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Pentagon demands continuation of US surge in Afghanistan

By Bill Van Auken

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On the eve of President Barack Obama's July deadline for beginning the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, the US military has opposed any significant drawdown.

Gen. David Petraeus, the top US military commander in Afghanistan—and Obama's nominee for director of the Central Intelligence Agency—met with White House national security advisers on Wednesday. According to White House spokesman Jay Carney, Petraeus presented a "range of options." Carney said that the US president would announce "relatively soon" how many troops would be withdrawn and at what pace.

Citing military and administration officials, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Thursday that the military commanders are demanding that the White House "hold off on ending the Afghanistan troop surge until the fall of 2012."

Since taking office in January 2009, Obama has nearly tripled the number of American troops fighting in the decade-old war. When he entered the White House, there were 34,000 troops in the country. Now there are nearly 100,000.

In December of 2009, Obama announced his "surge," ordering the deployment of 33,000 extra troops. At the time, he set July 2011 as the date when Washington would "begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan."

The surge was preceded by a heated debate within the administration between the military, which wanted a major increase in troop strength to carry out a full-scale counterinsurgency operation, and elements within the administration, led by Vice President Joseph Biden, who favored a counter-terrorism strategy that would rely on fewer troops but more aerial bombardments and special forces assassination raids to quell the resistance to US domination.

In the end, Obama gave the military precisely what it had asked for. Moreover, virtually as soon as his speech announcing the surge was delivered, the administration began back-peddling on the July 2011 deadline, insisting that any drawdown of US forces would be dependent upon conditions on the ground and stressing a 2014 target date set by NATO for transferring security operations to Afghan puppet military and police forces.

In the run-up to the surge the military waged a quasi-public campaign for the troop strength it desired, with Petraeus's predecessor as Afghanistan commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, delivering a speech in London that bordered on insubordination in its ridicule of the Biden position. This time around, the uniformed commanders have avoided public comment.

The *Journal* reports, however, that Petraeus has privately told both members of Congress and administration officials that he wants to keep the present US combat strength in Afghanistan intact, at least until the autumn of 2012. This would maintain the present level of deployment through this year's and next year's "fighting seasons," the summer months in which the armed groups opposing US occupation traditionally wage their offensive.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who is due to step down next month after serving as the chief of the Pentagon since being appointed by George W. Bush in 2006, has made no secret of his position, which reflects that of the uniformed brass. In a speech to the NATO defense ministers meeting in Brussels last week, he insisted that there will be "no rush for the exits" when Obama announces his decision on the July drawdown.

During a July 6 visit to Afghanistan, Gates stressed that any withdrawal would be "responsible" and insisted that the administration had to "look at it strategically... and not just focus on the front end of this and whatever number gets announced in July."

He added that he would "try to maximize my combat capability as long as this process goes on," meaning that whatever withdrawal does take place will consist primarily of support units, which in some cases could be replaced by private contractors. At the end of last year, there were 18,919 private security personnel in Afghanistan, triple the number in June 2009. The total number of contractors, including those in unarmed capacities, tops 100,000.

Testifying before a congressional committee on Wednesday, Gates stressed the 2014 deadline set by NATO, saying that by then "the number of troops in Afghanistan will be significantly reduced," and that until then "there's plenty of time to adjust the size and schedule of this change."

In his final Pentagon press conference on Thursday, Gates referred to mounting popular opposition to the war in the US. Recent polls have indicated that two thirds of the American people do not believe the Afghan war is worth fighting.

“So this unhappiness and certainly the war weariness after a decade ... rests heavily on all of us,” Gates said. “And the key is how do we complete our mission, as we have largely done in Iraq, in a way that protects American national security interests and the American people and contributes to stability?”

Asked whether the US military was “winning in Afghanistan,” Gates said he had learned to avoid “loaded words” like winning, but claimed that the Pentagon had been “successful in implementing the president's strategy... in denying the Taliban control of populated areas, degrading their capabilities and improving the capabilities of the Afghan national security forces.”

The official line promoted by Gates and the American uniformed command—that the nearly 10-year-old war is succeeding and must be continued at the present level to avoid a setback—is belied by a number of indicators.

Violence in Afghanistan is now at its highest level since the US launched the war to oust the Taliban regime in October 2001. According to the United Nations, the number of civilians killed in the country last year reached 2,777, a 15 percent increase over 2009.

There is every reason to believe that this figure grossly underestimates the real number of civilian casualties, in large part because the UN uncritically repeats US-NATO data.

The spurious character of this data is underscored by an article by Gareth Porter, published by IPS, reviewing claims made by General Petraeus concerning alleged Taliban prisoners captured in raids by special operations forces.

“In December [2010], Petraeus’s command said a total of 4,100 Taliban rank and file had been captured in the previous six months and 2,000 had been killed,” Porter reports. The military’s own figures, however, show that 80 percent of the 4,100 detained were released within days, after it was determined that they were civilians with no ties to the Taliban.

Even more were released from the Bagram detention facility after US officers decided that there was no evidence that they were part of any armed opposition group. In the end, barely 10 percent of those grabbed by special forces troops were actually held.

The obvious question is, if 90 percent of the people US troops captured as suspected Taliban were civilians, is it not likely that a similar ratio of those killed were also non-combatants? In virtually every incident in which it has been proven that US operations have claimed civilian lives, US and NATO spokesmen have initially insisted that the dead were “insurgents.”

At the same time, reports prepared by the US military cast serious doubt on Washington’s strategy for the “Afghanization” of the war by 2014. According to the British *Independent*, the

latest Pentagon progress report on the Afghan National Army concludes that not a single unit is capable of operating “without assistance from coalition forces.” According to the report, more than half of army and police units cannot go into battle unless US and other foreign troops fight alongside them and less than a third are capable of doing so with just foreign military “advisors” supporting them.

The report also concludes that the “slow development of governance” and “corruption” threaten the “transition” and “could potentially threaten the progress made in the last six months.” In other words, the US is attempting to build up a military for a corrupt puppet regime led by President Hamid Karzai that lacks both legitimacy and popular support.

A second classified report prepared for the US Army last month concludes that the killing of American troops by Afghan soldiers the Americans are supposed to be training or fighting alongside is becoming a “rapidly growing systemic threat” that could undermine the entire US strategy.

Prepared by Jeffrey Bordin, a political and behavioral scientist employed by the Army, the document states that the frequency of such killings “may be unprecedented between ‘allies’ in modern history” and has created a “crisis of trust” between US troops and Afghan puppet forces, which American military commanders have attempted to gloss over.

There have been 57 such killings since 2007. Bordin described them as “a severe and rapidly metastasizing malignancy.”

The study includes interviews with Afghan and American troops about how each group perceives the other. The report says that Afghan troops saw their American counterparts as “violent, reckless, intrusive, arrogant, self-serving, profane, infidel bullies hiding behind high technology.”

The American troops described the Afghan soldiers as “cowardly, incompetent, obtuse, thieving, complacent, lazy, pot-smoking, treacherous and murderous radicals.”

As the surge continues, US-NATO casualties are reaching their highest level since the war began. In April and May, the number of US-led occupation troops killed in Afghanistan rose to 110, the highest ever for that two-month period. The total number of US casualties has risen to 1,623, with 177 killed this year.

On Thursday, the Pentagon announced the death of Private Ryan Larson, 19, of Friendship, Wisconsin, who was killed the day before by a roadside bomb in Kandahar Province.

Larson joined the Army before graduating from high school last year. His principal said that he had been the senior class president, made the honor roll throughout high school, played the trumpet and was on the school’s baseball, wrestling and cross country teams.

The teenager's mother and grandmother flew to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to wait for the return of his remains. He was the fifth soldier from the state of Wisconsin killed in Afghanistan this year.