

Afghan conference endorses indefinite occupation

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The international foreign ministers conference held in Kabul Tuesday formally endorsed President Hamid Karzai's proposed 2014 target for Afghan forces to assume the lead responsibility for the country's security, while acknowledging that the foreign occupation will continue indefinitely.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proclaimed the conference, which lasted just five hours, a "turning point." But there was little new presented at the gathering, and nothing to dispel the growing sense that after nearly nine years of occupation and war, the US-led project of installing a stable puppet regime and extending US hegemony in Central Asia is mired in crisis.

The greatest achievement appeared to be holding the meeting in Kabul at all. It was the first of nine such conferences held on Afghanistan since 2001 to be convened in the country itself.

The Afghan capital was placed under a state of siege, with armed soldiers keeping people off the streets and combat helicopters hovering overhead. Even with this security blanket, a plane carrying United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon had to be diverted to the US military air base at Bagram after Kabul's international airport came under rocket attack.

The conference rehashed the usual issue of Afghan government corruption, with President Karzai promising, once again, to clean house. For their part, the assembled ministers backed a proposal to funnel at least half of the \$13 billion in annual international aid to Afghanistan through Afghan government agencies. Until now, just one-fifth of such aid has gone through government channels.

Karzai delivered a speech in which he declared himself "determined that our Afghan national security forces will be responsible for all military and law enforcement operations throughout our country by 2014."

There was nothing new in this proposal, which Karzai first floated during his inauguration last November, following Afghanistan's rigged election. The embrace of this proposal by Washington and NATO, however, is significant. It is just one more confirmation that the July 2011 deadline announced by President Barack Obama for beginning the withdrawal of US troops is being repudiated in practice by the US administration.

More significant than Karzai's proposal for 2014 was the absence of any targets for handing over security before then. When NATO ministers met in Estonia in April, it was expected that certain Afghan provinces would be selected for the transfer of security to Afghan forces this year. However, no such plans were mentioned either in Karzai's speech or in the conference's final communique.

Washington Post reported Wednesday: "... the with the deteriorating war and the arrival of Gen. David H. Petraeus as top commander, officials now expect it will be at least the summer of 2011 before the first provinces shift to Afghan control. The delay has worried some of the Europeans who are eager to show progress to their skeptical publics. To others, it is merely a dose of reality."

This "reality" consists of, on the one hand, the growth of the insurgency and its spread throughout most of the country, and, on the other, the manifest incapacity of the Afghan army and police to suppress this resistance to foreign occupation.

Even as the ministers were meeting in Kabul, a bloody event in northern Afghanistan underscored the problems confronting the US-led effort to train competent Afghan puppet forces.

At a firing range in northern Balkh province, an Afghan army sergeant turned his gun on two US military contractors assigned to train Afghan forces, killing both of them and wounding another. The sergeant was killed along with another Afghan soldier standing nearby when other US contractors returned fire.

A US military spokesman described the shooting as "a tragic and isolated incident," while adding that American forces were "taking prudent precautions to make sure that doesn't happen again."

The "isolated" incident comes barely one week after another Afghan soldier opened fire on British soldiers with an automatic weapon and a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, killing three, including an officer who was the base commander. The Afghan soldier managed to escape and has since found refuge with the Taliban. He has given interviews to the media saying that he turned on his British trainers because the occupation was killing "innocent people."

These killings, and similar earlier attacks, have called into question the methods being employed by the US and its allies in their attempt to effect a rapid buildup of the Afghan security forces, with a goal of expanding the Afghan army from 85,000 soldiers in 2009 to 134,000 by October 2011. There is growing tension and mistrust between the Afghan and US forces, as well as concerns that insurgents may be joining the puppet army to obtain weapons and the opportunity to use them on occupation troops.

The abandonment of plans to hand over any province to Afghan control this year reportedly was decided based on the assessment of the new US commander in Afghanistan, General Petraeus, that the Afghan forces are not up to this task in any part of the country.

The depth of the crisis confronting the US occupation was

underscored by the release this week of a report by the Afghanistan NGO Security Office (ANSO), an agency funded by the European Union and the Norwegian Foreign Ministry that advises humanitarian aid organizations on security conditions in the country.

ANSO's quarterly report branded the US counterinsurgency strategy a failure, while warning that its escalation will result only in increased civilian casualties and greater support for the Taliban and other armed resistance groups.

"The counterinsurgency [COIN] approach shows few signs of weakening opposition," the report begins, pointing to a 51 percent increase in attacks since last year, with a record 1,319 operations by the insurgency in June alone. "It also shows few signs of protecting the civilian population, with a 23 percent rise in civilian casualties and widespread assassinations of civilian government workers."

The ANSO report adds, "We do not support the COIN perspective that this constitutes 'things getting worse before they get better,' but rather see it as being consistent with the five-year trend of things just getting worse."

The report pointed to the recent US-led offensive around the area of Marjah in southern Helmand province, noting that it "has yet to deliver security for the people, provide safe return for the displaced, or establish credibility for its boxed government. As a result, Helmand is now the most violent province in the country."

It further warned that "the delayed operation in Kandahar promises dire consequences for the civilian population with little or no impact on AOG (Armed Opposition Groups) capacity."

The planned offensive on Kandahar, Afghanistan's second largest city, has been dubbed Operation Hamkari, using a Dari word for cooperation as the name for an attack that will target the Pashto-speaking population of the region. This only reinforces the view that Washington is waging war on the Pashtun people.

The US-led occupation, the ANSO report states, has "committed about 30 percent of their total troop force to Hamkari, making it by far the largest single operation in the nine-year conflict and in many ways the 'grand finale'" of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan.

The organization said it "considers it likely that Hamkari will cause a significant rise in support for the armed opposition in Kandahar and, with that, make eventual Taliban ascendancy feasible."

Finally, the report provides a scathing assessment of the US military's attempt to arm local militias as a counter to the insurgency. This tactic has been heavily promoted by General Petraeus, who has reportedly browbeaten a reluctant Karzai into accepting it, even though the Afghan president sees such groups as an affront to his own authority.

The promotion of these militia groups, ANSO states, "continues to undermine the government's claim to a 'monopoly on violence' and fracture the security landscape." The tactic, the report adds, is "reminiscent of the 1963 South Vietnamese 'Self Defense Corps,'" and has produced a similar fiasco.

The militia groups, ANSO points out, "are falling victim to the same vices, with the active ones being murdered en-masse (Kandahar), smart ones partnering with AOG to exploit the

population and government supplies (Kunduz/Takhar), bold ones just being the AOG (Parwan), and timid ones keeping the status quo (Wardak)." Some of these groups, it adds, "have joined AOG when government failed to give them weapons, while others still have scared neighboring villages to turn to the AOG for protection."

Despite this grim outlook and growing popular opposition to the war among the American people, Secretary of State Clinton used the Kabul conference to reiterate the Obama administration's commitment to continue the war indefinitely. Exploiting past casualties to justify continued bloodshed, Clinton stated: "We have no intention of abandoning our long-term vision. Too many nations have suffered too many losses to let this country slide backward."

Referring to Obama's July 2011 target for beginning to draw down US forces, Clinton added, "This date is the start of a new phase, not the end of our involvement."

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the NATO secretary general, was even more blunt, insisting that there was no deadline for winding down the US-led occupation. "Our mission will end when, only when, the Afghans are able to maintain security on their own," he said. "Our transition will be based on conditions, not calendars."

Before departing Afghanistan for a visit to South Korea, Clinton drew a comparison between the two countries that directly suggested perpetual US military occupation of Afghanistan. Calling South Korea "one of our strongest allies" and referring to Washington's "long commitment to that country," Clinton said, "The US has stood beside countries [through] ups and downs a lot longer than eight years."

Nearly six decades after the Korean War, Washington maintains some 28,000 US troops in South Korea.



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