

NATO ministers hold crisis talks on Afghanistan

Bill Van Auken
3 February 2012

Amid growing signs of crisis in the decade-old US-led war in Afghanistan, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced Wednesday that the US military would make a “transition” from combat to “training” and “advising” puppet Afghan forces by the end of 2013.

The announcement came on the eve of a NATO ministers meeting in Brussels. The deadline is a year earlier than previously set by NATO at its summit in Lisbon in 2010. The new timetable was widely seen as an attempt to head off even earlier withdrawals of troops by European NATO members.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy last month raised the possibility of French forces pulling out of the country before the official date set by NATO for the end of 2014 after an Afghan soldier killed four French troops. Following talks between US and French officials, however, Sarkozy backed off of the threat, which was made with an eye on an upcoming presidential election and the overwhelming hostility of the French population to the Afghan war.

More generally in Europe, the cost of NATO’s continued troops deployment has come under scrutiny as the increasing economic and fiscal crisis has led to demands for austerity across the continent.

Panetta told reporters on a plane en route to the NATO conference in Brussels that US troops would remain in Afghanistan well past the end of 2014, the date previously announced as a withdrawal deadline, though they would be there to support the troops of the US-backed regime in Kabul.

“Our goal is to complete all of that transition in 2013, and hopefully by mid to the latter part of 2013, we’ll be able to make a transition from a combat role to a training, advise and assist role,” said the Pentagon chief.

Panetta claimed that the US intervention in Afghanistan had reached a “turning point” in 2011 based on the “ability to really go after the Taliban” following the surge announced by President Barack Obama in late 2009, which sent another

33,000 US troops into the country.

Panetta said that the US strategy was to utilize Afghan puppet troops to conduct security operations, while the US military maintains a substantial military presence, including with units “embedded” among the Afghan forces as well as special operations troops to carry out counterinsurgency raids and air strikes.

He stressed that the US military would maintain a “robust role” in Afghanistan long past 2014. “We’re committed to an enduring presence there,” he said. “We have the missions we’re going to be involved with—those CT [counter-terrorism] operations. We’ll be involved with training, advising and assisting, not only the Afghan forces, but we’ll continue to have to provide enabling forces for ISAF as well as Afghanistan. And there’ll be a large civilian presence there involved with development. So there clearly is going to be a continuing presence in Afghanistan for the long term...”

While the troops remaining would be formally designated as advisers and trainers, Panetta added, “Look, it doesn’t mean that, you know, we’re not—we’re not going to be combat-ready. We will be, because we always have to be in order to defend ourselves.”

While repeating the Obama administration’s pledge to withdraw the last of the 33,000 “surge” troops by the fall of 2012, he said no decisions had been made as to a timetable for drawing down the 68,000 US troops that will continue occupying Afghanistan.

The defense secretary’s emphasis on an “enduring presence” of US troops in Afghanistan reflects a key aim pursued by Washington since the onset of the war in October 2001: the securing of permanent American bases near the strategically vital and oil-rich regions of Central Asia as well as on the borders of both China and Iran.

Panetta’s rosy description of the situation in Afghanistan is belied, however, by a series of recently released reports.

The latest of these is a leaked classified report prepared by NATO, titled “State of the Taliban 2012,” which describes the forces resisting the US-led occupation as gaining strength and enjoying widespread popular support, including within the US-backed government of President Hamid Karzai and its security forces.

Based on 27,000 interviews with 4,000 Afghan detainees, the report states, “Many Afghans are already bracing themselves for the eventual return of the Taliban.” It adds that many government personnel “have secretly reached out to the insurgents, seeking long-term options in the event of a possible Taliban victory.”

According to the report, “Captured photographs of Taliban personnel riding openly in the green Ford Ranger pickup trucks of the Afghan army are commonplace throughout Afghanistan.” The vehicles, it said, are either “sold or donated.” Rifles, revolvers and heavy weapons are also transferred from the government security forces to the Taliban via arms bazaars in Pakistan. The report also cites collaboration between Afghan intelligence agents and the Taliban in organizing an ambush of US soldiers.

Issued on January 6, the report states that in areas where US and other foreign occupation troops have been withdrawn, the Taliban and other resistance fighters have re-established their influence with virtually no resistance from the government security forces. In many of these areas, it adds, the local population prefers Taliban governance, because, unlike the Karzai government, the resistance fighters do not demand payoffs and bribes.

Another focus of the report – likely the reason that it was leaked – is its portrayal of the Pakistani military intelligence agency, the ISI, as being “intimately involved” in the Taliban’s operations.

“ISI is thoroughly aware of Taliban activities and the whereabouts of all senior Taliban personnel,” the report states. Key Taliban leaders, it adds, have their residences in close proximity to the ISI headquarters in Islamabad.

The report was leaked on the eve of a visit to Kabul by Pakistan Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar, the first high-level contact between the two governments since last September. The apparent aim of the Pakistan government was to exploit divisions between Washington and its puppet Karzai over US efforts to broker peace talks with the Taliban.

Pakistan is anxious to preserve its influence over the Afghan resistance forces as a means of securing its own strategic

interests in the region, particularly vis-a-vis Indian influence in Afghanistan.

Khar dismissed the charges of ISI-Taliban collaboration as “old wine in an even older bottle.”

Also pointing to the crisis of the decade-long US war was a secret National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) issued last month, reflecting the assessment of the situation in Afghanistan of the CIA and 15 other US intelligence agencies.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Washington’s intelligence apparatus sees the war at a “stalemate” and discounts the Pentagon’s claims of enduring security gains over the past year. According to an official who spoke to the paper, the report concludes that the Karzai government’s “viability is tenuous” and would not likely survive a substantial US pullout.

Finally, US military brass testified Wednesday before the House Armed Services Committee on the growing number of incidents in which members of the US-backed Afghan security forces have shot and killed American and other NATO troops. The increased frequency of such attacks has raised serious questions about the Pentagon strategy of “transition” to a war waged by Afghan units together with US “advisors.”

The generals who spoke to the congressional committee said that 75 percent of the 45 such incidents that have taken place since 2007 occurred in the last two years. They have involved both members of the resistance who have infiltrated the puppet forces as well as individual soldiers who have become enraged at their US and NATO “allies.” The Afghan soldier who killed the four French troops reportedly acted after viewing a video of US Marines urinating on the corpses of slain resistance fighters.

On the day of the hearing in Washington a US Marine was shot and killed by an Afghan army soldier in the southern province of Helmand.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact