

NATO requests UK troops for US-led surge in Afghanistan

Paul Mitchell
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NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg met UK Prime Minister Theresa May in Downing Street yesterday to discuss sending more British troops for a proposed surge in the 13,000-strong Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan.

Although the British combat mission in Afghanistan—which cost 456 lives—ceased in 2014 there are still about 500 military personnel training and advising security forces fighting the Taliban.

Stoltenberg's visit came as US President Donald Trump approved a plan to deploy as many as 5,000 additional US troops alongside the 8,400 already in Afghanistan. Trump is demanding that America's NATO allies contribute more than the 5,000 they have there. According to various sources, a formal request for more troops has been made to the UK without the numbers involved being made public.

NATO hopes to finalise numbers at a summit meeting of leaders in Brussels on May 25.

A NATO press release declared the Brussels meeting “comes at a time when the Alliance continues to adapt to the most serious challenges in a generation, with the biggest reinforcement of NATO's collective defence since the Cold War and increased efforts to project stability beyond the Alliance's borders.”

After his talks with May, Stoltenberg made a lengthy statement declaring, “When it comes to burden sharing, the UK is leading by example, investing two percent of GDP in defence, but also by providing capabilities and contributions to NATO missions and operations.

“The UK is leading our multi-national battle group in Estonia, leading our high readiness joint task force, and also providing planes to our air-policing mission in the Black Sea region.”

Stoltenberg lavished praise on Theresa May's Conservative government for her commitment to

“defence.” Speaking along Stoltenberg, May said, “I would like first of all to reaffirm the commitment the UK has to NATO... Obviously we've got at the moment a number of commitments—nearly 1,000 troops in Estonia and Poland, the RAF Typhoons in the Black Sea as part of that project there.”

Stoltenberg said that NATO members, after many years of decline, “are now following” the UK example.

The Stoltenberg-May talks confirm the assessment of the WSWWS that behind the official reasons given for the calling of a snap general election—to strengthen May's mandate for negotiating the terms of Britain's leaving the European Union (EU)—is an undeclared aim of furthering the UK's war agenda in alliance with US imperialism.

The placing of British imperialism on a war footing is also confirmed by the despatch of dozens more troops to its former colony of Sudan—boosting the 200-strong deployment already there. The aim is to increase the number of troops to around 400.

The deployment to Sudan follows the *Guardian*'s revelation last week from a “Whitehall source” that “The government is considering holding a vote to expand military action in Syria if the Conservatives win a big enough majority in the general election.” As in Afghanistan, such moves are primarily aimed at countering increasing Russian influence.

There has been a continuous loss of territory to insurgent forces in Afghanistan—the Taliban claims to fully control 34 of the country's 349 districts and is fighting over another 167. Some 3,000 Islamic State (ISIS) fighters have gained a foothold in the country. Fatalities amongst Afghan troops soared by 35 percent last year to 6,700 deaths—three times that of US forces during nearly 16 years of the US occupation.

In April, Trump's national security adviser, Gen.

H.R. McMaster and US Defence Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis travelled to Afghanistan in an attempt to stem the crisis following high-profile attacks.

The prospect of a strategic defeat in Afghanistan is increasing US tensions with Russia. American officials are ramping up accusations that the government of Vladimir Putin is supporting and arming the Taliban to undermine the Kabul government and the US position in the country.

This is part of a general Russia-baiting campaign in the US, which has led to demands by the Democrats for the appointment of a special prosecutor or independent commission to investigate charges of collusion between Trump’s key personnel and the Russian government during the 2016 election campaign.

This has already succeeded in pushing the Trump administration into a more confrontational foreign policy in Syria, Central Asia, North Africa and Eastern Europe, where US imperialism regards Moscow as its principal opponent.

The head of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, has labelled Russia a “malign influence” in Afghanistan. Mattis declared, “We’re going to have to confront Russia... For example, any weapons being funnelled here [Afghanistan] from a foreign country would be a violation of international law unless they’re coming through the government of Afghanistan for the Afghan forces, and so that would have to be dealt with as a violation of international law.”

Russia has rejected the accusations, saying that following the failure of the US to establish peace talks, it is intervening to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for ISIS and preventing its expansion into neighbouring Central Asia and then Russia.

On April 14, Russia sponsored a third conference including China, Iran, India, Pakistan, Central Asian states and the Afghan government—to discuss peace negotiations with the Taliban, which Russian officials readily admit they have been in contact with. The US and its NATO allies boycotted the talks.

Russia’s courting of Pakistan, whose influence in Afghanistan the US has tried to contain, is of major concern to Washington. Last September, Russian and Pakistani special forces conducted their first-ever joint military operation in Pakistan. On April 27, Minister of Defence Khawaja Asif met with his Russian equivalent,

Sergei Shoigu, in Moscow and called on Russia to lead a stabilisation process. This strategy, they agreed, had to involve all the participants in the conflict.

The dropping by the US—on the eve of the Russia-led talks—of the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) bomb, purportedly to destroy a small group of ISIS militants in eastern Afghanistan, was clearly aimed at intimidating its rivals. Washington does not intend to allow an end to the Afghanistan conflict on terms other than its own. Central to its strategy is the retention of strategic bases within close striking distance of Iran, China, South Asia and Russia itself.

In response to the May-Stoltenberg meeting, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn declared that “at the end of the day wars are not solved by the presence of foreign troops” and a political solution to the violence was needed. However, he spoke out of both sides of his mouth, adding that he would “look at” any request for more troops. That he would also accede to any such request is clear from his record of kowtowing to the pro-war Parliamentary Labour Party.

Within weeks of being elected leader in September 2015, Corbyn granted a free vote to Labour MPs in support of UK bombing raids on Syria. In the December 2015 parliamentary debate on authorising UK’s bombing on Syria—which overturned a 2013 vote against air strikes—Corbyn allowed his warmongering Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn the right of replying to the government. Benn spoke in support of bombing, leading 66 Labour MPs in doing so, handing then Prime Minister David Cameron the convincing majority he needed to begin air strikes within hours.

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