

Central Command chief reassures Senate on July 2011 “withdrawal” date

No US military exit from Afghanistan

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In congressional testimony this week, Gen. David Petraeus, commander of American forces in the Middle East and Central Asia, made clear that the July 2011 timeline announced last December by President Obama to begin withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan could be extended.

He further stressed that the date did not imply either a rapid drawdown of troops or an early end to the nearly 9-year war. On the contrary, Petraeus and other top officials, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, used congressional hearings to underscore Washington’s commitment to the indefinite military occupation of Afghanistan.

At a hearing Tuesday of the Senate Armed Services Committee, where he was pressed on Obama’s July 2011 date both by committee Chairman Carl Levin (Democrat from Michigan) and the ranking Republican, John McCain (Republican from Arizona), Petraeus said, “We have to be careful with timelines. We are assuming that we will have those kinds of conditions that will enable [withdrawal] by that time, in July 2011.” He added that July 2011 was “the projection.”

Asked by Levin whether his support for the July 2011 date represented his “best personal, professional judgment,” Petraeus replied, “A qualified yes.” He added, “There was a nuance to what the president said that was very important, that did not imply a race for the exits, a search for the light to turn off or anything like that.”

The US Central Command chief briefly fainted during Tuesday’s hearing, which was then suspended for a day. When he returned Wednesday, Petraeus read out a statement obviously intended to dampen speculation that his previous day’s testimony reflected opposition to Obama’s July 2011 date to begin withdrawing troops.

“I support and agree” with the date, he said, and then added, “It is important that July 2011 be seen for what it is, the date when a process begins based on conditions.”

In the course of the hearing Petraeus refused to rule out asking for additional US troops. He said it was “not the intention right now” to request any new US troops, but added, “I would never rule out coming back and asking for something

more.”

Michèle Flournoy, the undersecretary of defense for policy, sought to underscore the commitment of the administration to a long-term occupation of Afghanistan, telling the committee that Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his cabinet ministers understood the “depth and enduring nature of the US commitment to Afghanistan.”

Citing unnamed US officials on the July 2011 “withdrawal” date, the *New York Times* wrote on Tuesday, “Even if some troops do begin coming home then, the officials said that it may be a small number, and that Mr. Obama could easily end his term with more forces in Afghanistan than when he began it.”

When President Obama announced his military “surge” in Afghanistan in a West Point speech last December, he cynically sought to portray the dispatch of an additional 30,000 troops as the prelude to an early end to the war. He declared that July 2011 would mark the beginning of the withdrawal of US forces.

Since then, the US has poured 20,000 troops into Afghanistan, mostly in the Pashtun-dominated south, where the Taliban originated and remains in control of most of Kandahar and Helmand provinces. This influx has brought the US troop level to 93,000, to rise to 105,000 by the end of the summer—more than double the US deployment when Obama took office.

The result has been a sharp rise in Afghan civilian deaths at the hands of US and NATO occupation forces as well as an explosive growth in US and NATO troop casualties. This week’s hearings—Petraeus before the Senate Armed Services Committee and Gates and Mullen before the Senate Appropriations Committee—came in the midst of one of the bloodiest stretches for occupation troops since the US invasion in October 2001.

On Tuesday, four NATO troops, two of them British, were killed in four separate attacks in the south and east of the country. Two more NATO soldiers were killed in the south of Afghanistan on Friday. So far this month, at least 46 NATO soldiers have been killed, including at least 23 Americans. The death toll for US and NATO forces so far this year is more than double that of a year ago.

There are mounting signs that the military “surge” is foundering. Last week, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, said major military operations in Kandahar, the second largest city in Afghanistan and longtime stronghold of the Taliban, would be delayed at least until September. The US-led offensive was supposed to begin this month.

However, as McChrystal also acknowledged, an earlier offensive against Marjah, a Taliban stronghold in Helmand province, had failed to dislodge the Taliban from the region. The Marjah operation, which was launched in February, was intended to be a showcase for McChrystal’s new counterinsurgency strategy and a testing ground for the far larger operation in Kandahar.

But as US officials have admitted, they face widespread popular hostility to foreign troops as well as the US puppet government of Karzai. That hostility extends to US-trained Afghan police and troops, who are largely ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks from the north.

Even the US establishment press not infrequently notes that in the Pashtun south, the Taliban enjoys considerable popular support, largely because it is seen as the only alternative to the Americans and their stooge regime in Kabul.

US war propaganda suffered another blow last week when aides to former cabinet members who had been sacked by Karzai told the Western press that the Afghan president no longer believed the US could defeat the insurgency and was maneuvering to cut his own deal with the Taliban and Pakistan.

The acknowledged popular opposition among the Afghan people does not in the slightest alter the full support for the war by both the Democratic and Republican parties and the media. Nor does the growing opposition of the American people.

A *Washington Post*/ABC poll released last week showed 53 percent of respondents saying the war was “not worth fighting”—the highest percentage in three years. The poll also found that 39 percent of the public believes the US is losing the war, only 3 percentage points less than those who think the US is winning.

The US operation around Kandahar suffered another blow on Tuesday when a massive car bomb killed Hajji Abdul Jabar Murghani, the US-backed governor of the Arghandab district, a key location in the American military buildup just outside the city of Kandahar.

The assault on Kandahar, when it is launched, will be bloody and protracted. In preparation for the attack, Kandahar is being carved into smaller districts and a ring of military checkpoints is being built around the city.

Following the failure of the operation in Marjah, the US is seeking to install a puppet government in the city first, before unleashing troops and Special Forces to kill anti-occupation forces in the city’s environs and then carry out a house-to-house campaign to kill or arrest all those suspected of actively supporting the Taliban.

There are growing concerns within both the military and the political establishment over the course of the surge and the growth of domestic anti-war sentiment. Last week, prior to a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels, US Defense Secretary Gates warned that the US war effort had to show demonstrable success in rolling back the influence of the Taliban by the end of the year, or public opposition in the US and its allied countries would rise sharply.

But one unnamed “senior military officer” told the *New York Times* this week, “If anybody thinks Kandahar will be solved this year, they are kidding themselves.”

“Things are not looking good,” said Bruce O. Riedel, a former CIA operative currently at the Brookings Institution, who helped formulate the administration’s Afghan strategy in early 2009. “There’s not much sign of the turnaround that people were hoping for.”

Hence the growing concern inside and outside the Obama administration over the July 2011 “deadline” for beginning to withdraw troops.

Testifying Wednesday before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Admiral Mullen and Gates both asked Congress and the American people for “patience.” They sought to put the best possible face on the military and security situation, claiming that despite setbacks, it was moving in the right direction.

Gates himself showed little patience with public criticism. In an implicit warning to the media and Congress, he said, “This is not something where we do ourselves any favors by tearing ourselves up by the roots every week to see if we’re growing.”

Last Monday, the *New York Times* published a front-page article hailing the supposedly recent discovery that Afghanistan is rich in valuable mineral deposits. The article estimated the value of such resources to be \$1 trillion or more, and noted that bidding on mining rights would begin as early as this fall. It made clear that the US intends to use its military presence to insure that its major economic rivals, such as China, do not gain control over the deposits.

The *Times* article, intended to boost flagging support for the war, only demonstrates its criminal nature. The Obama administration is escalating a filthy imperialist war of plunder and colonial occupation.



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