

London conference on Afghanistan: Occupation will last for years to come

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The London conference on Afghanistan laid down a scenario for the country's military occupation stretching over at least 5 years and, according to Afghan President Hamid Karzai, as long as 15 years.

Gone was President Barack Obama's claim that withdrawal of US troops would begin by 2011, replaced by a region-by-region transfer of responsibility that will take several years and will be dictated by "conditions on the ground," as determined by the military.

There is to be a concerted effort to incorporate various Afghan warlords presently associated with the Taliban insurgency into a power-sharing government with Karzai and split off upwards of 12,000 Afghan fighters, using a slush fund of over \$650 million provided by the US, Japan, Britain, Germany and others. (Only \$147 million of this has been pledged.) There will be a major military offensive to "convince" the Taliban that resistance is not an option.

Regarding the international trust fund, Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown stated that its purpose was "to provide an economic alternative to those who have none," other than participation in the insurgency.

Afghan President Karzai said, "To make our program a success, we hope that His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz of Saudi Arabia will kindly play a prominent role to guide and assist the peace process."

He pleaded with "all our neighbours, particularly Pakistan," to "support our peace and reconciliation endeavours."

Karzai has said that the establishment of a national council for peace, reconciliation and re-integration will be followed by a "peace jirga," an assembly of elders, with King Abdullah playing a "prominent role."

The main thrust of the policy is directed to various warlords, who will be offered roles in government. The cynicism involved in this plan is extraordinary, given that the war against Afghanistan was launched in 2001 on the pretext that the Taliban regime had to be overthrown because it sheltered Osama Bin Laden and had ties to Al

Qaeda.

Bin Laden is now barely ever mentioned, while the US has been in direct negotiations with representatives of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar and others—forces whom US Defence Secretary Robert Gates now describes as part of the "political fabric" of Afghanistan.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the US commander in Afghanistan, told the *Financial Times* prior to the London conference, "I think any Afghans can play a role if they focus on the future, and not the past."

Five former senior Taliban officials have already been removed from a United Nations sanctions list to facilitate these manoeuvres.

The long-term aim is to consolidate the transformation of Afghanistan into a US-controlled protectorate, ruling through a power-sharing client regime. In the next period, however, the emphasis is on an escalation of the US-led military offensive, using the 110,000 troops that will be stationed there after Obama's surge. Brown threatened that "for those insurgents who refuse to accept the conditions for reintegration, we have no choice but to pursue them militarily."

Major Gen. Nick Carter, the commander of 45,000 NATO troops in Helmand province, announced that a major offensive would be launched to "assert the control" of the Afghan government in areas currently controlled by the Taliban. The operation will involve elements of the 10,000 British troops in Helmand and 13,000 newly arrived US Marines.

An unnamed London diplomat described this as "a carrot-and-stick approach." He elaborated: "On the ground, there will be up to 40,000 more troops this year making things uncomfortable for the Taliban. The carrot is the money and a place within the power structure of Afghanistan."

In truth, the "carrot" is being offered to the warlords, while the stick will be applied to insurgents and Afghan civilians alike.

This effort to militarily demoralise the Taliban and incorporate sections into government is conceived of as

spanning at least three years, with Afghan forces only “taking responsibility for physical security within five years.” Even so, Brown repeatedly refused to give a timetable for withdrawal, insisting that this depended on meeting conditions so that “security can be taken over by the Afghans in the provinces in which we operate.”

McChrystal also told the *Financial Times*, “I believe that it will be more conditions-based, there will be an agreement on certain conditions driving the transitions.”

In a BBC interview broadcast before the conference started, Karzai was even less optimistic, stating, “With regard to training and equipping the Afghan security forces, 5 to 10 years would be sufficient. With regard to sustaining them... the time period extends to 10 to 15 years.”

The London conference was testimony to how anxious the world’s major powers are to demonstrate their readiness to lend support to the US intervention in Afghanistan. Despite growing concerns that the occupation is becoming a quagmire, sucking in troops and costing vast sums, no one wants to openly antagonise Washington or be excluded from establishing his own influence within strategic oil- and gas-rich regions neighbouring Afghanistan.

Sixty-plus nations attended the conference, as well as representatives from NATO, the United Nations, the European Union and the World Bank.

Brown boasted that more than 8,000 extra NATO troops had been committed to Afghanistan since Obama announced the US surge last year. Four more countries have joined the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)—Armenia, Mongolia, Montenegro and South Korea, which are all non-NATO members. They have pledged nearly 800 additional troops between them, with the majority coming from South Korea. This means that there are now 47 countries involved in Afghanistan. The day before the London conference, Germany pledged an additional 500 troops.

None of this in the long-term compensates for the mounting problems facing the US in Afghanistan. Washington remains to a large degree dependent on Karzai, whose corrupt regime is massively unpopular and remains in power only thanks to Western-sanctioned electoral fraud.

The Taliban are far from demonstrably losing the military struggle, and are a long way from accepting a role as a US proxy. A Taliban statement denounced the London conference as a “waste of time” aimed at justifying foreign occupation. It declared, “The recent attacks in Kabul were, in fact, a message for the London conference that the Taliban are not ready to negotiate and do not desire to set up a regime in collaboration with those who bear the marks of slavery to the occupiers.”

As to the regional powers, Iran, which is faced with growing threats from Washington and London, did not

attend the conference, which it denounced for its focus on increasing military action in Afghanistan. Pakistan did attend, but its Inter Services Intelligence agency is tied to the Taliban, and Islamabad is also faced with growing hostility from the US.

Prior to the conference, the *New York Times* published two classified memos from Karl Eikenberry, the United States ambassador in Kabul, that gave a devastating verdict on the situation confronting America in Afghanistan. Eikenberry, a retired army lieutenant general, served three years in Afghanistan over the course of two separate tours of duty, and was responsible during 2002-2003 for rebuilding Afghan security forces. He then served 18 months (2005-2007) as commander of US forces in Afghanistan.

Arguing last November against McChrystal’s proposal for a surge, Eikenberry warned that deploying large American reinforcements would cost tens of billions of dollars and deepen the Karzai government’s dependence on the US, making it “difficult, if not impossible, to bring our people home on a reasonable timetable.”

He described Karzai as “not an adequate strategic partner,” who was incapable of taking responsibility and exerting sovereignty. “He and much of his circle do not want the US to leave and are only too happy to see us invest further,” he wrote. “They assume we covet their territory for a never-ending ‘war on terror’ and for military bases to use against surrounding powers.”

Tellingly, he warned, “Pakistan will remain the single greatest source of Afghan instability so long as the border sanctuaries remain.” He added, “As we contemplate greatly expanding our presence in Afghanistan, the better answer to our difficulties could well be to further ratchet up our engagement in Pakistan,” raising the clear possibility of an extension of military hostilities.

The most dangerous factors threatening the plans of Obama, Brown, et al are the broad opposition among the Afghan people to the occupation and the massive unpopularity of the war amongst the working people of the US and Europe.



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