

# Top general demands US keep “robust” combat force in Afghanistan

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Marine Gen. John Allen, the top US commander in Afghanistan, told Congressional committees this week that a “robust” American combat force must remain in the country next year.

Testifying before the House Armed Services Committee on Tuesday and the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday, Allen claimed that the decade-old US war in Afghanistan remained “on track”, despite acknowledging that recent months have been “trying.”

Allen was referring to a string of incidents that have underscored the growing tensions between the US military forces and the Afghan population after more than ten years of foreign occupation. These included the release of a video in January showing US Marines laughing and urinating on the bodies of slain Afghans; the burning of copies of the Koran at the US Bagram air base, which triggered nationwide rioting; and, most recently, the horrific massacre of 16 Afghan civilians, most of them women and children, by US Army Staff Sgt. Robert Bales on March 11.

“My opinion is that we will need significant combat power in 2013,” General Allen told the Senate panel.

Asked by the committee’s ranking Republican, Senator John McCain of Arizona, whether 68,000 would be the right number, Allen responded: “Sixty-eight thousand is a good going-in number, but I owe the president some analysis on that.”

Sixty-eight thousand troops will be the number of American soldiers and Marines remaining in Afghanistan after the Pentagon completes the withdrawal of the 33,000 “surge” troops that President Barack Obama ordered into the country in December 2009. The 68,000 will still represent more than double the US force deployed there in the final days of the George W. Bush administration.

Sections of the military brass opposed the withdrawal of the “surge” troops, which is to be completed by October. The military has been even more resistant to setting deadlines for staged withdrawals between now and the end of 2014, when the US and NATO have agreed that all foreign “combat troops” are to be out of Afghanistan.

In reality, the Obama administration and its NATO allies are seeking to keep thousands of troops and bases in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future and are currently negotiating a “strategic partnership” agreement with the puppet government of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul to achieve this permanent military presence.

Allen rebuffed growing popular sentiments for an immediate withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, reflected in a series of recent opinion polls in the US. “Should the US leave Afghanistan, should ISAF, NATO leave Afghanistan, that would create in my mind, for all intents and purposes, a geopolitical vacuum,” he said.

The choice of words was significant in that it pointed not to the threat of terrorism, the pretext that has been used to justify the Afghan war from the outset, but rather to geopolitical considerations, i.e., the interests of the US versus those of its rivals—particularly China, Russia and Iran—in the geo-strategically critical and oil-rich regions of Central and South Asia.

The general said that he would not make a recommendation on troop levels until the end of 2012, likely after the presidential election in November, after an evaluation of the “state of the insurgency.”

Allen’s testimony also touched on the projected size of the Afghan puppet security forces that are to be in place when the formal US-NATO withdrawal is completed in 2014. While Washington and NATO had

previously planned for a police and military force numbering 352,000, Allen acknowledged that a force as small as 230,000 is now being contemplated.

Part of the considerations is funding. With Afghanistan's security forces almost entirely dependent on foreign money for their training, equipping and maintenance, NATO provided them with an \$11.2 billion budget in 2012. Under a US proposal, that sum is to drop to \$4.5 billion in 2014, necessitating a reduction in the size of the police and military. Even this level may prove difficult to sustain, with a number of NATO member states reluctant, under conditions of deepening fiscal crisis in Europe, to contribute to this funding.

Speaking at a graduation ceremony at a military academy in Kabul, Afghan President Hamid Karzai said that "for the next 10 years until 2024, the international community, with the US in the lead and followed by Europe and other countries, will pay Afghanistan security forces \$4.1 billion." The difference between that sum and \$4.5 billion is supposed to be made up by the Kabul regime itself.

Karzai also indicated that, if Washington and NATO failed to provide the Afghan security forces with "warplanes, transport planes, helicopters" and other hardware, his regime would seek to obtain it elsewhere. "If we were to buy planes from India or Russia or Iran or Pakistan or Ukraine, will our salaries still be paid from the NATO money?" he asked.

A Western official told the AFP news agency that if the Kabul regime attempted to make such purchases, "We're heading for a deadlock."



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