

Obama's Afghanistan speech: An exercise in political duplicity

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In his nationally televised speech Wednesday night, President Barack Obama announced a minimal withdrawal of US troops from the nearly decade-old war in Afghanistan. Obama's proposal represented a tacit admission of the failure of the US intervention in Afghanistan and of the immense crisis of American capitalism to which a decade of multi-trillion-dollar expenditures on militarism has substantially contributed.

In concrete terms, Obama's withdrawal proposal was crafted to give the US military command nearly everything it wanted, while helping him to get through his next election in 2012.

It calls for a token force of 10,000 to be withdrawn by the end of 2011. The July deadline set by Obama in December 2009, when he unveiled his proposed "surge" that sent another 33,000 troops into Afghanistan, will apparently come and go with no change on the ground in the occupied country. The generals will be allowed to decide what troops will be withdrawn and when over the next six months.

At the time that Obama announced the surge, the American public was told that it was a temporary measure that would "allow us to accelerate handing over responsibility to Afghan forces, and allow us to begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan in July of 2011."

In reality, if the so-called "withdrawal" plan is completed, it will pull out only the 33,000 troops that he ordered into Afghanistan 18 months ago. The second round of troop withdrawals is set to take place on the eve of the 2012 presidential election. Still, by the end of 2012, twice as many US troops will remain in the country as were deployed there when Obama first took office at the beginning of 2009.

One can be sure, moreover, that should the military command demand it, even this limited withdrawal schedule will be revised.

The initial withdrawal proposal for the end of this year is negligible. While it is roughly the equivalent of two Army brigades, those who will be withdrawn will undoubtedly be made up of support troops, not combat units. The tasks of the support troops can be outsourced to private contractors

or other units brought in on temporary duty. Such "temporary" deployments are not counted in the roughly 100,000 figure currently given as the US troop presence in Afghanistan. The real figure is reportedly as high as 155,000.

Obama claimed that his withdrawal plan was being executed from "a position of strength" and that the White House and the Pentagon "are meeting our goals".

General David Petraeus, the senior US military commander in Afghanistan, who Obama has tapped to serve as his director of the Central Intelligence Agency, has consistently described these supposed successes as "fragile and reversible." He has insisted that the US military needs to keep its full combat strength intact for two more "fighting seasons", referring to the summer months when the armed groups resisting the US occupation launch their offensives.

A far more sober assessment of the real state of affairs after 10 years of US intervention was provided by a recent email to *Time* magazine from a US Army colonel in Afghanistan, who withheld his identity for obvious reasons.

"The mendacity is getting so egregious that I am fast losing the ability to remain quiet; these yarns of 'significant progress' are being covered up by the blood and limbs of hundreds—HUNDREDS—of American uniformed service members each and every month, and you know that the rest of this summer is going to see the peak of that bloodshed," the officer wrote.

Referring to claims that after enduring increased casualties and inflicting increased death and destruction for another two years, US forces will be able to hand over a secure country to the Afghan puppet military and police forces, the colonel added, "It's sheer madness, and so far as I can tell, in the mainstream media and reputable publications, it is going almost entirely without challenge."

The concentration on the next two fighting seasons constitutes a stark warning. The US military is preparing to unleash an unprecedented bloodbath aimed at bleeding the popular opposition to US occupation white. Killing of Afghan fighters and civilians alike will escalate sharply, as

will the death toll among US troops.

Unmentioned in Obama's speech is a central focus of US efforts in Afghanistan for the past month, which is the attempt to negotiate with the regime of President Hamid Karzai a strategic partnership agreement that would allow the US and NATO to secure permanent military bases in the country.

He made an oblique reference to this semi-secret scheme, declaring that, while Washington was not trying to "make Afghanistan a perfect place"—a grotesque statement given the tens of thousands of civilian casualties and millions of refugees caused by the US-led war—"What we can do, and will do, is build a partnership with the Afghan people that endures—one that ensures that we will be able to continue targeting terrorists and supporting a sovereign Afghan government."

Behind all the government and media rhetoric about winding down the Afghanistan war and withdrawing US troops, the reality is that the US ruling establishment and the Pentagon are planning to occupy the country indefinitely.

Washington is seeking such bases not to wage a "war on terrorism" or to promote democracy in Afghanistan. Neither of these pretenses stand up to the slightest scrutiny. The aims pursued by US imperialism are of a geo-strategic character. They are centered on the determination to exert American hegemony over oil-rich Central Asia and to obtain a military beachhead against its principal rivals in the region: China, Russia and Iran.

Obama likewise signaled that the US would continue and likely redouble its military attacks on Pakistan, asserting that Washington "must also address terrorist safe havens in Pakistan" and "will never tolerate a safe haven for those who aim to kill us." In other words, the campaign of drone missile strikes that the Obama administration has steadily escalated, killing and maiming thousands of Pakistanis, will continue unabated.

Obama made an empty and hypocritical declaration that the US had "learned anew the profound cost of war" over the last decade of military aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan, referring to the more than 6,000 US troops killed in the two countries and the many tens of thousands more who have suffered grievous physical and psychological wounds.

Like his predecessor, George W. Bush, he could not even make a reference to the millions of Afghan and Iraqi civilians killed, wounded and turned into homeless refugees by these two criminal wars of aggression.

Obama and his advisers know full well that the targeted audience of the speech, the American public, is overwhelmingly opposed to the war and increasingly seething over the conditions of mass unemployment, falling

living standards and sweeping attacks on social conditions at home.

This is why he included such hollow promises as "the tide of war is receding" and "the light of a secure peace can be seen in the distance."

He went on to assert that, while "over the last decade, we have spent a trillion dollars on war, at a time of rising debt and hard economic times," now his government aimed to "invest in America's greatest resource—our people" and to "unleash innovation that creates new jobs and industries, while living within our means."

The Afghanistan war, according to official estimates, is costing some \$2 billion each and every week. It, together with the war in Iraq, has sucked up some \$1.3 trillion. The new illegal war launched by the Obama administration in Libya has already cost some three-quarters of a billion dollars.

The suggestion by Obama that the minimal reduction of troop strength in Afghanistan will be translated into reduced cuts in social spending or even "new jobs" is a barefaced lie. The amount of spending shaved off of the Afghanistan war by pulling out 10,000 troops this year and supposedly another 23,000 next represents a drop in the bucket compared to the multi-trillion-dollar budget cuts now being negotiated on Capitol Hill.

In all likelihood, if the limited drawdown does take place in Afghanistan, it will be because Pentagon planners see the need for freeing up military resources in preparation for new wars elsewhere. Obama's hypocritical references to supposed US support for the "Arab Spring" and his defense of the US military intervention in Libya as "pragmatic" and "strategic" suggest one possible arena in which the US military sees the need for new deployments.

All of the actions of the US government are being driven by an internal crisis in which vast expenditures on war have played no small role in wrecking the country and its economy. But this in no way means a turn by the American ruling elite away from militarism.

America's ruling financial oligarchy seeks to offset the decline in the economic position of US capitalism on the world market by, on the one hand, relying on its continued military superiority, and, on the other, a relentless assault on the living standards and basic rights of American workers.



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