Obama pledges intensified war in Afghanistan and Pakistan

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In a speech delivered Monday to the annual convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) in Arizona, President Barack Obama promised to intensify the US military engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, wind down the war in Iraq, and create a new military that would be better-equipped to wage unconventional warfare.

The speech's central purpose was to prepare public opinion for an escalation and prolongation of the US war in Afghanistan and its further expansion into neighboring Pakistan.

The president warned that the war in Afghanistan would be long and bloody, predicting "more difficult days ahead."

"The insurgency in Afghanistan didn't just happen overnight," Obama said. "And we won't defeat it overnight. This will not be quick. This will not be easy."

Obama said that diminution of the conflict in Iraq would allow the US "to refocus on the war against Al Qaida and its extremist allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan." In other words, there will be no lessening of US military violence. Whatever can be freed up from Iraq will simply be transferred to the "Af-Pak" theater.

"That's why I announced a new, comprehensive strategy in March, a strategy that recognizes that Al Qaida and its allies had moved their base from the remote tribal areas—to the remote tribal areas of Pakistan," Obama continued. This casual declaration demonstrates Obama's indifference toward international law and the US constitution. Pakistan is technically a sovereign state, and no formal declaration of war has ever been made against it.

To defend the intensification of the war in Afghanistan, Obama used fear-mongering language that could just as easily have been uttered by his predecessor, George W. Bush. "[W]e must never forget," Obama declared, "This is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity. Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which Al Qaida would plot to kill more Americans. So this is not only a war worth fighting; this is a—this is fundamental to the defense of our people."

The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US—for which no credible official explanation has ever been given—provided the pretext for the US invasion of Afghanistan, which corresponded to longstanding US geo-strategic aims that held Afghanistan as critical for its proximity to essential oil and gas resources and for its key central position in the Eurasian land mass.

The choice of the VFW convention to signal an escalation of the Afghanistan war provided another echo of the Bush administration. Using much the same rhetoric, Vice President Dick Cheney used the same venue to deliver a speech in August 2002 that inaugurated the campaign that led to the invasion of Iraq, also under false pretexts, in March 2003.

Obama's campaign to intensify the US military intervention in Central Asia comes under conditions in which the populations in the US, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are increasingly opposed to the war.

A recent poll by CNN/Opinion Research Corp of the US populations found that 54 percent of respondents are now opposed to the war in Afghanistan, with only 41 percent in favor, a dramatic reversal from May when 50 percent expressed support for the war. In Pakistan, a new Pew Global Attitudes survey found that about two thirds of the population, 64 per cent, view the US as "an enemy," with only 9 percent describing it as a "partner." And in Afghanistan, it is anticipated that national elections to be held Thursday will lack credibility due to fraud and voter abstentionism. There is a widespread understanding in the population that the election results will not end the US occupation.

In early October the war in Afghanistan will have entered its ninth year, making it the second-longest continuous military action in US history after the Vietnam War. At least 1,316 coalition soldiers have been killed, but the pace of the violence has steadily quickened, with July the bloodiest month for coalition forces since the war began. Beginning in 2005, each new year has outstripped the last as the war's deadliest, with 2008 setting a record of 294 coalition deaths. The current year will far surpass that total, with 271 deaths having already taken place.

On Sunday and Monday, three British and two US soldiers, as well as an American civilian, died in gun battles and bombings in Afghanistan.

The war has killed tens of thousands in Afghanistan and the

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border regions of Pakistan, although no accurate count is available. The vast majority of these have been innocent civilians, with a far larger proportion than in Iraq slain in US aerial bombardments or through attacks from the unmanned Predator drones that terrorize the region's villages on a daily basis.

As for Iraq, Obama asserted he would "remove all our troops from Iraq by the end of 2011," a promise that has already been nullified by both the US military command and the Iraqi regime.

After six years and four months of war, there remain 130,000 American soldiers in Iraq. In the interim, more than one million Iraqis have been killed as a result of the invasion, according to the most credible estimate. About a fifth of the population, nearly five million people, have been displaced—two million as refugees in neighboring countries. Iraq has been destroyed as a functioning society; unemployment is widespread and basic social services, including education, transportation, water, sewerage, and electricity, are decimated. Oil production has scarcely reached pre-invasion levels.

Over 4,331 US soldiers have been killed in the conflict, and over 31,100 have been wounded. The cost of the Iraq war will surpass the US war in Vietnam, adjusted for inflation, by the year's end, when it will reach nearly $700 billion.

Nonetheless, politicians of both parties have joined hands with the media to celebrate the supposed success of the Bush administration's "surge" in Iraq, whose strategy combined overwhelming violence, assassinations, bribery, and the ethnic cleansing of Baghdad and other areas that previously contained mixed Shiite and Sunni populations.

This barbaric policy has temporarily diminished attacks on US soldiers. But hundreds of Iraqis continue to die every month through bombings and assassinations, and the nation remains a tinderbox, with tense ethnic, religious, and regional tensions set to reignite.

Further undermining Obama's claim of an imminent withdrawal, the top US commander in Iraq, General Ray Odierno, on Monday said that he would request more US forces be stationed in Iraq's northern Kurdish region, where ethnic violence among Arabs and Kurds has intensified in recent weeks.

Obama's claims that he intends to "wind down" the military involvement in Iraq notwithstanding, it is an article of faith in Washington as well as Baghdad that a large-scale military presence must and will remain. The US has announced its real intentions through the construction of a series of "enduring" military bases and what will be the largest US embassy in the world in Baghdad's Green Zone. There is agreement within the US ruling elite that the US must dominate Iraq and its oil wealth, the world's second largest proven reserves.

Yet there is a growing consensus in the ruling class that Afghanistan is even more crucial to long-term US interests. This perspective last year coalesced behind the Obama campaign, and his ultimate ascension to the presidency represented, in no small measure, its triumph.

In his speech to the VFW, the president joined his bellicose statements on Afghanistan and Pakistan with a promise to maintain increased military spending and revamp the US military.

Obama boasted that his administration intends to increase the cost, size, and global superiority of the military, in spite of the economic crisis. "We need to keep our military the best trained, the best led, the best equipped fighting force in the world," Obama said. "And that's why, even with our current economic challenges, my budget increases defense spending ...why we've increased the size of the Army and the Marines Corps two years ahead of schedule and have approved another temporary increase in the Army."

Obama offered a vision of a new military that could respond to multiple conflicts simultaneously, suggesting the armed forces have "yet to fully adapt to the post-Cold War world, with doctrine and weapons better suited to fight the Soviets on the plains of Europe than insurgents in the rugged terrain of Afghanistan."

This would entail, the president said, "an Army that's more mobile and expeditionary and missile defenses that protect our troops in the field; a Navy that not only projects power across the oceans, but operates nimbly in shallow, coastal waters; an Air Force that dominates the airspace with next-generation aircraft, both manned and unmanned; [and] a Marine Corps that can move ashore more rapidly in more places."

Obama's proposals for a lighter and more high-tech army ready to deploy quickly all over the world are entirely in line with the views of Bush administration holdover Defense Secretary Gates, and, for that matter, his predecessor Donald Rumsfeld.

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