

Washington's crisis over Afghanistan deepens

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The increasingly public dissension within the Obama administration and the military itself over the proposed escalation in Afghanistan reflects the reality that US imperialism has no good options in the war that it launched more than eight years ago.

The sharp differences came to the fore last week with the leaking of cables sent by the US ambassador in Kabul, Karl Eikenberry, advising the White House against sending tens of thousands more US troops to the occupied country.

Eikenberry commanded US occupation forces in Afghanistan from 2005 to 2007. He retired from the US Army as a lieutenant general last April to become the Obama administration's ambassador to the country.

The ambassador apparently argued that the deployment would do little good given the rampant corruption and political impotence of the Afghan puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai and would merely perpetuate and increase the dependence of the country's security forces on US military might.

It is unclear whether Eikenberry was asked to submit his written opinion in the ongoing debate within Obama's National Security Council. It is clear, however, that the warning from the ambassador and former commander cut across the proposal submitted by the current commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal.

McChrystal's proposal, which was leaked in September, calls for sending at least 40,000 more US troops—on top of the 68,000 already deployed—to wage an intensified counterinsurgency campaign with the aim of militarily suppressing the growing resistance to the US occupation.

An alternative proposal has been advanced for sending another 10,000 troops to concentrate on training Afghan puppet forces. Two hybrid proposals call for 20,000 and 30,000 troops respectively.

Before the leaking of Eikenberry's cables, it was widely reported that top officials within the administration had settled on plans to send between 30,000 and 40,000 troops. Before leaving for Asia on Friday, Obama reportedly asked administration officials to come up with a new plan that combined elements of the various options presented.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates summed up this approach last Thursday. "I would say it was more, how can we combine some of the best features of several of the options to maximum good effect?" he told reporters. "How do we signal resolve and at the same time signal to the Afghans as well as the American people that this is not an open-ended commitment?"

Meanwhile, the administration is making a show of getting tough on the corruption that pervades the Karzai regime. Speaking in Manila last week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said she was concerned over “corruption, lack of transparency, poor governance [and] absence of the rule of law.”

In Kabul on Monday, the Karzai regime’s interior minister, Mohammad Hanif Atmar, announced the creation of an anti-corruption unit that would collaborate with the American FBI as well as British and European Union police. Atmar denied that the measure was being taken to placate Washington and its allies, but he made the announcement with Eikenberry on one side and the British ambassador, Mark Sedwill, on the other.

Spiegel Online quoted a member of Karzai’s cabinet as saying: “The pressure on Karzai is horrible. He feels treated like the governor of a colony in the 18th century.”

Obama is scheduled to return to Washington from his nine-day Asian tour on Thursday—the same day that Karzai will be inaugurated for a second term, which he won in a fraudulent August election characterized by massive ballot-stuffing. There is growing speculation in the media that Obama may make an unannounced detour from his trip back to Washington to make an appearance in Kabul, signaling his commitment to the war and demanding a curbing of corruption face-to-face from Karzai.

Any attempt to prosecute the principal purveyors of corruption in Afghanistan, however, would only further isolate Karzai. Warlords implicated in graft, drug trafficking and war crimes—men like Abdul Rashid Dostum, or Karzai’s running mate, Mohammed Fahim, or his own brother, Ahmed Wali—are not only the regime’s main base of support, but also served as the key allies of Washington in its 2001 invasion and overthrow of the Taliban regime as well as the subsequent occupation.

The dispute between the ambassador and the military commander has grown increasingly bitter, according to media reports. Citing the testimony of unnamed government officials, the New York Times reported that McChrystal “pointedly addressed” the issues raised in Eikenberry’s cables at a recent regularly scheduled meeting of US military and civilian staff at the US embassy in Kabul.

McChrystal condemned the ambassador’s position, saying its logical conclusion was “the helicopter on the roof of the embassy,” referring to the panicked withdrawal of the last US military forces from Saigon in 1975 following the defeat of the US-backed Vietnamese regime.

It seems unlikely that Eikenberry, a West Point graduate with nearly 40 years in the military, would have put forward his opinion without enjoying support from within the senior command of the Army.

When Eikenberry served as commander in Afghanistan, there was reportedly friction with McChrystal, who was then head of the secretive Joint Special Operations Command. Eikenberry apparently refused to approve some of McChrystal’s proposals for commando raids and targeted assassinations in Afghanistan, fearing that they would result in civilian casualties and further antagonize the population.

Undoubtedly, there exists widespread skepticism and outright opposition toward McChrystal’s counterinsurgency proposal within a senior command that for the most part

joined the military in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War.

There is also growing concern within the Army that the eight years of war in Afghanistan, together with the six-and-a-half-year occupation of Iraq, is stretching the all-volunteer ranks to the breaking point.

Further feeding such concerns, the Army on November 6 released a Mental Health Advisory Team report on troops deployed in Afghanistan. Among its findings was that "unit morale rates in OEF [Operation Enduring Freedom] 2009 were significantly lower than in 2005 or 2007." Only 5.7 percent of the troops rated their units' morale as high or very high, barely half the percentage in 2007.

The Army's survey found that 21 percent of its soldiers in Afghanistan reported suffering psychological problems, more than double the percentage reported in 2005. Among those soldiers on their third or fourth deployment to a battle zone, 31 percent reported psychological problems.

The survey also found that 31 percent of junior enlisted men reported problems with their marriages.

Citing discussions within focus groups formed during the survey, the report pointed to the growing popular opposition to the US-led occupation as a key source of falling morale. "They voiced frustration because they did not see progress," the report said in relation to troops deployed in clearing roadside bombs. It quoted one soldier who stated, "Once we clear the route it gets another IED because the villagers are putting it there."

Another soldier described being sent out on night patrols with little preparation or coordination. "We go out there [and] we think we're all going to die."

The costs of the Afghanistan war, meanwhile, are an increasingly significant element within the fiscal crisis of the US government and will result in even deeper cuts in social spending at a time of mounting unemployment and poverty at home. According to internal government estimates, the New York Times reported, the price tag for McChrystal's additional 40,000 troops would be as high as \$54 billion a year. The cost to the US government of fielding one soldier for one year in Afghanistan is roughly \$1 million, according to government estimates.

In addition, the cost of training the Afghan police and military is expected to reach \$50 billion over five years. This comes on top of the \$130 billion appropriated for the Iraq and Afghanistan occupations this year, as well as another \$50 billion in supplemental funding that the Pentagon is expected to request soon.

Another indication of the tensions building up within the US administration and military came in the form of an interview given to the British Guardian by David Kilcullen, a reputed counterinsurgency expert and adviser to Gen. David Petraeus, head of US Central Command, who compared Obama to someone "pontificating" about whether or not to send fire fighters into a burning building.

Criticizing proposals within the administration for cutting the number of troops requested by McChrystal, Kilcullen, a former Australian army officer, warned: "You either commit to D-Day and invade the continent or you get Suez. Half-measures end up with Suez."

The reference is to the 1956 humiliation of Britain in its abortive attempt to militarily retake the Suez Canal, which had been nationalized by Egypt. The episode signaled the end of Britain's hegemony in the Middle East and its great power status on the world stage.

No doubt, discussions within the US ruling establishment and the military-intelligence apparatus—with references to Suez and helicopters on the embassy roof—have centered on whether a US debacle or withdrawal from Afghanistan could signal a similar loss of world power for US imperialism.

What Kilcullen ignores, however, is that the Suez debacle for Britain was not the result of inadequate military forces, but rather the refusal of Washington, which opposed the military action, to support the British pound. The resulting financial crisis compelled London to comply with US wishes and end the military adventure.

The mounting costs of the Afghanistan war are exacerbating the crisis of US capitalism, preparing the conditions for a similar turning point. Whatever Obama decides in relation to troop deployments, such a crisis—and the bitter recriminations within the ruling establishment that will result—is unavoidable.

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