

Britain: Blair's overseas diplomacy highlights military crisis in Afghanistan

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The visits by Prime Minister Tony Blair to Pakistan and Afghanistan and by Chancellor Gordon Brown to Iraq continue the desperate efforts of the British government to rescue its imperialist ambitions following the defeats suffered by the Bush administration in the United States mid-term elections.

Blair's key foreign policy address to the City of London last week saw him make a call for greater international involvement in Iraq from regional powers such as Syria and Iran, in order to deal with the growing insurgency.

However, his proposals amount to little more than a wish list, the fulfillment of which depends on factors outside of Britain's control.

The fact that it was left to Brown to make a low-key and unannounced visit to Basra indicates the scale of the problems facing the government. Britain's Iraq policy is effectively in limbo. Entirely dependent upon the US, it can only be formulated once the factional conflict that has erupted in Washington finds some resolution. At present, Britain is pinning its hopes on the possibility that the Iraqi Survey Group will recommend a timetable of phased withdrawal, but this is by no means assured. The only certainty is that all sections of the Republican Party and the Democrats are united in their resolve that the insurgency cannot be seen to have won—raising the immediate prospect of worsening violence and bloodshed, rather than a let-up in hostilities.

For its part, the Blair government is just as clear that a defeat in Iraq would be a devastating blow to the strategic interests of British imperialism.

All that Brown could do in Basra was to promise additional financial aid towards Iraqi reconstruction and to suggest that troops may be withdrawn some time in the future. But without a dramatic scaling back of Britain's military commitment, it faces the prospect of defeat in Afghanistan—the consequences of which would be just as damaging.

Blair was not only avoiding Iraq when he chose to visit Lahore and Kabul. His meetings with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf and Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai were made necessary by the ever-worsening situation facing British troops. Forty-one British soldiers have died since the start of the US-led war in 2001, 36 since June of this year.

He used his meetings with the two leaders and an address to British troops to argue for greater emphasis to be placed on the Afghan conflict by the NATO powers. In a five-minute speech before 800 servicemen and -women at Camp Bastion in Helmand province, Blair made the extraordinary declaration that “Here in this extraordinary piece of desert is where the future of world security in the early twenty-first century is going to be played out.”

It was not long ago that Blair was making similar claims about the central significance of Iraq to justify a war that did nothing but destabilise the entire Middle East. To pin the fate of world security on the military subjugation of Afghanistan is no less disastrous. This is a region that Britain was never able to bring under control, even at the height of its empire.

All that has so far been achieved since the US-led offensive that brought down the Taliban regime is the setting up of a puppet government that has little authority outside of the capital. Throughout the country, the 31,000-strong United Nations-mandated International Security Assistance Force face continuous attacks.

Former US president Theodore Roosevelt famously summed up his approach to US foreign policy as “Speak softly and carry a big stick.” Blair's approach to British foreign policy amounts to shouting loudly, whilst waving a twig.

In his efforts to rally the troops, he declared, “If your enemy is fighting you—and they are our enemy—then your response should be to fight them back even harder and with more determination.” Speaking alongside Karzai, he

promised to “stick with it until the job is done.”

However, Britain has fewer than 6,000 troops, which have been unable to effectively subdue the Helmand Province. And as for staying until the job is done, he went on to speak of Afghanistan as a “generational struggle”—adding quickly that he was not suggesting that this would be the duration of Britain’s military presence.

For all his bellicose rhetoric, the real aim of Blair’s trip was in fact to call for someone else to come and do the fighting.

In the first place, his visit to Pakistan was an attempt to secure the support of the Musharraf regime in suppressing the Afghan insurgency. This focused on complaints made earlier by Britain’s Lieutenant-General David Richards, NATO’s commander in Afghanistan, that Pakistan was failing to police its border and that its secret service, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, was backing the Taliban.

Faced with such criticisms and more serious threats from Washington, Pakistan’s armed forces have carried out a number of military operations, including the destruction of an Islamic school in Chingai that killed at least 80 students and teachers.

Far more is now being demanded. Blair made clear that aid to Pakistan would be tied to its readiness to effectively police its 1,400-mile border with Afghanistan and to clamp down on Islamic extremism. Britain and the US have criticised Musharraf’s agreement last month to withdraw Pakistani forces from the autonomous northwest provinces on the Afghan border dominated by Pashtun clans that they claim are being used by the Taliban to hide and regroup.

Of equal significance, Blair also pledged to deepen collaboration between Britain’s intelligence services and the ISI. The ISI has already been one of the main sources of intelligence regarding high-profile terrorist plots, including the July 7 London bombings. This is despite a wealth of evidence of its own ties to Islamic fundamentalists and terrorist activity, its frame-up of political opponents, and its use of torture and fabrication of evidence.

Blair’s reliance on the ISI is a damning refutation of the democratic pretensions in which he has sought to cloak Britain’s neo-colonial policies. It can only accelerate the attacks on democratic rights in Britain and overseas. And even if Musharraf gave Blair everything he is demanding, this would run the risk of spreading the Afghan conflict into Pakistan.

Musharraf made a desperate appeal at the joint press

conference for a Marshall Plan-style development programme as the only effective way of defeating terrorism, in response to which Blair offered a paltry £480 million in additional funding for education and gender balance and to help develop “moderate” Islamic schools.

Ultimately, Blair is pinning his hopes on presenting a convincing case for greater military involvement in Afghanistan by the European powers.

His visit was made in advance of the NATO summit in Riga scheduled for November 28-29. The NATO powers Germany, Italy, France and Spain have all placed severe restrictions on the relatively small contingents they have deployed in Afghanistan, excluding them from a combat role. Blair wants these restrictions removed. His position is supported by NATO secretary-general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, as well as Canada and the US. In Washington, Daniel Fried, assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, said NATO “shouldn’t have countries saying, ‘No. We don’t do fighting. We don’t get our hands dirty.’ ”

But however anxious the European powers are to strengthen their military role on the world arena, this does not translate into a desire to become embroiled in the Afghan conflict. Ahead of Riga, Chancellor Angela Merkel ruled out redeploying any of Germany’s 2,900 troops in Afghanistan to fight in the south. The German military is fulfilling “an important and dangerous task” in the north, providing security and backing reconstruction, she told parliament. “The Bundeswehr will continue to take responsibility there within the framework of its mandate, but I do not see any military commitment that goes beyond this mandate.”



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