

US retreats from strategic Afghanistan valley

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26 February 2011

The Pentagon is withdrawing its forces from the northeastern Pech Valley in Afghanistan that it had previously insisted was strategically vital to the US war, now in its tenth year.

The pullback, which began on February 15, is expected to be completed over the next two months, according to a report Friday in the *New York Times*. It will see the US military abandon a string of combat outposts along the river valley, where over 100 US troops have been killed and many hundreds more wounded since they first moved into the area in 2003.

This pullback is only the latest in a series of withdrawals. The US military retreated from the neighboring Korengal Valley to the south last April, after 42 soldiers had died and hundreds more had been wounded in three years of fighting. In October of 2009, it pulled out of Nuristan Province to the north, where four main bases were abandoned after nearly being overrun in a series of battles over the previous year.

Some US officers have stressed that each withdrawal has emboldened the armed groups resisting the US occupation, leading them to expand their attacks into other areas.

The strategic significance of the Pech Valley is underscored by the role it played in the disintegration of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. It was the scene of some of the bitterest fighting from the Soviet intervention in 1979 until 1988, when Moscow decided to pull its troops out of the valley. Within a few months, the mujahedin resistance fighters had defeated the Soviet-backed Afghan army in the valley, and by 1989, the Soviet military had withdrawn in defeat.

The valley is one of the main arteries through the area, which borders on Pakistan and has been a key transit point for Pashtun resistance fighters crossing freely over the Durand Line, the arbitrary border imposed by British imperialism that divides the Pashtun populations of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

American military deployment in the area was previously seen as key to a counterinsurgency strategy, which held that the resistance could only be defeated to the extent that US troops deployed among Afghan villages and not just in the major cities. Along with the setting up of remote forward operating bases, the US carried out major investments in the area, including \$7.5 million for the building of a new road.

A review of this strategy begun under General Stanley McChrystal and accelerated under his replacement, General David Petraeus, led to the conclusion that the Pech deployment was unsustainable and that replicating the use of troops being

carried out in the valley throughout Afghanistan would require an occupation force of at least 600,000.

The tone of the coverage of the withdrawal in the major media has been noticeably guarded, and the military itself has tried to present it as merely a tactical readjustment. The clear attempt is to obscure the obvious: the US military has suffered a major defeat.

Major General John Campbell, who heads US military operations in eastern Afghanistan, is “repositioning” his troops “within the province to achieve greater effect and allow for more flexibility,” a Pentagon spokesperson said, adding, “There are dozens of mountain passes and we cannot be in all of them.”

This is unquestionably true, and to the extent that US occupation forces are not in these areas, the Taliban and other armed resistance groups will use them to organize their forces and carry out attacks.

A more revealing rationale was provided by someone the *Times* described as an “American military official familiar” with the withdrawal decision. “What we figured out is that people in the Pech really aren’t anti-US or anti-anything; they just want to be left alone,” he said. “Our presence is what’s destabilizing the area.”

The same could be said for all of Afghanistan, where the presence of nearly 100,000 US and 50,000 other foreign troops has “destabilized” the entire country, leaving hundreds of thousands of civilians dead and wounded and fueling the steady growth of the armed resistance, which is now active in virtually every region. They “want to be left alone” and are prepared to fight to expel the US occupation so that they will be.

The withdrawal also explodes the entire rationale of the “surge” launched by the Obama administration, which held that the US escalation would knock back the “insurgency” and allow for the training of Afghan puppet forces, who would take control of areas previously held by American troops.

As the *Times* reports, “Afghan officials worry that the shift of troops amounts to an abandonment of territory where multiple insurgent groups are well established, an area that Afghans fear they may not be ready to defend on their own.”

Indeed, a November 2008 report issued by the West Point Combating Terrorism Center gave a frank assessment of the array of forces operating in the area: “The enemy in Korengal and nearby Pech consists of a variety of fighters belonging to

Kashmir Khan's Hizb-i-Islami faction, Abu Ikhlas' al-Qa'ida, angry local Afghans who resent the presence of 'infidels' or any outsiders in their valleys, Lashkar-i-Tayyaba, Taliban fighters led by Dost Muhammad and Qara Ziaur Rahman, Nuristanis led by Mullah Munibullah, Arab fighters from a group calling itself Jami'at al-Da'wa al-Qur'an wa'l-Sunna, and Pakistani volunteers. Among these groups are hundreds of fighters who routinely ambush U.S. patrols, plant IEDs, snipe at exposed soldiers, shell observation posts, and on occasion even attempt to storm forward operating bases."

One senior Afghan officer frankly confessed to the *Times* that there is not a chance that Afghan troops can hold the area. "According to my experience in the military and knowledge of the area, it's absolutely impractical for the Afghan National Army to protect the area without the Americans," said Major Turab, the former second in command of the Afghan battalion stationed in the valley. "It will be a suicidal mission."

Expressing a similar opinion was Afghan Defense Minister Rahim Wardak, who is in Washington for consultations with his Pentagon overlords. "It will be difficult for Afghans to hold these areas on their own," he told the *Washington Post*. Noting that he had himself participated in the campaign in the Pech Valley that initiated the defeat of the Soviet occupation, he added, "We have to be very careful in how we manage this area."

The *Times* article acknowledged that the debate within the US military on withdrawal from the Pech Valley had been "painful," due in no small part to fears within the top brass over the impact on troop morale of abandoning an area in which many thousands of US troops have been deployed, and more have died than in any other region except Helmand Province in the south.

The tone of this debate at the level of troops in the field was reflected in interviews given by US Army soldiers to the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes* last September, when plans for the withdrawal were being discussed.

"A lot of people would take it personally," said Sgt. Kelly O'Donnell. "They would all ask why we were there in the first place. 'Cause we lost some boys. How do you explain that to your guys?"

Similarly, in a posting on a military-oriented web site earlier this week, a soldier deployed in the Pech area last year wrote: "What upsets me the most is all the blood, sweat, and tears put into Kunar ... by thousands of Infantryman who have rotated in Kunar over the years will be for nothing. I sometimes question what is the point of going back on deployment after deployment and fighting these wars when it seems to be for nothing."

That such sentiments are apparently not confined to the ranks was made clear in a speech delivered Friday by Defense Secretary Robert Gates at the US Military Academy at West Point.

Speaking to an audience of cadets, Gates predicted that "the

odds of repeating another Afghanistan or Iraq—invading, pacifying and administering a large third-world country" would be low, while adding that the US military would have to prepare to fight a range of potential adversaries, including "terrorists, insurgents, militia groups, rogue states, or emerging powers."

He went on—referring to the ongoing US military deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan—to declare that "any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should 'have his head examined,' as General MacArthur so delicately put it."

The comments, delivered to the audience of future officers, not a few of whom will find themselves sent to fight and potentially die in Afghanistan or Iraq within the year, are extraordinary.

They effectively debunk the propaganda claims made by the Obama administration that the US intervention in Afghanistan was a "war of necessity," fought to protect the American people from a supposedly omnipresent terrorist threat. Instead, Gates tells us, to even propose such a war today would be insane.

Reflected in the defense secretary's speech is the growing perplexity and even demoralization within official Washington and the American ruling elite generated by the insoluble economic crisis at home and the inability to achieve its aims abroad of establishing US hegemony over key energy-producing regions by the means of aggressive war.

There is within both Gates's remarks and the military withdrawals carried out from strategic areas of Afghanistan the unmistakable whiff of an impending defeat that may well rival the debacle in Vietnam in terms of its social and political impact within the United States itself.



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