

Another decade of neo-colonial war in Afghanistan

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In the lead-up to next month's NATO summit in Lisbon, the Obama administration and its allies, confronting widespread antiwar sentiment at home, are attempting to dupe the public by claiming that the US/NATO combat role in Afghanistan will end by 2014, with troop withdrawals to begin next year. Behind closed doors, however, the talk is not of an end to the war, but rather of an open-ended, neo-colonial occupation.

In opening a debate on the Afghan war in the Australian parliament on Tuesday, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard spilled the beans. After noting that Afghan President Hamid Karzai expected to assume full responsibility for his country's security by the end of 2014, Gillard bluntly spelt out that the "transition process" would not mean the end to the Australian military presence in Afghanistan.

"Let me be clear," Gillard said, "this [transition process] refers to the Afghan government taking lead responsibility for security. The international community will remain engaged in Afghanistan beyond 2014. And Australia will remain engaged. There will still be a role for training and other defence cooperation. The civilian-led aid and development effort will continue... We expect this support, training and development task to continue in some form through this decade at least."

While ministers and officials in the US and other countries have spoken vaguely about a continuing military role in Afghanistan after 2014, Gillard is the first leader to declare that the US-led military occupation will continue for another decade—at least. Her repeated references to the "new international

strategy" highlight the fact that this is the Obama administration's plan. And if Australia, with its current, modest troop numbers of 1,550, intends to remain for another 10 years, then the US and its closest allies are preparing for a large military presence in Afghanistan into the indefinite future.

Taking her cue from Washington, Gillard justified the ongoing occupation by declaring Afghanistan must "never again become a safe haven for terrorists". However, the intensifying US-led war is not directed against Al Qaeda—according to the CIA, it numbers no more than 50 in Afghanistan—but against the "Taliban". The "enemy" are Afghans, predominantly Pashtun tribesmen, who are bitterly hostile to the continued foreign military presence that has wreaked death and destruction on the civilian population for more than nine years. Suppressing "terrorism" means a never-ending neo-colonial war against the Afghan people.

Washington's "war on terrorism" was only ever a pretext for advancing US ambitions for dominance in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. The US strategy was drawn up well in advance of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the subjugation of Iraq in 2003 were part of broader plans for refashioning the Middle East and establishing a greater US presence in Central Asia. Now focussed on the challenge posed by a rising China, the Obama administration is not about to relinquish US footholds in Iraq or Afghanistan that could prove very useful in the future. His troop "surge" in Afghanistan, like that in Iraq, is aimed at securing a permanent US presence, including military bases, while ensuring the puppet Karzai regime and its army take on the lion's share of fighting to suppress the

anti-occupation resistance.

If Gillard was a little more open about the US plans, it was only to demonstrate that her Labor government is in lockstep with Washington. The Australian prime minister has already indicated that she might accompany her defence minister to the NATO conference in Lisbon where she would line up with Obama in pressuring other allies to make a similar open-ended military commitment. Canada has announced that it will be pulling its 2,800 soldiers out of Afghanistan by next year. Italy has set a deadline of 2014 for the complete withdrawal of its 3,300 troops. Gillard is standing unequivocally on the US side, despite overwhelming domestic opposition to the war, in a bid to ensure full US support as Australia shores up its own strategic position in the South West Pacific.

Next month's haggling over the "transition process" at the NATO conference in Lisbon has been preceded by a preparatory gathering in Rome this week on Afghanistan. US special envoy to Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke insisted that the Lisbon conference would not lay out a timetable for specific provinces to be handed over to Kabul's military control. He also emphasised that "transition" did not equal troop withdrawals, confirming that the US would be pressing for long-term military commitments.

Leading up to the Lisbon conference, the US has been at pains to stress the advances being made through the troop surge. In the *Washington Post* for instance, US officials claimed that the aggressive military campaign in recent months has killed or captured hundreds of Taliban leaders and more than 3,000 fighters, forcing some insurgent groups to consider negotiations with the Karzai government. They spoke of "pockets of security" in former Taliban strongholds where schools have been reopened and bazaars are bustling.

The slaughter of Taliban leaders and fighters, particularly in the current offensive around the southern city of Kandahar, is largely the result of intensified special forces operations. Like the reign of terror from aerial bombing, these assassination squads are notorious for killing civilians, thus adding to the bitterness and hatred among Afghans toward the

occupation of their country and the corrupt puppet regime in Kabul. The so-called pockets of security in the south—the product of the expansion in foreign troop numbers to 150,000—are paralleled by reports of escalating insurgent attacks in the country's north.

The optimistic note being sounded by the Obama administration and its camp followers like Gillard cannot hide the fact that nine years of war have proven to be an unmitigated disaster for the Afghan people. According to very conservative UN estimates, at least 14,000 civilian deaths are directly attributable to the military conflict. The military occupation is propping up a venal regime in Kabul that is notorious for corruption and ballot rigging. The majority of the population is still mired in poverty and lacks access to elementary services such as electricity, education and health care.

The only way to end this criminal war and allow the Afghan people to decide their future is to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops and the payment of tens of billions of dollars in war reparations.

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