

Petraeus outlines indefinite Afghan occupation in congressional testimony

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Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General David Petraeus demanded increased funds and an indefinite US military occupation in order to secure what he described as “fragile and reversible” gains.

Petraeus, the top commander of US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan, told senators on Tuesday that “the momentum achieved by the Taliban in Afghanistan since 2005 has been arrested in much of the country and reversed in a number of important areas.”

Since 2009, President Barack Obama has poured an additional 30,000 troops into Afghanistan, while escalating the bombing campaign across the border in Pakistan. There are now 150,000 troops from the US, NATO and other allied countries in Afghanistan, in addition to forces from the Afghan National Army.

Petraeus, the senior military commander in Iraq during the “surge” that brutally suppressed militant opposition to the US occupation between 2007 and 2008, is charged with replicating that policy in Afghanistan.

“While the security progress achieved over the past year is significant, it is also fragile and reversible,” the general warned. He stated that “insurgents are already striving to regain lost momentum and lost safe havens as we enter the spring fighting season.”

A more pessimistic assessment of the occupation was provided during the hearing by General Ronald Burgess, head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, who stated, “The Taliban in the south has shown resilience and still influences much of the population, particularly outside urban areas.” There had been “no apparent degradation in their capacity to fight,” said Burgess.

There is ample evidence of the continuing ability of insurgents to operate despite the surge of US troops into Afghanistan. There were 711 US armed forces personnel killed in Afghanistan in 2010, a large increase over the 521 killed the year before. Opponents of the US occupation are still able to lay roadside bombs across much of the country, while US commanders have been forced to abandon once-held areas in order to focus on centers of opposition like

Kandahar, Afghanistan’s second city.

Petraeus spelled out some of the gruesome details of “progress” in Afghanistan, telling senators that US and allied forces had killed or captured on average 360 “targeted insurgent leaders” in each 90-day period over the past year.

The methods of this campaign against the insurgency in Afghanistan include aerial bombardments, nighttime raids, special forces assassinations and a vast network of road blocks and other intrusions in the lives of ordinary Afghans. Thousands of civilians have been killed, wounded or thrown into US and Afghan prisons—where torture is rife—in the course of these operations.

Petraeus also boasted before Congress of “unprecedented” coordination between the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan to prevent the flow of support for the insurgency from Pakistan’s tribal areas. In the past year, the US has intensified its aerial campaign inside Pakistani territory using unmanned drones to kill suspected insurgents. Hundreds of civilians, including women and children, have been killed in these raids.

The tragic human cost of this coordination was demonstrated the day before Petraeus addressed Congress. Pakistani jet fighters, acting on intelligence from their US allies, killed at least nine people in the country’s Orakzai tribal area. While Pakistani officials claimed the victims were insurgents, there are reports that fighters had moved out of the area following an earlier attack by an unmanned US aerial drone. Orakzai, like much of the tribal region bordering Afghanistan, has been devastated by US and Pakistani military attacks, with thousands of impoverished tribespeople forced to flee their homes.

The result of the US occupation of Afghanistan has been devastating. The United Nations reported last week that 2,777 civilians were killed in Afghanistan in 2010, a rise of 15 percent over the previous year. According to the UN, 722 civilians were killed by US and allied forces last year. These figures grossly underestimate the number of civilians killed, due to the US policy of either not reporting civilian casualties or mis-recording them as “insurgents.”

A large number of civilians have died in US and NATO attacks so far in 2011, including at least 65 civilians killed in a US-led offensive in the province of Kunar. In one such atrocity, on March 3 a US air strike killed nine children collecting firewood near a Forward Operating Base in the Darah-Ye District.

While the US military blames the Taliban for the majority of civilian casualties, all the deaths in Afghanistan and Pakistan are a product of the colonial war for which Obama, Petraeus and the entire US political establishment bear responsibility.

While Obama had set a date of mid-2011 for the partial withdrawal of the additional US troops sent to Afghanistan—in an effort to placate mass opposition to the war—it is clear that no significant drawdown is planned. Petraeus and the military brass, as well as Obama himself, have repeatedly stated that any withdrawal of personnel will be dictated by “conditions on the ground.”

Petraeus contemptuously dismissed the mid-2011 drawdown date, telling senators, “We need to focus not just on the year ahead, but increasingly on the goal agreed at Lisbon of having Afghan forces in the lead throughout Afghanistan by the end of 2014.”

However, in an acknowledgement that this official goal was unlikely to be met, Petraeus stated that the US would maintain large-scale garrisons in the country for years to come.

“We are now also beginning to look beyond 2014, as well, as the United States and Afghanistan, and NATO and Afghanistan, discuss possible strategic partnerships,” the general said. He added, “There will be an enduring commitment of some form by the international community to Afghanistan.”

Obama has shown himself entirely willing to let the generals, backed by the most right-wing sections of the Republican Party, determine the course of military strategy. During the questioning of Petraeus, Senator John McCain, the senior Republican on the committee and the party’s 2008 candidate for the presidency, repeated the demands of the military brass that US forces not only maintain their current manpower in Afghanistan but prepare for an increased level of fighting over the spring.

“We should not rush to failure, and we should cultivate strategic patience,” McCain said. “Our country, and especially this Congress, must remain committed to this fight.”

Speaking for the Obama administration, Michele Flournoy, undersecretary of defense for policy, told senators, “We have no intention of declaring premature transitions” that would go against military objectives.

The statements of McCain and Flournoy echo comments

made by US Defense Secretary Robert Gates at NATO’s Brussels headquarters last week. Gates demanded that Washington’s allies in Europe commit to a protracted fight in Afghanistan rather than make “ill-timed, precipitous or uncoordinated” troop withdrawals.

There are growing tensions within NATO over the military situation in Afghanistan, with the European powers increasingly concerned about a military debacle in the country. A report by the British parliament’s foreign affairs committee warned that despite the “optimistic progress appraisals we heard from some military and official sources...the security situation across Afghanistan as a whole is deteriorating.”

In a direct criticism of the military strategy pursued by Petraeus, first in Iraq and now in Afghanistan, the British parliamentarians stated, “We question the fundamental assumption that success in Afghanistan can be ‘bought’ through a strategy of ‘clear, hold and build.’” Instead, the committee urged the US “not to delay its significant involvement in talks with the Taliban leadership” without which they suggested no resolution to the war was possible.

The war in Afghanistan is being fought in defiance of public opinion in the European members of NATO and in the United States itself. A recent poll conducted by the *Washington Post* and ABC News found that almost two-thirds of Americans say the war is not worth fighting, and three-quarters support a “substantial” withdrawal of US military personnel this year.

While their views are nowhere expressed in the US two-party system or the corporate-owned media, millions of people in the US are disgusted with the war, which they see as a tragic waste of human life and a drain on essential social resources. The Congressional Research Service reported that the US has spent \$336 billion on the war in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, states and municipalities across the US are passing draconian budget cuts that will destroy thousands of jobs and gut social services.

While thanking the US Congress for providing billions of dollars of additional funding for the war over the past year, Petraeus called for even greater resources to be poured into the operations of the state department in Afghanistan, telling senators that joint civilian-military operations were vital to the “accomplishment of the overall mission.”



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