US general suggests delaying troop withdrawals from Afghanistan

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General John Campbell, who assumed command in August of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that is occupying Afghanistan, suggested this week that he may request more troops remain in the country than is presently scheduled.

Amid signs that the Afghan military and police are being overwhelmed by the Taliban and other insurgent organisations, Campbell told journalists he was examining whether "we need more NATO forces in certain locations for longer." He foreshadowed presenting the Obama administration with an "analysis" justifying a delay in the withdrawal of US and other foreign troops.

By the end of the year, the US is slated to reduce its presence from 20,000 to approximately 9,800 personnel, while the European states involved in the US-led occupation are reducing their contribution from 10,000 to barely 2,500. Last month, the last American army and marine combat units were withdrawn from major bases in the provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, where some of the heaviest fighting of the 13-year war has taken place.

Obama ordered successive surges of US troops to Afghanistan after he took office, boosting overall numbers to close to 100,000 by late 2010 in order to wrest back entire regions from the Taliban. Large-scale offensives killed thousands of insurgent fighters and civilians, and claimed the lives of hundreds of American and NATO troops. More than 70 percent of the 2,350 American deaths and 19,000 injuries in and around Afghanistan were suffered after February 2009.

The steady withdrawal of US and NATO personnel over the past two years has been accompanied by repeated claims that the Afghan government security forces are now sufficiently large, trained and equipped to combat and defeat the insurgency without foreign assistance.

The reality was hinted at on Wednesday by Lieutenant General Joseph Anderson, a US officer deployed in ISAF command headquarters. While asserting that the government forces were "winning" against the insurgents, he admitted at a press conference that their casualty rate was "not sustainable." Since 2013, at least 9,000 Afghan Army and police have been killed in combat and tens of thousands wounded as the Taliban have intensified and broadened their operations.

Anderson revealed that the purported 200,000-strong Afghan Army is only at 81 percent strength and the 160,000-strong police force at 89 percent. As well as the high death toll, desertion is rampant. In numerous areas, the security forces have been accused of turning a blind eye to insurgent activity so as to avoid having to go into combat. Many units are infiltrated by Taliban sympathisers.

Outside the major cities and heavily fortified military bases, the newly formed Afghan government of President Ashraf Ghani exerts little or no control. Much of the country is under the sway of tribal warlords who help finance the Taliban insurgency by paying "taxes" on the country's $3 billion annual drug trade. The latest report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, issued in October, made the damning finding that opium production "hit an all-time high in 2013" and "further increases in cultivation are likely in 2014." An estimated 209,000 hectares is now growing opium, producing 80 percent of global heroin supplies.

General Campbell's comments that the withdrawal of US troops might be slowed reflect concerns in Washington that its puppet government in Kabul could actually fall to the Taliban. Thirteen years after the US invasion of Afghanistan, the country is in a state of dysfunction and hovering on the brink of economic bankruptcy. Apart from the drug trade, the only other significant industry had been catering to the tens of thousands of foreign troops, contractors and officials. As the occupation force has been reduced, the feverish economic growth of 13.5 percent has slumped since 2013

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to just 3.5 percent.

Reports earlier in the year found that one third of the country's 27 million people are malnourished, one million children under five are acutely malnourished, at least one million people are addicted to opium and more than half of all girls do not go to school. Unemployment and underemployment is variously estimated at between 40 and 50 percent. Corruption is endemic within the government apparatus and the security forces.

The social catastrophe facing the population is the main factor behind the hatred of the US-backed regime and the continuing support for the Taliban. Emboldened by the possibility of returning to power, the Taliban leadership has spurned the offers by the Obama administration and the Afghan government of peace talks. If Ghani's government were overthrown, the US military would lose access to the strategic bases it has developed in Afghanistan since 2001, particularly the Bagram air field.

Another fear in American ruling circles is that the Afghan government will attempt to survive by turning to other sources for military, political and economic assistance, particularly to China. Ghani's first official state visit was to Beijing in October, where he sought Chinese investment in infrastructure and mining projects and signed agreements for joint cooperation in combating "terrorism."

On November 3, former US ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq and the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad, raised concerns over Ghani's orientation in a comment in the *New York Times*. After reviewing Beijing's interest in Afghan minerals and natural gas, Khalilzad declared that "Afghanistan must ensure that closer ties to China don't come at the expense of its partnership with the West," and that the US had to "avoid the temptation to abandon Afghanistan … and cede wider regional influence to China."

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