

Obama's AfPak review: Endless war in face of mass opposition

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17 December 2010

The Obama administration's review of its strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan produced the predictable conclusion that the war and occupation will go on indefinitely, despite mass opposition from the American people. That is the core message of the perfunctory five-page statement that was presented Thursday.

Obama delivered brief remarks in the White House briefing room, appearing at the podium flanked by Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Marine Gen. James Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Presenting what purports to be a progress report on the military "surge" that he launched a year ago, with the order to send another 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan, Obama said that, while the war was "a very difficult endeavor," Washington was "on track to achieve our goals."

In reporting Obama's remarks, the White House web site asserted that "from the outset of his discussion of the report, he leveled with the American people."

What nonsense! From start to finish, Obama's brief presentation was a compendium of deceptions and outright lies designed to package and sell a militarist policy determined by the Pentagon brass and dutifully accepted by his administration.

Obama began by insisting that the deployment of 100,000 US troops in Afghanistan is a response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and is aimed at achieving a "core goal" of "disrupting, dismantling and defeating Al Qaeda."

US military officials have repeatedly acknowledged that there are no more than 100 members of Al Qaeda in all of Afghanistan, while US troops are engaged in continuous combat with armed Afghan opposition groups that number in the tens if not hundreds of thousands and enjoy the support of a broad section of the Afghan population.

Obama went on to claim that Al Qaeda elements in the Pakistani tribal areas bordering Afghanistan were under greater pressure than ever with senior leaders having been killed and its operations disrupted. Neither the US president nor the report itself, however, made any reference to the main instrument of US policy in the region: remote-controlled assassinations by means of Hellfire missiles fired from pilotless drones. These attacks have claimed the lives of thousands of Pakistanis, the

majority of them civilians, and have fueled popular hostility to the US war throughout Pakistan's population.

In Afghanistan, Obama described the supposed gains of the US military surge as "fragile and reversible," a stock phrase repeated by various other officials in the course of the day.

Nonetheless, he claimed that the US military would "begin the transition of responsibility to Afghans and start reducing American forces next July," with the US-trained Afghan forces assuming the "full lead" by the end of 2014.

In a subsequent press conference, from which Obama and Biden absented themselves, Defense Secretary Gates refused to give any indication as to what the level of reduction in US troops would be in July 2011. He said only that any withdrawals would be "conditions-based," adding that "In terms of what that line looks like beyond July 2011, I think the answer is we don't know at this point."

Every indication is that any withdrawal in 2011 would of a strictly token character. US military commanders have insisted that a sizable US combat force will remain in the country for years, and that to the extent any real gains are made in suppressing the armed opposition groups in one part of the country, US troops deployed there will have to be moved to other areas where resistance remains.

Both Obama and others made it clear that even in the event that Washington is able to rely on its Afghan puppet forces to secure the country, it plans to maintain its military presence in Afghanistan indefinitely.

Obama declared a "long-term commitment to training and advising Afghan forces," while Clinton spoke of plans for a "long-term partnership with Afghanistan." Gates said that US forces would remain "in the background...in a train-and-equip mission."

In other words, Washington's strategy is to defeat the resistance to occupation and establish a semi-colonial domination over Afghanistan. Its aim is to use the country as a strategic base for projecting US military power into the energy-rich Central Asia. This, not the pursuit of a hundred Al Qaeda members, is the real reason 100,000 US troops are fighting in Afghanistan.

While touting supposed military gains in the areas in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, where the US surge has

been concentrated, the progress report ignores mounting reports that armed resistance has spread to the north and west of the country, which previously had seen little conflict. The day before Obama's presentation, the International Committee for the Red Cross held its own press conference in Kabul, where it described the armed conflict as the worst in 30 years and reported that its aid workers were unable to travel through much of the country.

The one note of dissatisfaction with the development of the US war sounded by Obama was in relation to Pakistan. While referring to a "strategic dialogue" and "closer cooperation" between Washington and Islamabad, Obama said that "progress has not come fast enough." Washington, he said, "will continue to insist to Pakistani leaders that terrorist safe havens within their borders must be dealt with."

National Intelligence Estimates on Afghanistan and Pakistan produced by US intelligence agencies on the eve of the Obama administration's report provide a sobering assessment of the Pakistani government's position on this score. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the reports state that Islamabad "remains unwilling to stop its covert support for members of the Afghan Taliban who mount attacks against US troops from the tribal areas of the neighboring country." The reports further suggest that without eliminating attacks, the prospects of a US military success in Afghanistan are poor.

While Obama said that he had spoken to Afghanistan's president Hamid Karzai before issuing the report, the document itself is notable for its failure to even mention Karzai's name. It makes a half-sentence reference to US support for building "institutions with increased transparency and accountability to reduce corruption."

The report skates over the glaring contradiction underlying the US strategy, which is based upon building up and transferring responsibility to Afghan security forces that are ostensibly serving a political regime that is terminally corrupt and viewed as illegitimate by much of the population.

On the same day that the Obama administration issued its progress report, the influential London-based military think tank Chatham House released its own study warning that the corrupt and unjust character of the US-backed Afghan regime is fueling the armed resistance.

Citing the US reliance on corrupt and abusive warlords, rigged elections and the use of the state by top officials and their cronies to enrich themselves, the report states that "political marginalization" has pushed many into supporting the Taliban, while corruption has reached a point where parts of the state have been co-opted by criminal elements.

The report, "No Shortcut to Stability," cites NATO officers who warn that "military operations would have little point if nothing was done to improve the abusive administration driving much of the insurgency."

In one of the most revealing moments in the string of press conferences held on Thursday in Washington, a reporter at the

White House briefing referred to a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll released this week showing that 60 percent of the US population believes that the Afghanistan war is not worth fighting. The war has claimed the lives of 1,436 US troops—489 of them this year—and is costing upwards of \$115 billion a year. The poll's results mark a 20 percent increase in opposition to the war since Obama took office.

"Considering that the US withdrawal date is not until 2014, how can the Obama administration continue to wage this war with so little public support?" asked ABC's White House correspondent Jake Tapper.

In answering the question, both Clinton and Gates echoed the refrain sounded by Bush and Cheney in the previous administration's response to mass opposition to the war in Iraq, dismissing popular sentiments and insisting that the administration would not base its policy on polling.

Gates went further, however, pointing out that mass hostility to the war is not merely a US problem. "I think if you look at polling in almost all of our 49 coalition partners' countries, public opinion is in doubt," he said. "Public opinion would be majority—in terms of majority, against their participation."

In other words, an administration that was elected little more than two years ago in large part thanks to mass antiwar sentiments in the US population is functioning as the political mouthpiece for the Pentagon, determined to continue a dirty colonial-style war that is opposed by the majority of the people of the United States and the entire world.

Behind the rhetoric of Clinton and Gates about the need to base policy on "national security," "public interest" and the "long term," rather than popular sentiments, is the stark reality that Washington's illegal wars are being waged for the benefit of a financial oligarchy at the expense of the broad mass of the population.



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