

US generals balk at Obama's Afghanistan withdrawal plan

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In the latest conflict between Obama and his military commanders, the senior US general in Afghanistan is opposing administration plans for troop withdrawals from the US-occupied country.

General John Allen has given briefings to US Congressional delegations visiting Afghanistan in which he and other officers opposed administration proposals for a continuing drawdown of US troops, up to the formal transfer of security operations to Afghan forces at the end of 2014.

Obama put forward his withdrawal plan last June, announcing that the 33,000 US troops that he had ordered into Afghanistan—as part of a military “surge” aimed at quashing growing resistance to the US-led occupation—would leave the country by next summer. Some 10,000 soldiers and Marines are supposed to be out of Afghanistan by the end of this year, and another 23,000 by the summer of 2012.

In announcing the plan, Obama insisted that the US forces would continue leaving Afghanistan at a “steady pace” between 2012 and 2014, with US-trained Afghan puppet forces taking over operations now conducted by American units.

It is this second phase—the gradual withdrawal of the 68,000 US troops that will remain in Afghanistan after the “surge” force leaves—that has provoked opposition in the military brass. Allen and other commanders insist that the 68,000-strong force remain intact until 2014, when the Afghan National Army and police will supposedly be ready to take over the decade-old war.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, this position is supported by an “internal assessment” by NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which Allen leads. Citing unnamed officials, the *Journal* reported that the assessment “warns that cutting US troop levels below 68,000 would make it harder to clear and hold insurgent havens, and would complicate efforts to protect supply lines and bases ahead of the scheduled 2014 handover.”

The US military is preparing for another major offensive in eastern Afghanistan, drawing forces from the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar to areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, which have been a focus of resistance. Plans for this new escalation reportedly include stepped-up drone attacks and even cross-border raids into

Pakistan by US Special Operations forces.

Allen was tapped by Obama to command US and NATO forces in Afghanistan when his predecessor, Gen. David Petraeus, was named by the White House as CIA director. He is only the latest top military commander to publicly oppose Obama’s decisions.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal was replaced by General Petraeus in 2010 as senior Afghan commander following the appearance of a magazine article quoting him and senior members of his staff making contemptuous remarks relating to President Barack Obama and other senior administration officials. In a speech delivered in London the previous year, he had all but demanded publicly that the Obama administration accept his proposal for a larger “surge”. He also used the speech to deride Vice President Joe Biden’s calls for a “counter-terrorism” strategy that would have cut troop deployments and relied more on drone missile strikes and special forces operations to assassinate opponents of the US-led occupation.

More recently, the outgoing head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, publicly stated his reservations about Obama’s withdrawal plan, saying the White House plans were “more aggressive and incur more risk than I was originally prepared to accept.”

The controversy has a directly political component, with senior military officers reportedly concerned that Obama will push for a significant drawdown of US troops in the period before the November 2012 election. This would be a desperate attempt to rally support in a large section of the electorate who voted for Obama in 2008, based on illusions that he was an antiwar candidate.

The British daily *Telegraph* cited a senior official in Kabul: “NATO top brass wanted to keep troop levels constant for at least a year, but predicted that Mr. Obama would seek to promise a further withdrawal before November’s US elections.”

According to the *Wall Street Journal* report, “Some officials in Washington are critical of what they sometimes see as commanders circumventing decision makers back home.” However, the *Journal* also predicted, with ample justification, that Obama would likely “be wary of a public scrape with top military commanders, which could fuel unified Republican

attacks.”

A preview of the kind of press campaign which would be waged against Obama if he overrules his Afghan commander was provided by Frederick Kagan. A leading figure in the right-wing American Enterprise Institute think tank, Kagan advised General Petraeus during the 2007 “surge” in Iraq.

In an article titled “The President & the generals” in the right-wing journal *The Weekly Standard*, Kagan writes: “The situation has become very dangerous for an administration that has overruled its commanders dramatically and frequently and is reportedly considering doing so again by announcing accelerations of the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan beyond what military commanders have recommended.”

Arguing that senior US military officers should have wide autonomy once they are assigned to their command, Kagan continues: “if a president finds himself repeatedly overruling or rejecting the advice of commanders he himself has selected, his own judgment must start to come into question.”

As the US military has been granted unprecedented powers to wage a never-ending and global “war on terrorism,” and the officer corps has become more politicized, it seems likely this conflict over the Afghan war will intensify in the run-up to the elections.

This conflict is unfolding as Washington attempts to negotiate a “strategic partnership” agreement with President Hamid Karzai in Kabul. Such a pact would involve tens of thousands of US troops remaining in Afghanistan after NATO’s 2014 deadline for the withdrawal of “combat forces.” These troops would be rebranded as “trainers” and “advisers,” while continuing to fight. US imperialism is determined to keep permanent bases in Afghanistan, to have a beachhead in strategic, energy-rich Central Asia and a potential launching pad for wars against Iran or China.

In this context, the sectarian bombing attacks that killed at least 60 Shi’ite Muslims—including women and children—and wounded over 100 during religious processions in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif Tuesday assume a particularly sinister character.

While the US occupation command tried to blame the killings on the Taliban—with General Allen publicly demanding that Taliban leader Mullah Omar condemn the atrocity—the Taliban denied any involvement, promptly denouncing the bombings.

A statement by Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid read: “We strongly condemn this wild and inhuman act by our enemies, who are trying to blame us and trying to divide Afghans by doing such attacks on Muslims.” It blamed the massacres on the “invading enemy,” suggesting that US-led forces had orchestrated them to create a pretext to continue occupying the country.

Indeed, the Taliban has nothing to gain from such sectarian provocations. While in power in the 1990s, it repressed the Shia population, but in recent years it has presented itself as an Afghan nationalist force. It increasingly organizes resistance to

the US-led occupation among populations outside of its strongholds in ethnic-Pashtun areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, a Pakistani Islamist group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, claimed responsibility for the mass killing in a call to Radio Free Europe. The group has a history of massacring Shi’a Muslims in Pakistan, but this would be the first time that it carried out an attack in Afghanistan. There are doubts that it could have mounted coordinated operations in separate Afghan cities without help from forces in the country.

From the standpoint of who benefits from these killings, there is cause to question whether the US or sections of Afghan ruling circles favorable to a continued US occupation had a hand in the attacks. Just as sectarian violence in Iraq, prepared by violence unleashed by the US military, provided a pretext for the “surge” in that country, similar conflicts could be used to bolster arguments in favor of keeping large numbers of US troops in Afghanistan.

At the same time, blaming the attacks on Islamist extremists tied to Pakistani military intelligence puts additional pressure on Islamabad. This would be welcome in Washington, as the November 26 US raid that killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers and the resulting boycott by Pakistan of the Bonn conference on Afghanistan, have provoked unprecedented US-Pakistani tensions.

In an *Asia Times Online* article, former Indian diplomat M.K. Bhadrakumar concludes that “US interests are, paradoxically, very well served in the current scenario if sectarian tensions escalate in Afghanistan and Western troops become the only credible provider of security.” He added that “any number of forces could be interested in indirectly buttressing the US’s regional strategies.”

It is worth recalling that after arresting CIA employee Raymond Davis for gunning down two Pakistani youth in Lahore last January, Pakistani police reviewed the call records of Davis’s cellphone, establishing that he had been in contact with elements within Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the group that claimed credit for the massacre of Shi’a Muslims in Afghanistan.



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