Afghan war escalating in defiance of popular opposition

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A major increase in American and NATO troop numbers in Afghanistan is on the agenda in the wake of last week's corrupt and illegitimate election in that country. The ballot—which witnessed a mass voter boycott—has underscored the widespread opposition within the country to the ongoing US-led military occupation.

Over the coming weeks, General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of US and NATO occupation forces, is scheduled to present the White House with an assessment of the military and political situation. Defence Secretary Robert Gates stated on August 13 that the review will not include "specific recommendations or requests for more forces". What it will include, however, has been largely leaked to the media by US military commanders and foreign policy analysts.

McChrystal is expected to inform the White House that without more troops, his forces cannot curb the growth of Taliban-led resistance over the next 18 months. The review is likely to dismiss the Afghan army and police as inadequate and ineffectual, and the Afghan government as too corrupt and divided, to be of any significant assistance to military operations. It will also assess that Pakistani army operations and US air strikes have failed to destroy insurgent safe havens over the border in the tribal agencies of North West Pakistan.

The writing is on the wall. The US media—from the *Wall Street Journal* to the *New York Times*—is already conducting a campaign to prepare public opinion for a further "surge" of US troops in Afghanistan. Article after article has highlighted the consensus in military circles that the occupation does not have enough "boots on the ground". Speculation about the additional troops required ranges from two combat brigades to as many as nine—that is, between 10,000 and 60,000 personnel.

The commander of US forces in Central Asia, General David Petraeus, made clear in a speech on Tuesday that Washington also expects NATO states and countries such as Australia to make significant further military contributions. "An enormous amount of work and tough fighting lies ahead," he declared, "and reversing the downward trend in security, in particular, will require a sustained, substantial commitment from all involved."

These preparations for a major escalation of the war in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan are taking place in open defiance of public opinion around the globe.

In Afghanistan itself, the scale of the election boycott, particularly in the ethnic Pashtun southern provinces, demonstrated that the insurgency has control of significant areas of the country and enjoys considerable popular support. More foreign troops will only fuel resistance. A poll last month, mainly conducted in cities under US/NATO control, found that 68 percent wanted a negotiated peace, not an escalation of fighting. In Pakistan, 67 percent told a recent Al Jazeerah survey they opposed the American air strikes taking place in the North West.

In the US, a CNN/Opinion Research Corp poll this month found that 53 percent of respondents opposed the war. A *Washington Post*-ABC survey found that 41 percent opposed the occupation of Afghanistan, compared with 31 percent who still indicated support. Sending more troops was opposed by 45 percent. Indicative of shifting public opinion, a majority of the organisation, Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) voted at its convention this month to demand the "immediate and unconditional withdrawal of US forces

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from Afghanistan" as well as Iraq.

Public sentiment in countries involved in the US-led occupation is also opposed.

* In Britain, a ConRes survey in July found 52 percent wanted the 9,000 British troops withdrawn and 60 percent opposed any additional troops being sent.

* Recent polling found 52 percent of Canadians opposed the war and just 38 percent thought the decision to send 2,800 troops was correct.

* Even before the Australian government earlier this year announced an increase in troop numbers for Afghanistan from 1,100 to 1,550, polls registered 66 percent in opposition to the war.

* An I*fop/Le Figaro* poll in France this month found 64 percent opposed the war and the deployment of 3,000 French troops.

* A poll published on July 30 by Italy's *La Repubblica* found 56 percent wanted the 3,250 Italian troops withdrawn.

* A survey in Germany last month registered 62 percent support for the withdrawal of the 4,500 German troops.

* In the Netherlands, 74 percent told a July poll they wanted the withdrawal of all or most of the 1,770 Dutch personnel.

This overwhelming opposition to the war finds no expression within official circles in any country. Virtually every political party and organisation that postured as an opponent of the Iraq war either openly supports the occupation of Afghanistan or does so implicitly by its silence.

The situation in the US is particularly striking. Having won office by appealing to anti-war sentiment, Obama is pressing ahead with the dramatic escalation of the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. That was precisely why powerful sections of the American political establishment backed him as a vehicle for refocussing foreign policy on Afghanistan and Central Asia, while continuing the occupation of Iraq.

The war in Afghanistan is crucial to US strategic and economic interests, as well as to the major European powers. It is the linchpin in a strategy of establishing US domination in Central Asia and preventing this energy-rich region coming under the sway of rivals such as China and Russia.

As the war grinds on, the entire liberal milieu has fallen in behind Obama. The commentator Bob Herbert of the *New York Times*, for example, a critic of the Bush administration, this week denounced the "pathetic unwillingness of the American people to share in the sacrifices of these wars". If Afghanistan was "absolutely essential", he declared, then the military draft should be reintroduced.

The necessary conclusions must be drawn. The struggle against war requires a complete political break with all the parties of big business and their apologists and a turn to mobilising the international working class against the source of militarism—the capitalist profit system itself.

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