Imperialist interests drive US focus on Iran, Afghanistan

Patrick Martin
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The Obama administration began a much-publicized internal review of US policy in Afghanistan Wednesday, which is expected to culminate in the dispatch of as many as 40,000 additional US troops to the war.

On the following day, in Geneva, the US government held its first direct talks with Iran in 30 years, on the sidelines of a six-power meeting with Iran whose purpose is to threaten Tehran with economic sanctions and direct military action if it does not bow to US-inspired demands to scrap its alleged nuclear weapons program.

Media attention on the region has focused largely on the day-to-day events—the disputed Iranian and Afghan presidential elections, the steady growth of American and NATO casualties in the war against Taliban and other anti-occupation guerrilla forces in Afghanistan, and the supposed discovery of a secret Iranian nuclear facility, which was given sensationalized coverage in the American media last week.

But there is little or no analysis of the real driving forces of American intervention in southwestern Asia, which can only be understood historically. For three decades, under Democratic and Republican administrations—under Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Bush the second, and now Obama—American imperialism has plunged ever more deeply into the Middle East and the region west, south and east of the Caspian Sea.

In the post-World War II period, American domination of the oil resources of the Persian Gulf was dependent on three strategic pillars: Saudi Arabia, the largest single oil producer; the state of Israel, a US-financed and US-armed ally in formerly Arab Palestine; and the Shah of Iran, whose savage dictatorial rule was cemented in a CIA-backed coup in 1953 and backed by a flood of American weapons and advisers.

The overthrow of the Shah in the February, 1979 Iranian revolution destroyed one of these bastions, creating a strategic crisis for US imperialism which continues to this day. The Shah had served as the gendarme of the Gulf and a key ally against the Soviet Union. Saudi Arabia was too weak militarily and Israel too small and isolated to play these roles.

The initial US response was the issuance of the “Carter doctrine,” which authorized American military intervention against any threat to oil supplies from the Persian Gulf. This was combined with stepped-up intervention on both flanks of the new Islamic Republic of Iran—Afghanistan and Iraq.

In Afghanistan, a campaign of political provocation and subversion against the pro-Soviet government in Kabul provoked a reactionary invasion by Moscow in November 1979, achieving the goal set by Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, of involving the Soviet military in a protracted, bloody stalemate, which he described enthusiastically as “Russia’s Vietnam.”

In Iraq, the Carter administration goaded the regime of Saddam Hussein, who had only recently come to power, to invade Iran, with the goal of seizing the oil fields of the southern province of Khuzistan, which has a large Arab population. A colossal bloodbath followed over the next eight years. The Iran-Iraq War took a million lives, and Washington aided both sides to keep the fighting going as long as possible.

It is worth recalling, given the subsequent US-led propaganda campaigns against both Iraq and Iran over “weapons of mass destruction,” that it was the United States and its European NATO allies who supplied Iraq with the chemical weapons that Saddam Hussein used against both Iranian troops and his own Kurdish-speaking citizens. The special envoy sent by the Reagan administration to Baghdad to conduct its dealings with the Iraqi dictator was the future US defense secretary under George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld.

In 1990, when Hussein invaded Kuwait, the first Bush administration seized the opportunity to mobilize an

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enormous American military force in Saudi Arabia and then annihilate much of the Iraqi military. Washington still hesitated, however, to go all the way to Baghdad, both because it wanted the Iraqi regime as a counterweight to Iran, and because a full-scale invasion was thought too risky, since it would involve the projection of American military power nearly to the border of the Soviet Union.

The collapse of the USSR in December 1991 gave a new and dangerous impetus to American intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia. Washington now saw the possibility of gaining strategic positions and access to resources in considerable parts of the region that had been effectively outside the orbit of imperialism since the Russian Revolution.

The result was a series of initiatives by American imperialism along the entire southern periphery of the former Soviet Union:

* 1991-92—the dismemberment of Yugoslavia
* 1995—NATO intervention in Bosnia
* 1998—US bombing of Iraq
* 1999—NATO bombing of Serbia and occupation of Kosovo
* 2001—invasion of Afghanistan and overthrow of the Taliban
* 2003—invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein
* 2003-2004—instigation of “color” revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine
* 2007-2008—Bush’s military “surge” in Iraq
* 2009—Obama’s escalation of the war in Afghanistan and renewed pressure on Iran

There is a political and strategic logic to these interventions, which continue and escalate regardless of the episodic internal disputes within the American political establishment, or the transitions from administration to administration, from Democratic to Republican and back. What is involved is not merely the decisions of various individuals who occupy the top positions in the White House, Pentagon and State Department, but fundamental concerns common to the entire ruling class.

Definite material economic interests are certainly at stake: first and foremost, access to the oil and natural gas reserves of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin, by far the largest in the world. Much of American diplomacy throughout this region has been directed at establishing pipeline connections that would bring these energy resources to the market bypassing Russia, the former regional hegemon, and a hostile Iran.

On a broader historical plane, the projection of American military power into southwest Asia has an even more ominous and reactionary significance. American capitalism is a declining world power, a fact which is underscored by the central role played by Wall Street in the financial collapse of September-October 2008. The US ruling class seeks to offset the erosion of its economic power by the increasingly reckless and provocative use of its still dominant military power.

Thus, the election of Barack Obama eleven months ago, aided by an appeal, however limited, to the antiwar sentiments of American working people, has produced no change of any substance in American foreign policy. The erstwhile critic of the Iraq war maintains an army of occupation in that country, still numbering over 140,000 soldiers. The supposed advocate of dialogue with Iran has set an effective deadline of December for economic sanctions that would be the equivalent of a blockade (an act of war), or outright military assault. And his administration has already escalated the war in Afghanistan by sending an additional 21,000 troops, while the general whom Obama selected to run that war is demanding 40,000 more.

Working people in the United States and internationally must grasp the logic of the eruption of American imperialism. It is impossible to separate war and militarism from their underlying causes: the capitalist economic order and the nation-state system in which it is embedded. The struggle against war can go forward only through a struggle against the capitalist system and all its political representatives and defenders. This means building a mass political movement, on the basis of a socialist program, to unite the international working class.

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