

Obama, Pentagon stall on Afghanistan troop withdrawal

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With the deadline for President Barack Obama's promised initial withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan less than a month away, the top US military commander has revealed that no plan has been submitted for pulling out US forces.

When he announced his "surge" of 30,000 additional troops into Afghanistan in December 2009, Obama set July 2011 as the date that, supposedly having achieved US military objectives, the drawdown of troops would begin.

In the intervening year and a half, the administration and the Pentagon have done their utmost to diminish the significance of this promise, which was made in an attempt to placate the overwhelming hostility of the American people to a war that is nearing the end of its tenth year, making it the longest in US history.

The focus was shifted to 2014, which NATO designated as the year in which Afghan puppet security forces could be entrusted with the suppression of resistance nationwide. More candid statements from NATO allies and military commanders, however, intimated that the real expectation is for the war and occupation to continue for another decade or more.

Nonetheless, it was extraordinary that Admiral Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, admitted this week that the military has yet to even make a recommendation as to how many of the nearly 100,000 US troops deployed in Afghanistan will be pulled out next month.

General David Petraeus, the senior US commander in Afghanistan, has not, as of this week, provided the administration with any proposal. Ostensibly, Petraeus's recommendation would be the first step in a process that would involve discussion within the administration and a final decision by Obama.

It seems clear that any withdrawal will be of a minimal and largely symbolic character. Petraeus himself has joined the top British commander in Afghanistan and the secretary-general of NATO in warning against any precipitous drawdown of troops. In an interview with *USA Today* earlier this week, the US commander stressed that any withdrawal would be "responsible" and "at a pace determined by conditions on the ground."

Having named Petraeus, a political general, as his new director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Obama is hardly likely to overrule his recommendation.

Petraeus, who invariably describes purported progress in Afghanistan as "fragile and reversible," issued a memorandum to his subordinates in mid-May declaring that the nearly decade-old war had reached a "pivotal moment."

The nature of this "moment" has been brought sharply into focus by the events of the past week.

First, there was Afghan President Hamid Karzai's public denunciation last Tuesday of the slaughter of civilians in US military operations. While Karzai has made similar condemnations in the past, this time he issued an order - promptly rejected by US-NATO spokesmen - for a halt to air strikes and night raids by special forces against Afghan homes. And he warned that if such actions continued, the US-led forces would be seen as occupiers, adding that history showed "how Afghanistan deals with occupiers."

This invocation of armed resistance by a puppet president installed by the US military nearly a decade ago and utterly dependent upon foreign troops for his survival is a pale reflection of the mass popular hostility to the American-led occupation.

This has been fueled by a series of bloody massacres of Afghan men, women and children. Two airstrikes a

week ago claimed the lives of at least 126 Afghans. In Nuristan, 22 policemen and 20 civilians died in an attack on alleged Taliban insurgents, 70 of whom were reportedly killed as well. In Helmand, 14 civilians lost their lives in the US bombing of two homes. The dead included two women and 10 children. Images of Afghan villagers carrying the broken bodies of children as young as two triggered widespread outrage.

These attacks followed the killing of civilians last month in special forces night raids carried out in southeastern Khost and northern Takhar provinces. The latter incident, in which four members of one family were slaughtered, provoked a mass demonstration in which another 12 Afghans were shot to death and scores wounded. Such outbursts of popular anger are becoming ever larger and more frequent.

Meanwhile, a series of attacks attributed to the Taliban have called into question the US strategy for the gradual “Afghanization” of the nearly 10-year-old war. Last Monday, armed fighters attempted to storm the main NATO base in the western city of Herat, using a car bomb to blast a hole in the compound’s wall and waging a pitched battle with Italian and Afghan troops.

Barely 72 hours earlier, insurgents bombed a high-level security meeting in the Takhar governor’s compound, killing the top Afghan police commander for northern Afghanistan and wounding the German general who commands all NATO forces in the region. The two areas had been described as among Afghanistan’s most secure, with Herat supposedly ready to be turned over to Afghan security forces next month.

With Obama’s July deadline approaching, the US administration is pursuing talks with the Karzai regime on a long-term “strategic partnership” agreement that would grant the Pentagon control of permanent bases in Afghanistan.

There has been virtually no media coverage of this, the real objective of Washington’s war in Afghanistan, masked by the pretense that US troops are engaged in a “war against terrorism”. From the beginning, Washington’s aim has been to assert its military hegemony over the strategic region of Central Asia and its rich energy reserves.

According to conservative estimates, this war has cost the American people some half a trillion dollars, even as federal, state and local governments insist that there

is “no money” for jobs, education, health care and vital social services. Over 1,600 US troops, drawn overwhelmingly from the working class, have been killed in this war (together with 900 more from Britain, Canada, Germany, Australia and other countries). Tens of thousands more have been wounded, many of them grievously. Meanwhile, the US-led occupation force has killed and maimed countless Afghans over the past decade, while turning hundreds of thousands into refugees.

The war continues with little media attention and virtually no public debate. Repeated polls indicate that a large majority of the American people wants an end to the war and a withdrawal of US troops now, but these antiwar sentiments find no real reflection in the political establishment and its two parties.

Bringing an end to the war in Afghanistan and to the global operations of American militarism requires the building of a new movement against war based upon the working class and joined with the struggle to defend jobs and living standards and defeat the sweeping attacks on social conditions and basic rights by the financial aristocracy and its government.

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