

US commander warns American troops will be in Afghanistan for years

By [Peter Symonds](#)

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The top US commander in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, warned on Wednesday that the huge boost to US troop numbers announced this week would have to continue for years. His comments underscore the fact that the Obama administration is preparing for a dramatic escalation of the war in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan that will inevitably heighten tensions throughout the region, especially in Central Asia.

In a bid to shore up the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, President Obama announced on Tuesday that an additional 17,000 US soldiers would be sent there. McKiernan told the media that the troop buildup was “not a temporary force uplift” and would “need to be sustained for some period of time,” adding that he was looking at “the next three to four to five years”. The US already has 36,000 troops deployed in Afghanistan, along with about 30,000 other foreign soldiers operating under NATO command.

The latest troop increase will not be the last. McKiernan repeated a previous request for an extra 10,000 in Afghanistan on top of those already announced. US Defence Secretary Robert Gates did not rule out additional US forces, but noted that no additional troops would be sent to Afghanistan until the Obama administration had completed its current strategic review.

At a meeting of NATO defence ministers in Poland, Gates pressed NATO allies for further support for Afghanistan. NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer warned that NATO could not “afford the price of failure in Afghanistan” and urged “all members of the team... to pull closer together and pull harder in 2009”. But the commitments made were cosmetic, underlining the continuing deep tensions inside NATO between the US and European powers such as Germany and France.

UK Defence Secretary John Hutton complained that Britain was already doing its share, saying that “the European members of NATO need to do more”. Italy promised 500 soldiers. Germany indicated that it may send an additional 600 troops, but to the largely peaceful north of Afghanistan to assist with elections due in August. France committed no extra soldiers. While expressing his disappointment at the lack of extra forces, Gates urged NATO members to contribute economic aid and to the training of Afghan security forces.

The NATO summit highlighted the intersection of the war in Afghanistan with growing rivalry in Central Asia. One day before the meeting, the Kyrgyzstan parliament voted to shut down a key US air base needed to supply US and NATO forces in land-locked Afghanistan. As supply lines through neighbouring Pakistan have come under fierce attack from anti-US insurgents, the Pentagon has been seeking alternative routes through Central Asia.

Russia, however, has made clear that any shipment of US supplies through the region will depend on its support and will involve US concessions, particularly over the positioning of US anti-ballistic missiles in NATO-allied countries in Eastern Europe. Before the decision to shut down the Manus Air Base, Moscow announced a substantial aid package to Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, Russia has permitted some non-military US supplies to pass through Latvia, Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—the first trainload left on Thursday.

The issue is creating divisions within NATO. The US-based think tank Stratfor commented: “The lack of enthusiasm for the Afghanistan surge was matched by growing questions among the Europeans over the military plan itself—both the overarching strategy and the lines of supply. Moreover, the Europeans are anxious to know how and to what extent the US plan involves the Russians.” While France and Germany support a rapprochement with Russia, Eastern European countries are opposed to any deal that would weaken US protection against Moscow.

The US confronts a deteriorating military situation in Afghanistan. Commenting on the boost to US troop numbers, General McKiernan said: “What this allows us to do is change the dynamics of the security situation, predominantly in southern Afghanistan, where we are, at best, stalemated.” He added: “I have to tell you that 2009 is going to be a tough year.”

Other US analysts are less cautious in their warnings. John Nagl, from the Centre for a New American Security, told the British Observer that the number of US soldiers in Afghanistan could eventually rise to 100,000. “The immediate problem is to stop the bleeding. The 30,000 troops is a tourniquet... [but] that is all we have. If Obama is a two-term president then by the end of his time in office there may only be marine embassy guards in Iraq. But there will still be tens of thousands of troops in Afghanistan.”

In a detailed statement to a US Congressional committee last week, Anthony Cordesman from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies bluntly warned that “we are losing the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan and we have at most two years in which to decisively reverse the situation”. He cited military statistics for 2008 pointing to a 33 percent rise in military clashes with insurgents, an increase in roadside bombs of 27 percent and in surface-to-air fire of 67 percent.

Cordesman stressed, however, that such details were secondary to the growing influence of the Taliban and other anti-occupation militias in Afghanistan. He cited in some detail the results of an ABC poll, released this month, which demonstrated falling support in Afghanistan for the occupation, and for its puppet President Hamid Karzai. Just 18 percent supported any increase in US and NATO troops and 44 percent wanted a reduction.

Support for the Taliban was strongest in the south and east of the country, where Pashtun tribes have been subjected to more than seven years of searches, arbitrary detention, military attacks and bombing. Overall, 25 percent of Afghans felt that violent attacks on occupation forces were justified; in the top five high-conflict provinces, the figure rose to 38 percent.

The survey also provided evidence of deteriorating living standards. The proportion of Afghans who characterised their economic opportunities as “very bad” doubled from 17 percent in 2006 to 33 percent. More than half reported an income of less than \$US100 a month and 93 percent less than \$300. Many registered complaints about fuel prices, lack of

electricity, medical care, roads and other infrastructure. Nearly three quarters of respondents were worried about the impact of the global economic crisis.

Far from addressing any of these issues, the surge in US troops in Afghanistan will compound the anger and resentment that is providing a steady stream of recruits to the anti-occupation insurgency. Most of the fresh troops will be assigned to south of the country, where control by US forces and the Karzai government is tenuous, and to the border with Pakistan in an effort to halt the infiltration of Taliban fighters from bases in Pakistan.

The US war in Afghanistan has already spread across the Pakistani border, destabilising the government in Islamabad. The Obama administration has continued US missile strikes from unmanned drones on targets inside Pakistan's tribal areas along the border, killing scores of civilians and inflaming local anger. Proof that at least some of the US drones are operating from a base inside Pakistan will compound the political difficulties facing the government, which has previously disclaimed any knowledge or involvement. The London-based Times and the Pakistani News have both published Google Earth images of three drones parked at the Shamsi air field in southwestern Pakistan.

Under pressure from Washington, the Pakistani army has been fighting a war to suppress anti-US militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Some 120,000 troops have been involved, and more than 1,500 have been killed in the fighting. The army, which has received around \$10 billion in US aid, has laid waste to towns and villages, causing hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee. The insurgency has also spread beyond the FATA to areas of the North West Frontier Province, including the Swat Valley, and is even touching on the Punjab, Pakistan's most populous state.

Pakistan announced this week that it had struck a shaky deal with insurgents in the Swat Valley to introduce Islamic Sharia law to the area as part of a ceasefire. Richard Holbrooke, US special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, told the media that the Obama administration was concerned that "the truce does not turn into a surrender". He said he had spoken to Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari who had assured him that was "not the case" and described the deal as "an interim arrangement".

US Defence Secretary Gates took a slightly different tack, saying on Friday that the agreement was acceptable if it led to reconciliation and the disarming of the insurgents. He made clear that the US was looking to similar arrangements with sections of the anti-occupation forces in Afghanistan, seeking to replicate the tactic used in Iraq to buy off local tribal leaders and use them against hard-line insurgents. "We have said all along that ultimately some sort of political reconciliation has to be part of the long-term solution in Afghanistan," Gates said.

Washington's neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan, however, is confronting widespread hostility and a burgeoning armed resistance. Asked about the ability of the US to succeed where the British army in the nineteenth century and the Soviet military in the 1980s had failed, General McKiernan simply said that it was "a very unhealthy comparison". The comparison is perfectly apt. Like the British Raj and the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, Washington is pursuing a criminal war for the subjugation of Afghanistan and the pursuit of US economic and strategic ambitions in Central Asia. Now, thousands more US soldiers are being sent into a quagmire that shows no signs of ending.

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