

Afghan president confirms US demand for permanent bases

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Afghan President Hamid Karzai has confirmed for the first time that the Obama administration has demanded the establishment of a system of permanent US military bases across the country, effectively laying the basis for an indefinite neo-colonial occupation.

Karzai stated that his government was negotiating with US officials on a range of strategic agreements, including the permanent bases. He said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had discussed the issue with him during last week's Munich Security Conference in Germany.

Referring to his discussions with US officials and senators, the Afghan president said: "Yes they want this [permanent bases] and we have been negotiating with them." He made clear his readiness to oblige: "We believe that a long-term relationship with the United States is in the interest of Afghanistan."

Karzai's disclosure, made at a media conference on Tuesday in his fortified presidential place in Kabul, underscores the fraud of President Obama's pledge that July 2011 would see the beginning of a withdrawal from Afghanistan. It also exposes the White House claim, adopted by last year's Lisbon NATO conference, that the country's security would be handed over to Afghan forces by 2014.

Washington's plans further demonstrate that the protracted war in Afghanistan—now in its 10th year—is being waged not to defeat "terrorism" or promote democracy, but to secure US hegemony in Central Asia, one of the most energy-rich and geo-strategically vital regions of the globe.

When Obama announced his Afghanistan troop "surge"—doubling the number of US troops to 100,000 and the total NATO-led force to 150,000—he insisted that the US had no intentions of permanently occupying the country. In reality, plans are being drawn up for US military forces to stay for many more years, if not decades.

Karzai insisted that any long-term US bases would not be "used as base against other countries and that Afghanistan is not a place from where our neighbours could be threatened". He also said he hoped for a relationship "that brings security to Afghanistan, that brings economic prosperity to Afghanistan and an end to violence".

Nothing could be further from the truth. A number of Afghanistan's neighbours, notably Iran, Pakistan and China, will necessarily regard the establishment of permanent US bases as threatening. Afghanistan will in effect become a staging post for operations in the region, as well as within the country. As for security and prosperity, the US invasion in 2001 has produced only destruction, carnage and impoverishment, and an indefinite military occupation will perpetuate the devastation.

Karzai claimed that any long-term agreement would need to be approved by the parliament and the Loya Jirga, the traditional assembly of tribal leaders. But his immediate statement of support in principle highlighted his subservience to Washington.

Just last month, Karzai's spokesman Waheed Omer said the issue had not been discussed with the United States. Omer had been responding to a NBC news interview with senior US Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, who said he wanted the Obama administration to consider such permanent bases.

Graham made clear an intention to also send an intimidating signal to Pakistan, whose government is despised by ordinary Pakistanis for its collaboration in the bloody US war. Graham said the bases "would be a signal to Pakistan that the Taliban are never going to come back in Afghanistan," which "could change their behaviour". The Obama administration has been demanding that the Pakistan government and military escalate their involvement in the

AfPak war.

Last August, the White House brought forward legislation to provide \$1.3 billion in additional funds during fiscal year 2011 for “multiyear construction of military facilities in Afghanistan”. Among the plans were \$100 million expansions for each of three major US air bases in strategically critical parts of the country: Shindand, in the west not far from the Iranian border; Camp Dwyer, in the southwest near Pakistan and Iran; and Mazar-i-Sharif, in the north, close to the former Soviet Central Asian republics and Russia. Another major US air base is at Bagram in the northeast, not far from borders with China and Pakistan.

The Pentagon is seeking to realise the central thrust of the October 2001 invasion—an unprecedented projection of American military power into the heart of Central Asia, the hotly contested region, rich in oil, gas and other minerals, opened up by the collapse of the Soviet Union. From the Afghan facilities, US air force bombers, surveillance flights and predator drones can dominate the region.

Over the past decade, the decline of the US economy and the rise of China have further intensified the scramble for supremacy over the region, which also sits astride crucial land, pipeline and shipping routes for energy supplies.

Permanent US military bases are also being established in Iraq, where some 50,000 US troops remain despite the Obama administration’s pretence of withdrawing all combat forces. The major facilities include Joint Base Balad in Iraq’s north, Camp Adder in southern Iraq, Al-Asad Air Base in the west and the Victory Base Complex around Baghdad International Airport.

The bases in Afghanistan provide headquarters for the escalating aerial bombings and attacks by special forces hit squads that play a central role in the Obama administration’s onslaught in the country. Camp Dwyer, a Marine base and air field in southern Helmand province, has been described by a Pentagon document as “a key hub” for special forces operations in southern Afghanistan, the scene of US offensives in both Helmand and Kandahar provinces.

According to US military statistics, American and allied aircraft are now flying about 10 bombing missions a day. In the first 29 days of January, NATO planes conducted 284 separate sorties, compared to 157 in January 2010. Under General David Petraeus, appointed by Obama to command the Afghanistan “surge,” there have been 3,620 “weapons sorties” over the past six months, double the 1,813 during a

similar period under Petraeus’s predecessor, General Stanley McChrystal.

Obama’s surge has also featured the killing or capture of thousands of alleged Taliban militants by special operations forces; surface-to-surface missile attacks in Kandahar, Afghanistan’s second largest city with half a million people; tank operations in Helmand; and the demolition of three villages in the Arghandab River Valley.

In a February 7 interview with the *Financial Times*, Petraeus claimed there had been “very, very few civilian casualties in the course of these operations”. This bald-faced lie was thrown into relief by a report yesterday from the Afghanistan Rights Monitor group that an average of two children per day were killed in the fighting during 2010.

Of the 2,421 civilians the group registered as killed in security-related incidents, 739 were under the age of 18. It blamed NATO-led forces for 17 percent of the deaths, and “armed opposition groups” for two-thirds.

On Monday, another innocent child died. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force announced that a child had been killed inadvertently in an air strike during coalition operations in Helmand.

Late last year, a UN report confirmed that civilian, as well as military, casualties in Afghanistan hit record levels in 2010, jumping by 20 percent in the first 10 months of 2010 compared with 2009.

Civilian casualties in NATO operations, often caused by air strikes and night raids, have deepened the popular opposition to the US-led occupation, an opposition that goes far beyond the Taliban. A Western media poll last December found that 73 percent of Afghans said US air strikes were “unacceptable”.

President Karzai and his regime have now agreed that this criminal and catastrophic enterprise—a linchpin of the Obama administration’s entire foreign policy—will extend indefinitely.



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