

The Obama candidacy and the new consensus on Afghanistan

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The statements made by Barack Obama during his visit to Afghanistan over the weekend verify that his campaign for president is the mouthpiece for a significant section of the American ruling elite that is insisting on a shift in US policy in the Middle East and Central Asia. Far from proposing any retreat from militarism, Obama is arguing for a faster drawdown of troop numbers in Iraq and a reduction in tensions with Iran, only in order to facilitate a major escalation of US military operations in Afghanistan, potentially extending them into Pakistan.

In a lengthy interview with CBS's Lara Logan yesterday, Obama said the situation in Afghanistan was "precarious and urgent". Global terrorist networks, he alleged, had "sanctuary" in the region and were financing themselves with the drug trade. He declared: "I don't think there is any doubt that we were distracted [by the invasion of Iraq] from our efforts to hunt down Al Qaeda and the Taliban..."

Obama told Logan: "There's starting to be a broad consensus that it's time for us to withdraw some of our combat troops out of Iraq, [and] deploy them here in Afghanistan. And I think we have to seize that opportunity. Now's the time to do it... If we wait until the next administration, it could be a year before we get those additional troops on the ground here in Afghanistan. And I think that would be a mistake. I think the situation is getting urgent enough that we've got to start doing something now."

Obama repeated his calls for a build-up of forces in Afghanistan and for greater intervention inside Pakistan against anti-US militants. "What I've said is that if we had actionable intelligence against high-value Al Qaeda targets, and the Pakistani government was unwilling to go after those targets, that we should," he stated. While declaring he would provide increased aid and "push Pakistan very hard" to go after insurgent camps with its own military, his remarks make clear that he is prepared to unilaterally launch attacks over the border.

In regards to Iraq, the Illinois senator again highlighted the statement of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that the Iraqi government wanted a timetable for the withdrawal of US forces to be included in the agreement being worked out to govern the presence of American troops after December. Obama declared:

"[T]his is the perfect time for us to say 'We are going to shift our resources. We are going to get a couple more brigades here into Afghanistan. We're going to be willing to increase our foreign aid to Pakistan.'"

Obama's comments underscore the utter fraud of attempts to portray him as an "antiwar" candidate. Rather, he speaks for a layer in the US political and military establishment that considers the Iraq war to have been a costly strategic blunder. It has tied down a large proportion of the armed forces and cost vast resources, as well as provoking tremendous social divisions at home and mass hostility to US militarism around the world.

In February, the WSWS commented on the backing for Obama by major corporate figures such as billionaire Warren Buffett and former Federal Reserve head Paul Volcker in an article entitled "The two faces of Barack Obama". We noted: "No doubt, they believe Obama, who would be America's first African-American president, is best suited to confront the dangers posed by continuing economic crisis and rising social tensions. Who better to demand even greater sacrifices from the working class, all in the name of national unity and 'change?' At the same time, he would present a fresh face to the world, which they hope would help extricate US imperialism from the foreign policy debacles and growing global isolation that are the legacy of the Bush administration."

This is precisely the content of Obama's prescriptions for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While a large proportion of the US war machine has been bogged down occupying Iraq, US economic and strategic ambitions in Afghanistan and Central Asia have suffered serious setbacks. Insurgents among the Pashtun tribesmen of southern Afghanistan and the frontier provinces of Pakistan are conducting a large-scale guerilla war against not only US/NATO troops and the pro-occupation government of President Hamid Karzai, but also against the Pakistani government, which has long been a crucial US ally in the region. Pakistan has effectively lost control of its border areas.

Indicating the concerns in US ruling circles, the current issue of *Time* magazine has a cover with the headline: "Afghanistan—the Right War". It features the call for additional troops by both Obama and his Republican rival, John McCain.

The military situation in Afghanistan sharply deteriorated this summer. The number of attacks launched against the occupation forces has jumped by over 40 percent, and casualties have risen sharply. A measure of the intensified fighting, and the desperation among US and NATO military commanders, is the number of bombs dropped by US aircraft. In June, 646 bombs were dropped—the second highest total for any month in the near seven-year war. In the first half of 2008, 1,853 bombs and missiles were used, 40 percent more than the same period last year. Analysts openly speak of the Afghan war as continuing for 10 to 20 years.

US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen has stated that as many as three additional combat brigades are needed in Afghanistan, but has admitted that he does not have them to send, due to the number of troops in the Middle East.

US allies in Europe have continued to baulk at US calls for them to deploy greater military forces to Afghanistan. A major factor is the fear of European governments of the widespread hostility that exists toward the Bush administration as a result of the illegal and murderous invasion of Iraq. With Obama embarking this week on visits to France, Germany and Britain, there is no question that he will attempt to exploit the illusions and false hopes in his campaign to try to overcome this hostility with populist demagogic about the legitimacy of the war in Afghanistan.

Under conditions where the military situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating, the calls by elements in and around the Bush administration for US or Israeli military strikes on nuclear facilities in Iran are viewed in the Obama camp and more widely as a recipe for a complete catastrophe.

Open concerns have been expressed in the military that a war with Iran would undermine efforts to stabilise the US occupation of Iraq and any redeployment of forces to Afghanistan. Despite US accusations of Iranian aid for the insurgents, Tehran has repeatedly intervened to shore up the US-backed government in Baghdad against more radical elements in the majority Shiite population. Iranian pressure was a critical factor this year in the ability of the Maliki government and US forces to largely destroy the anti-occupation Mahdi Army militia of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Moreover, leading US commanders have questioned their ability to wage a full-scale war with Iran. Admiral Mullen told Fox News. “I worry about it a lot... I’ve said when I’ve been asked this before, right now I’m fighting two wars and I don’t need a third one... Not that we don’t have the reserve to do it in the US. We do. I worry about the instability in that part of the world ... the possible unintended consequences of a strike like that in fact having an impact throughout the region that would be difficult to predict exactly what it would be and then the actions that we would have to take to contain it.”

One obvious consequence of recent talk of US or Israeli aggression against Iran is its contribution to the sharp rise in oil

prices and global inflationary pressures. Already faced with the most severe financial crisis since the 1930s, the American business elite has no desire to see oil soar to over \$200 a barrel as a result of a war with Iran.

The Bush administration is clearly adapting to the reorientation being advocated by Obama and his backers. Tensions with Iran have been eased somewhat and renewed stress laid on diplomacy to achieve the US demands that Tehran shut down its nuclear fuel enrichment facilities. Senior US diplomat William Burns took part in a weekend meeting between the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany, and Iran over the nuclear issue—the first time the US has participated in such talks.

On Iraq, the White House announced on Friday that it was prepared to agree to Maliki’s call for “a general time horizon” for “the further reduction in US combat forces from Iraq”. The US commander General David Petraeus is reportedly assessing the possibility of pulling out three brigades by September to free up troops for a “surge” to Afghanistan before the end of the year. Implicit in the agreement being formulated is that a US force numbering in the tens of thousands will remain in Iraq indefinitely, occupying the major bases that the US military has constructed in Iraq over the past five years.

This follows announcements by the Iraqi government that oil contracts will be handed over to major US and other energy conglomerates. A reduction in forces in Iraq, in other words, follows signs that one of the main aims of invasion—seizing control of the country’s vast energy resources—is in the process of being realised.

The Obama candidacy, whether he is ultimately successful or not, is thus being used to effect a shift in foreign policy. During the primary elections and caucuses, millions of people were mobilised on the pretext that Obama was the leader of a grass roots movement against the status quo. As soon as Obama captured the nomination, he began a lurch to the right, embracing policies of the Republican right. Now it is clear that whoever wins the presidency, the wars will continue.

Once again, the US elections are being engineered to deprive the American people of any say over or ability to end the militarist policies of the government. The decisions to escalate the neo-colonial war in Afghanistan have already been made, justified with more propaganda about the “terrorist threat”. The consequences will be the loss of thousands more lives and the squandering of billions more in resources.



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