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'Surge' smoke follows Petraeus to Afpak

By Pepe Escobar

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Confirmed and reconfirmed by United States President Barack Obama, the US Senate and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and duly hailed as the new armored Messiah by US mainstream media, "tightly disciplined" political fox and former US Central Command chief General David Petraeus is about to land in Kabul. He will either hit the road to his 2012 Republican presidential nomination, or witness another disaster in a US\$7 billion a month (and counting) quagmire.

The myth of Petraeus' "successful surge" in Iraq could not but linger on. The Pentagon never managed not to profit by selling a public relations operation to a gullible American public. Petraeus actually "won" the war in Iraq by disgorging Samsonites full of cash to selected strands of the Sunni resistance who were fiercely fighting the US occupation, while at the same time shielding the American military inside remote bases.

Let's assume that what in effect are mostly Afghan Pashtuns will now also take Petraeus' bundle of cash (after all Afghanistan is the second most corrupt country in the world, only behind Somalia). In this case will he have enough time to buy the whole Afghan resistance before the 2012 US presidential election? It depends on how much cash will flow.

What's certain is that the Pashtuns will be more than happy to take the money and not

run, but wait - exactly as the Sunni Iraqis are doing (newsflash: the Sunni-Shi'ite civil war is still on, killing at least 300 civilians every month).

Naturally the infinite war lobby - from the Pentagon's "full-spectrum dominance" crowd to hawkish Zio-cons and assorted Republicans - wants "cold-eyed realist" Petraeus to engage in, what else, infinite war, with its attendant surge(s). We're already on our way; the general already said this is an "enduring" commitment. Maybe not exactly the White House sort of commitment, which until now was demoted General Stanley McChrystal's hardcore, "take, clear and hold" counter-insurgency (COIN) plus building up local "governance".

What US public opinion was sold on was McChrystal performing surge part two in Afghanistan. But from running Pentagon death squads in Iraq to performing COIN designed by Petraeus himself, McChrystal fell way out of his league; not to mention that you don't captivate Pashtun civilians' hearts and minds by bombing their villages to rubble and incinerating their sons, daughters and wedding parties.

Follow the money

Every shard of lapis lazuli and lithium in the Hindu Kush knows al-Qaeda abandoned Afghanistan ages ago. The Taliban remain. For Washington, the Taliban is the same as al-Qaeda. Thus Washington also remains.

Petraeus never ended the Sunni-Shi'ite civil war raging in Iraq between 2006 and 2007. He tried to marginalize the Sadrists; he failed miserably. What he did, apart from showering US dollars, was to kill - via McChrystal's death squads - the leaders of many a Sunni resistance cell, while building a million checkpoints and installing a horrendous cement apartheid in Baghdad (a key factor into driving citywide unemployment to 80%).

Yet the civil war only diminished because the Shi'ites achieved a brutal, large-scale ethnic cleansing of Baghdad (and that showed to the Sunnis that the next best option was to cash in). Petraeus was peripheral at best during this whole (bloody) process. But he was stellar in selling to the US the notion of "victory".

Anyone who buys Pentagon spin believing the same successful "surge" will happen in the Pashtun south and southeast of Afghanistan must have smoked Hindu Kush's finest.

For starters, it's not only the "Taliban" - this James Joyce-style portmanteau word - who are fighting the US and NATO "invaders" as well as the Hamid Karzai "puppet" government in Kabul (the terminology is resistance-based). In crucial Kunar province the key resistance actor is notorious Ronald Reagan-friendly mujahid Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his Hizb-e-Islami. Karzai, crucially, has been talking to Hekmatyar. And Hekmatyar, apart from fighting some Taliban strands, has also been positioning himself as mediator - as long as the "invaders" leave.

Karzai is also talking to another key mujahid who is based in Pakistan's North Waziristan, Sirajuddin Haqqani, son of the legendary Jalaluddin, another Reagan "freedom fighter". And not leaving anything to chance, Karzai is also negotiating with the number two of the Mullah Omar-led historic Taliban - Mullah Baradar. Mullah Omar himself wants no tea with Petraeus: he firmly believes the infidels will eventually leave.

What this all means is that wily Karzai, seeing which way the wind blows, is essentially leaning towards Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence - and there's nothing Petraeus can do about it. The Central Intelligence Agency - always faithful to divide and rule tactics - predictably abominates the idea of Afghans talking among themselves to sort out their common future. In an aside with truly Dadaist overtones, the head of the Taliban in Kunar, Obaid al-Rahman, offered Petraeus a praetorian "Guard of Death". The heart of the matter is that the overwhelming majority of Pashtuns in the south and southeast don't want Karzai, don't want Petraeus, don't want surge, don't want US and don't want NATO. They want to be left alone to rule their local tribal land as they see fit. And to top it off, all those strands lumped as "Taliban" believe in their heart of hearts that their own brand of counter-surge is the real deal - that is, taking over Kabul by the end of 2012.

Petraeus' cash diplomacy is doomed. The Taliban in all their strands, compared with Sunni Iraqis, are infinitely stronger, as much as Karzai is much weaker than Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. And even if only 30% of tribal Afghan Pashtuns actively support the Taliban, the majority totally supports their fierce anti-occupation struggle. The Washington notion that Petraeus can influence complex tribal Pashtun politics is risible.

If Petraeus goes "clear, hold and build" COIN in Pashtun lands he is doomed. If Petraeus gets restless and produces a Fallujah in Pashtun lands, he is also doomed (that may be in effect right away, as one of his minions told Fox News that rules of engagement will be more "kinetic" - code for more US firepower and more civilian casualties.)

So what's the point of all this upcoming carnage? Well, there are so many - the poppy trade, the "Saudi Arabia of lithium", the ultimate pipe dream known as Trans-Afghan Pipeline, those military bases spying both Russia and China ... So many rats scurrying around the sinking US flotilla in the sand, but what the hell, there's another successful "surge" to sell and the (war) show must go on.