ruled out” sending more troops.

The very fact that Obama has made no attempt to silence speculation over plans for additional troops is a strong indication that a decision has already been made. Obama was propelled into office by decisive sections of the US ruling elite precisely to focus on the war in Afghanistan and shore up the geo-political interests of American imperialism in the resource-rich Central Asian region—regardless of how much it costs in blood and dollars.



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