

US backs “peace talks” as violence soars in Afghanistan

James Cogan
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The Obama administration and its top military commander in Afghanistan have confirmed reports that American and NATO forces are actively assisting the government of President Hamid Karzai to organise “peace” negotiations with the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton used a NATO summit in Brussels on Thursday to publicly back Karzai’s establishment of a “High Peace Council” on October 7. Gates stated: “Whenever opportunities [for negotiations] arise that are worth exploring, I think we ought to take advantage of that ... We have always acknowledged that reconciliation has to be part of the solution in Afghanistan and we will do whatever we can to support this process.”

In an interview later in the day, Clinton indicated a shift away from the longstanding US rhetoric that the Taliban were “terrorists” who had to be killed or captured. “You don’t make peace with your friends,” she said. While indicating she did not believe it was likely, Clinton did not rule out the possibility of talks with the top Taliban leadership. “Stranger things have happened in the history of war,” she declared.

Karzai has repeatedly claimed over the past few weeks that contact was taking place with the Taliban and other insurgent organisations. An announcement on Wednesday, purportedly by the main Taliban leadership, dismissed Karzai’s claims as “baseless propaganda”. The press release stated that any negotiations while foreign troops were in the country would be a “waste of time” and “give legitimacy to the current occupation of Afghanistan”.

On Friday, however, the top US commander in

Afghanistan, General David Petraeus, confirmed media reports that US and NATO forces had assisted Taliban leaders to travel to Kabul for negotiations. He stated that “several very senior” Taliban had sought talks and that the occupation forces “therefore allow it to take place”.

Pakistani intelligence sources told Associated Press this week that other talks had occurred near the city of Peshawar in northwest Pakistan. According to former Pakistani intelligence chief Hamid Gul, the Taliban representatives presented three conditions for beginning formal peace talks: a deadline for the withdrawal of foreign troops; the release of all Taliban prisoners; and the recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate political tendency.

A spokesman for the anti-occupation Hizb-e-Islami, headed by Pashtun warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, told Associated Press this week that it had held meetings with the Karzai government earlier in the year. He told the news agency that the group had not heard back from Karzai because one of its 15 terms for peace talks was the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

Whatever the actual progress of “peace talks”, the fact that the Obama administration is holding out the prospect of “reconciliation” with the Taliban is testimony to the crisis wracking the US-led occupation of the country. Under conditions in which the White House is facing deepening economic problems and rising political tensions with China, the Afghanistan war has become a costly and distracting debacle.

The conflict has now entered its tenth year—the longest in US history. Over 100,000 American troops and close to 50,000 NATO personnel have not been able to suppress the armed resistance to the foreign military occupation

and the puppet Karzai administration. Military operations have escalated across the insurgent-controlled areas of south and east of Afghanistan, leading to a sharp rise in casualties. On Wednesday and Thursday alone, 14 American and NATO troops were killed. The combined death toll this year is already approaching 600—far higher than the total figure for any previous year—and more than 5,000 have been wounded.

In the US and NATO countries, there is mass popular opposition to the war. Millions of people are questioning what the troops are killing and dying for. Even the CIA has had to publicly dispute the hollow claim that the war was necessary to prevent “another 9/11”. The rampant corruption of the Karzai government and its blatant election fraud has left the propaganda that the US is bringing “democracy” to the Afghan people in tatters. The constant revelations of civilian deaths, assassinations, secret prisons and torture have generated disgust and anger.

Following the withdrawal of Dutch forces in August, Canada, Italy, France, Germany and even Britain are discussing pulling out parts of their troop contributions next year—to appease popular opposition at home and assist in slashing spending.

The Obama administration, however, has no intention of walking away from the fight to establish Afghanistan as a US client state. To do so would undermine American efforts to establish its domination in resource-rich Central Asia against China, Russia and other rivals. The White House is desperate to end the war, but only on its terms.

Behind the offer of talks with the Taliban is a ruthless military strategy. General Petraeus and his counter-insurgency “experts” operate with a criminal logic gleaned from a meticulous study of colonial wars throughout the 20th century. The aim of the “surge”, implemented first in Iraq in 2007 and now in Afghanistan, is to inflict maximum death and destruction against insurgent groups while at same time seeking to split the armed resistance by offering political and financial pay-offs, provided they accept US domination.

In Afghanistan, the strategy is predicated on the understanding that the Taliban’s reactionary Pashtun and Islamist perspective is incapable of winning support across the entire country. At a certain point, the US

military calculates that the Taliban hierarchy will conclude their only way to achieve a measure of power and privilege is to make a deal with the occupation—just as the Sunni-based and Shiite fundamentalist leaderships ultimately did in Iraq.

However, as in Iraq, forcing the Taliban leaders into talks requires a bloodbath. Alongside the recent sharp rise in US and NATO casualties, the death toll among the insurgents has also soared.

Hundreds of rank-and-file fighters have been slaughtered by air strikes. Since Petraeus took over command of Afghan operations in July, the number of air attacks has more than tripled, reaching 700 in September. There was a monthly average of less than 200 in the first six months of 2010 under the previous commander, General Stanley McChrystal.

Predator drones are stalking insurgent-held areas of the country, seeking out alleged “Taliban leaders” and hideouts. Over 19,000 drone and other surveillance flights have been flown this year—more than in all 2009. Special forces’ death squads, sent out in response to surveillance information, are reportedly carrying out about 10 missions a day. A Taliban leader’s killing or capture is announced on the main occupation web site virtually every day.

The region surrounding Kandahar, the major city in the Taliban-dominated south, has been flooded with tens of thousands of American and Afghan government troops. While there is next to no media coverage of what is taking place, the scale of the violence is hinted at in a report this week that war-related hospital admissions have skyrocketed. Just one hospital, Mirwais Regional, took in 1,000 patients with weapons’ injuries in August and September alone—twice as many as 12 months earlier.

Any “peace talks” in Afghanistan will be the outcome of the frenzy of killing and repression taking place against the Afghan population behind a screen of sanitised propaganda and media censorship.



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