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Former US generals, diplomats clamor for renewal of Afghan war

By Thomas Gaist

9 June 2016

In an open letter to the White House published June 3 by *The National Interest* magazine, 13 retired American generals and diplomats demanded the suspension of all further US troop withdrawals from Afghanistan.

The letter, signed by four former US ambassadors to Kabul and five former US military commanders in Afghanistan, including General Stanley McChrystal and General David Petraeus, makes clear that the proposed “freeze” in US troop withdrawals would serve to defer the issue until after the election.

“Unless emergency conditions require consideration of a modest increase, we would strongly favor a freeze at the level of roughly ten thousand U.S. troops through January 20,” the letter stated. “This approach would also allow your successor to assess the situation for herself or himself and make further adjustments accordingly.”

Given the long history of US wars launched immediately following presidential elections, it is easy enough to guess at the sort of “adjustments” the authors have in mind. The obvious implication of such a statement is that, with the election past, the newly installed administration will have a free hand to order further escalation.

In the event, the authors leave no doubt over their preferred policy. With arrogance befitting the colonial masters of old, the retired US officials wrote: “Afghanistan is a place where we should wish to consolidate and lock down our provisional progress into something of a more lasting asset.”

The demands for an essentially permanent US presence in Afghanistan, issued one and a half years after President Obama proclaimed the war over, have become more insistent amid signs that the Afghan government is likely to lose more and more territory to the Taliban.

Stephen Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations wrote, “The range of plausible outcomes in Afghanistan is now very narrow. The Afghan government could lose the war outright, or it can negotiate a compromise settlement with the major insurgent factions. There is no longer any meaningful prospect to defeat the Taliban.”

“What’s needed isn’t a slower timetable for withdrawals – it’s the end of timetables altogether,” he continued.

While framed as “proposals” in the public statements of the foreign policy establishment, preparations for expanded war in Afghanistan and Central Asia are proceeding as if the question were already decided. As early as January, US commanders began proclaiming openly in the US media that the Pentagon plans to station thousands of American troops in Afghanistan for “decades to come.”

From the outset, the Afghanistan “drawdown” was always a tactical maneuver, conceived as part of the Obama administration’s strategy of shifting resources to the Asia-Pacific and Eastern Europe, in preparation for large-scale wars against Russia and China.

This strategy was disrupted by the unexpected seizure of large portions of Iraq by Sunni insurgents, beginning with the seizure of Mosul by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in June 2014, which threatened to bring about the collapse of the US-backed neocolonial government in Baghdad. Under pressure from the Pentagon, the Obama administration has steadily re-inflated the US intervention in Iraq, deploying thousands of ground troops and pounding the already devastated country with more than 6,000 air strikes.

A similar catastrophe now threatens the US position in Afghanistan. Despite 15 years of murderous warfare waged by the United States military in the name of suppressing insurgency and terror but directed, in reality, against all opposition to the Kabul regime, and against the Afghan population as a whole, the US puppet government remains incapable of controlling the cities without help from tens of thousands of Western troops and heavy fire support from the US Air Force.

The Afghan national army, trained at huge expense by the American government, has proven incapable of holding territory without US air and ground support. In the course of 2015, Taliban forces briefly seized the northern city of Kunduz, staged attacks against the Afghan Parliament building in the center of Kabul, and launched offensives in Helmand province that forced

Washington to redeploy hundreds of combat forces in support of collapsing Afghan national units.

While the US sought negotiations with the Taliban via the Quadrilateral Coordination Group during the opening months of this year, the assassination of Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour, carried out by a squadron of US Special Operations drones on May 21, appears to have succeeded in scuttling the talks.

Mansour's killing, an act characterized bluntly by CFR analyst Biddle as "a major escalation in the US drone campaign," has brought to power a new Taliban leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, reported to be much more strongly opposed to a negotiated compromise with the US-backed government than his predecessor.

The US push to escalate the killing on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border comes amid geopolitical tensions throughout the region that have been massively inflamed by the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia."

The shift in US policy, aimed at encircling and preparing for war against China, is compressing and amplifying political tensions throughout Asia, irreversibly dislocating the continent's political order and impelling all of its major powers toward a general war.

The US-Pakistan alliance, once a pillar of American-dominated South Asia, is breaking down amid mutual denunciations by Washington and Islamabad.

Any expansion of the Afghanistan war will be directed, in part, against elements in Pakistan that are increasingly bucking the US line and turning toward China. In their letter to Obama, General Petraeus and Co. noted, "Afghanistan is a crucial partner in helping to shape the calculations of Pakistan, which has been an incubator of violent extremism but which might gradually be induced to cooperate in building a regional order conducive to peace and economic progress."

In its concluding paragraph, the diplomats and generals letter again emphasized the "helpful effects on the strategic assessments of some in Pakistan."

For their part, Pakistan's elite, having authorized a decade and a half of continuous US drone warfare against Pakistan's population, responded to the latest strike on Mansour with denunciations of Washington for violations of international law and demands for an end to all US strikes on Pakistani soil.

Washington has drawn India on board as a full partner in its Eurasian military agenda, signing a series of agreements, including the U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region and the Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relationship, setting India on a collision course with both China and Pakistan.

India is now poised to assume a direct security and military role in Afghanistan, under conditions where the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan are already involved, according to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, in a "secret war." Five days after Mansour's killing, Pakistan announced

the capture in Quetta of six agents from Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS). The Afghan cadres were interfacing with insurgent groups involved in terrorism and armed struggle against Pakistan, Islamabad claimed.

At the same time, Obama's "pivot" is fostering a new era of ferocious economic nationalism and propelling a scramble for economic primacy in Central Asia and control over the vast resource and commodity flows linking East Asia and the Indian subcontinent with Africa and the Middle East.

Seeking to circumvent the US encirclement, China is moving to develop the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a \$46 billion infrastructure project aimed at integrating Pakistan into a Chinese-led Eurasian economic bloc.

The Chinese initiative has only spurred India to intensify its intervention in Afghanistan and deepened the simmering India-Pakistan conflict. Last month, in a move openly intended to undercut the CPEC, India's Hindu nationalist-led government signed the Chabahar Pact with Iran and Afghanistan, pledging hundreds of millions for infrastructure projects linking Afghanistan with the Indian coast, which are designed to allow New Delhi access to Central Asia and the Middle East while bypassing Pakistan.