

# Congressional hearings set stage for escalation of Afghanistan war

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Testimony Tuesday by the senior US military commander and the US ambassador in Afghanistan before the House and Senate armed services committees has set the stage for a dramatic escalation of the war in Afghanistan and its further expansion across the border into Pakistan.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal and the ambassador, Karl Eikenberry, a retired general who previously commanded US forces in Afghanistan, both asserted their agreement with President Barack Obama's decision—announced at West Point on December 1—to send another 30,000 US troops into the country.

The review process that consumed countless hours of discussion by Obama and his top aides has produced a policy that essentially provides McChrystal with everything he requested and leaves the strategy that he was pursuing in Afghanistan unchanged.

Ambassador Eikenberry, who together with McChrystal repeatedly referred to the two men's shared military careers, told the House panel, "I can say without equivocation that I fully support this approach," adding that he was "exactly aligned with General McChrystal."

The remark was aimed at distancing himself from a cable he sent from Kabul, which was leaked to the media last month, warning that the deployment of tens of thousands more American troops would not accomplish US objectives, given the corruption and impotence of the Afghan puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai.

In his opening statement, McChrystal repeated the standard justification for the US war, stating that to achieve the "core goal of defeating Al Qaeda and preventing their return to Afghanistan, we must disrupt and degrade the Taliban's capacity, deny their access to the Afghan population, and strengthen the Afghan Security Forces."

US military and security officials have estimated that there are no more than 100 Al Qaeda members in Afghanistan and have presented no evidence to back the repeated assertions that the organization is operating under the wing of the Taliban.

As for the Taliban itself, the term is used indiscriminately

to describe the armed resistance to the US-led occupation that has spread over at least 80 percent of Afghanistan and has been fueled by the killing of civilians in US airstrikes and ground operations.

The real aim of the US escalation, which will increase the number of American soldiers and Marines in the country to over 100,000, is to suppress this resistance through the use of overwhelming force.

The questioning of McChrystal was, with few exceptions, characterized by the habitual obsequiousness of the politicians, Democratic and Republican alike, to the generals who head the US military. Republicans attempted to maneuver McChrystal into making statements critical of President Obama, questioning, in particular, whether he had been shortchanged on the number of troops being sent to Afghanistan. Media reports suggested he had asked for 40,000.

They also focused on Obama's pledge in his West Point speech that the Afghanistan "surge" would begin to wind down in July 2011, when a gradual withdrawal of US forces would commence. The Republicans demanded to know whether this promise did not undermine the mission and allow the insurgents to wait out the US occupation forces.

McChrystal, who in the run-up to Obama's decision had pressured the White House to agree to his troop request, using leaked memos and even a public speech in London, did not take the bait.

The general said he was "comfortable" with the number of troops and did "not anticipate the requirement to ask for additional forces." The difference between his request for 40,000 troops and Obama's decision to send 30,000 will doubtless be erased with the sending of additional "support" troops and the use of private military contractors.

In the Bush administration's Iraq "surge" an announced deployment of an additional 21,000 troops was surreptitiously increased to nearly 30,000, with the Pentagon sending additional forces in the form of support units. This process has already begun in Afghanistan, with Defense Secretary Robert Gates announcing to a Senate committee

last week that he may need to send 3,000 more troops to assist the 30,000 stipulated by Obama.

There are nearly 10,000 private military contractors in Afghanistan, a number that has grown sharply in recent months. In total, the Department of Defense employs over 100,000 contractors in the country to support the US occupation by providing essential services formerly provided by military personnel.

As for Obama's pledge to begin withdrawing American troops by July 11, McChrystal dismissed it with the contempt it deserves, knowing full well that the White House tacked it on to the escalation proposal in a bid to counter mass popular opposition to the war in the US.

"I don't view July 2011 as a deadline," McChrystal told the House Armed Services Committee. "At that time, we'll evaluate the time and scope of a possible drawdown."

Asked whether he had recommended setting a date for withdrawing some of the additional occupation troops, McChrystal acknowledged, "I made no recommendations at all on that." Nor does he see himself bound by Obama's political gesture.

The Democrats on the two committees, in their overwhelming majority, indicated their support for the war's escalation. Several of them, however, attempted to shift the focus of the questioning to Pakistan. Representative Rob Andrews, a Democrat from New Jersey, referred to the decision to send additional US troops into Afghanistan as a "bank shot," suggesting that the real target should be Pakistan.

Andrews asked McChrystal whether "force protection" could be invoked to allow the pursuit of insurgents across the border into Pakistan.

The US general allowed that while he would reserve the right of US forces to do whatever is required to defend themselves, he would be "very cautious" about cross-border raids. "The sovereignty of Pakistan is as sacred as the sovereignty as any other country," he proclaimed.

Such sentiments were not in evidence in September 2008, when Special Operations units, then under McChrystal's direct command, carried out a raid against a Pakistani village. Local officials said that the raid killed 20 people, most of them women and children.

While both McChrystal and Eikenberry dodged questions on Pakistan by insisting that it was not their direct responsibility, it has become increasingly evident that a central feature of the Obama administration's escalation will be stepped up military operations in that country as well.

The *New York Times* Tuesday cited US and Pakistani officials as reporting that Washington had warned the Pakistani government "that if it does not act more aggressively, the United States will use considerably more

force on the Pakistani side to shut down Taliban attacks on American forces in Afghanistan." The warning came, the *Times* reported, during a visit last month to Islamabad by Obama's national security advisor, Gen. James Jones, and the administration's chief advisor on counterterrorism, John Brennan.

The warning was interpreted by Pakistani officials as a threat to launch new raids by US Special Operations troops across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and to expand Predator drone missile attacks, including against the city of Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan, where Taliban leaders have reportedly taken refuge.

In his testimony before the House panel Tuesday, McChrystal hinted at the sharp rise in US casualties—as well as the hundreds of billions of dollars in additional spending—that will accompany the Afghanistan "surge." He said, "Success will require steadfast commitment and incur significant costs."

This warning was spelled out more explicitly the day before in an address by Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Marines at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, who are to be among the first elements deployed in the escalation.

"I don't want to be in any way unclear about that," said Mullen in predicting a sharp increase in the killing and wounding of American troops. "This is what happened in Iraq during the surge and, as tragic as it is, to turn this thing around, it will be a part of this surge, as well."

Mullen also told the Marines: "We are not winning, which means we are losing and as we are losing, the message traffic out there to [Afghan resistance] recruits keeps getting better and better and more keep coming."

Unmentioned by the witnesses, the members of Congress and, of course, the media, is what the escalation will mean in terms of the killing and maiming of Afghan civilians. Behind all of McChrystal's euphemisms about "degrading" or "rolling back" the Taliban, what is being prepared is the unleashing of massive and sustained violence designed to crush those resisting the US-led occupation as well as those civilians who support or harbor them.



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