Obama appointees signal continuing aggression and war

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Barack Obama's vague campaign promises of "change" are rapidly evaporating as the key positions in the next administration are filled with veterans of the US political establishment. Far from ending war abroad and social reaction at home, Obama's choices underline the essential continuity with the policies of the Bush administration.

Nothing expresses the right-wing orientation of Obama's foreign policy more than the confirmation Tuesday that he will retain Bush's defense secretary, Robert Gates, in his post when the new foreign policy team is formally announced after the Thanksgiving holiday. Gates, who took over from Donald Rumsfeld in late 2006, has been responsible for the continued bloody prosecution of the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Obama, who won the Democratic presidential nomination in large measure because of overwhelming support among antiwar voters, youth and students, has now agreed to the continuation at the Pentagon of the man who has supervised the war in Iraq for the past two years.

Gates will stay on in a line-up that is stacked with proponents of US militarism. Hilary Clinton, who supported the criminal invasion of Iraq from the outset and notoriously declared that the United States should "obliterate" Iran if it attacked Israel, is to become the secretary of state.

Retired Marine General James Jones, a former NATO commander and current executive at the US Chamber of Commerce, is to be installed as national security adviser. After a 40-year military career, he served last year as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's special envoy on Middle East Security and conducted a congressional investigation into the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. His view that the war in Iraq caused the US to "take its eye off the ball" in Afghanistan is in line with Obama's insistence that US military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan must be intensified.

As significant as these appointments are Obama's ongoing discussions with figures such as Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to Presidents Gerald Ford and Bush senior, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter. Both men were sharply critical of the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, not because they were opposed to the war as such, but because they regarded it as a destabilizing military adventure that has seriously damaged US strategic and economic interests, particularly in the Middle East. Many such advocates of *realpolitik* backed Obama as the means for effecting a tactical shift to stabilizing Afghanistan as a base of US operations within the broader region.

In a joint column published in last Friday's *Washington Post*, Scowcroft and Brzezinski argued that Obama's first priority should be on the Arab-Israeli peace process as a means of resurrecting US standing in the Middle East. "It would liberate Arab governments to support US leadership in dealing with regional problems, as they did before the Iraq invasion," they wrote, "It would change the region's psychological climate, putting Iran back on the defensive and putting a stop to its swagger."

Setting another round of the Middle East peace process in motion would provide the necessary political

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camouflage for more sinister objectives. Last week, another of Obama's high profile advisers, Dennis Ross, gave a speech in Denver in which he advocated a far more aggressive stance towards Iran. Criticising the Bush administration for its approach of "weak sticks and weak carrots", he said that Obama was "ready to use strong sticks and strong carrots—the strong sticks to concentrate their minds on what they stand to lose."

Ross and other Obama advisers participated in drawing up a series of think tank reports in September calling for a rapid escalation of the US confrontation with Iran, including the threat of tougher sanctions, an economic blockade of the country and military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. While the stated aim of this high-risk strategy is to induce Tehran to abandon its nuclear program and to reach a broad political accommodation with Washington, it carries the obvious danger of another full-scale war.

Ross, who has a close association with the Bush administration's right-wing neocons, was quite open about the role that Obama could play. "When you have someone like President-elect Obama as president, it is a lot harder to demonize the United States," he told his audience. In other words, the Obama administration will be able to carry out policies that the widely despised Bush administration is simply incapable of implementing. Ross is widely tipped to be appointed to a top state department job.

In Iraq, the status of forces agreement currently being concluded between Washington and Baghdad effectively implements Obama's call for a deadline for the withdrawal of US combat troops. But the sensitive issue of retaining long-term US military bases in the country remains to be negotiated. Obama, who always supported a continuing US presence in Iraq, will be in a far better position than Bush to assuage the concerns in Baghdad.

In Afghanistan, Defense Secretary Gates announced last Friday that he wanted to boost US troop numbers to escalate the war against anti-occupation insurgents. The *Los Angeles Times* reported on Monday that Marine Corps leaders have been drawing up plans for the deployment of more than 15,000 troops to "wage aggressive warfare against the Taliban they expect could take years." The build-up of US forces in Afghanistan is being accompanied by an increasing number of US missile strikes against targets in the border areas of neighboring Pakistan. The latest attack on Saturday killed at least four people.

Far from bringing an end to US militarism as tens of millions of American voters hoped for, the Obama administration is preparing to consolidate a US presence in Iraq and escalate the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The prospect of a dangerous new war looms as Obama's advisers lay out their plans for confronting Iran.

For those in the US establishment, Obama's emerging foreign policy comes as no surprise. As the Stratfor think tank commented yesterday: "Obama's supporters believed that Obama's position on Iraq was profoundly at odds with the Bush administration's. We could never clearly locate the difference. The brilliance of Obama's presidential campaign was that he convinced his hard-core supporters that he intended to make a radical shift in policies across the board, without ever specifying what policies he was planning to shift, and never locking out the possibility of a flexible interpretation of his commitments."

The foreign policy heavyweights who supported Obama for president clearly hope to extend this "brilliance" in duping people onto the world stage as the US continues to aggressively pursue its economic and strategic interests in the Middle East and internationally.

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