

European states fall into line behind Obama's Afghanistan surge

Stefan Steinberg
5 December 2009

European foreign ministers meeting in Brussels for a two-day conference have signaled that they will do all they can to back the military surge in Afghanistan announced this week by US President Barack Obama. In so doing, they are defying the clear will of their populations, which overwhelmingly oppose the war.

The governments of Europe are joining the US in an international imperialist onslaught that will mean more killing, more torture and greater social devastation in that war-ravaged country, as well as in neighboring Pakistan.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Washington's special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, and the top American commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, all travelled to Brussels on Friday to bang the drum for increased participation by European countries in the military occupation of Afghanistan.

Upon arriving in the Belgian capital, Holbrooke said, "I understand the war is unpopular. It's a long way off, and there's the legacy of Iraq and Vietnam." He then declared that the US was gratified by the support it had received from its European allies for Obama's escalation.

Holbrooke's remarks were echoed by Clinton, who acknowledged that European governments faced major hurdles in justifying any increased military involvement.

Clinton's remarks are most relevant to the situation facing the Dutch government. One of its coalition partners has publicly expressed opposition to any continuation of the country's involvement in Afghanistan beyond 2010.

The US State Department and its allies in NATO, first and foremost NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, have been conducting an intense campaign to pressure European governments to step up their military engagement in Afghanistan. Prior to his West Point speech on Tuesday announcing a 30,000 increase in US troop levels, Obama spoke for 20 minutes by phone with German Chancellor Angela Merkel outlining his plans.

For her part, Merkel said that while the German government was prepared to increase its troop levels, it needed more time to arrive at such a decision.

Germany's leading political parties had come to an agreement that the deeply unpopular war would not be a theme in the country's federal election, held in October. This attempt to exclude the war issue collapsed shortly before the election as a result of the events in Kunduz.

A German colonel gave the order for the destruction of a tanker hijacked by rebels in Kunduz. The bombing of the tanker by a US jet resulted in well over 100 deaths—the largest loss of civilian lives due to German military action since the Second World War.

The subsequent public debate over the Kunduz massacre has led to the resignation of the German defense minister and reactivated what one political commentator has described as "the deep-seated pacifism of the German population." The latest opinion poll conducted by the ARD television channel reveals that 69 percent of the German people favor the quickest possible withdrawal of the 4,500 German troops stationed in Afghanistan. Only 27 percent of respondents were in favor of troops remaining.

Despite the strong support for the Obama surge expressed by the new German defense minister, it is not politically possible for Germany at this time to increase its troop levels in Afghanistan. This was Merkel's message to Obama. However, according to *Der Spiegel*, the German Defense Ministry is drawing up proposals behind the scenes to mobilize up to 2,000 additional troops for posting to the country.

The French government shares the dilemma of the government in Berlin. Only two weeks ago, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced that under no circumstances would his country send more troops to Afghanistan. Like its German neighbor, the French government faces broad public opposition to its

involvement in Afghanistan.

In addition, France is concerned over the shaky hold on power of the US puppet regime of Hamid Karzai. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner played a particularly active role following the recent reelection of Karzai, amidst rampant fraud and ballot-stuffing, seeking to widen Karzai's power base.

In the event, Sarkozy announced this week his full support for the Obama surge. At the same time, like Merkel, he indicated that he needed time to announce the dispatch of more troops.

The deal struck between Washington, Berlin and Paris gives France and Germany breathing space until the international Afghanistan conference scheduled for the end of January in London, when both governments hope to announce increased troop commitments.

Predictably, a number of governments in Eastern Europe with close links to the US administration have announced their willingness to increase their troop levels, including Georgia (900), Poland (600) and Slovakia (250). The Italian defence minister announced that Rome would send around 1,000 additional troops to Afghanistan. In October, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown pledged to increase the British contingent of 9,000 by an extra 500 troops.

Comments this week by one of Britain's leading commanders make clear that the British political and military establishment is alarmed by increasing public opposition to its operations in Afghanistan.

Speaking to an audience at the Royal United Services Institute in London on Thursday, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup said that the prolonged war was fuelling popular opposition and undermining the morale of British troops. Ominously, he declared that the biggest enemy of British troops in Afghanistan was not insurgents or hidden mines, but the British public. "Our people in theatre know this," he said. "The greatest threat to their morale is not the Taliban or IEDs, but declining will at home."

In pledging their support for Obama's revamped Afghanistan strategy, European political and military leaders are increasingly aware of the risks involved, including the possibility that the war could end with a military and political defeat equaling the debacle for imperialism in Vietnam. Nevertheless, as trade and financial rivalries between the major economic powers increase, with Eastern powers such as China and India in the ascendant, Europe continues to share many of the economic and geo-strategic priorities of the US.

This relationship and the political significance of the

Afghanistan war were summed up in an editorial in the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* on Wednesday aimed at drumming up European support for the Obama surge. *La Stampa* wrote: "The link between the conflict in Afghanistan and the extremely rapid redefinition of the international balance of power currently underway is perhaps not so obvious, but it is crucial... This is why Obama can't give up, he can't withdraw from the trial of strength with Iran and he must increase US influence in Iraq... The West is on the way to becoming a minority. It is important—and this also goes for Europe—that this minority not become a marginal figure."

The US-led war in Afghanistan has now lasted twice as long as the First World War. It has already cost the lives of over 50,000 Afghan civilians, insurgent fighters and allied troops. An estimated 8 million Afghans suffer from hunger and malnutrition and 75 percent of the population has no access to clean drinking water.

These horrific conditions will inevitably worsen in the coming months following the entry of new contingents of US and European troops. The combined assault of European and American imperialism against the peoples of Central Asia—a region rich in oil and natural gas and strategically vital for domination of the Eurasian continent—demonstrates the international character of the struggle against militarism and war.

It underscores the inherently violent and colonialist character of imperialism, and the fact that the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan—and those that are being planned by imperialist strategists against other countries in the region and beyond for control of oil, pipe lines and trade routes—cannot be halted except through the international mobilization of the working class against capitalism, which is the root cause of militarism and war.

Stefan Steinberg



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact