

Behind Obama's Afghan withdrawal decision

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By the end of this month, President Barack Obama is expected to announce his decision on how many troops he will withdraw from Afghanistan come July, his self-imposed deadline to—as he put it in December 2009—“begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan.”

He made the pledge in a speech announcing his “surge” of an additional 33,000 troops into the war-torn country. Since coming into office at the beginning of 2009, the Democratic administration has tripled the size of the US military force deployed in Afghanistan, which now totals nearly 100,000.

In the year and a half since Obama delivered this speech, he and other US officials have sought to minimize the importance of the July 2011 deadline, stressing that it is only the beginning of a process that will be determined by conditions prevailing in Afghanistan and on the basis of consultation with military commanders.

Yet, with polls indicating that fully two-thirds of the American public oppose the war and nearly three-quarters want to see a “substantial” withdrawal, and with war costs mounting to \$2 billion a week in the midst of relentless social spending cuts at home, attention has inevitably focused on the deadline.

The Pentagon has made it clear that it wants to keep the withdrawal down to a token number of support troops, while maintaining the US combat force on the ground in Afghanistan intact, at least through this and next year's summer “fighting seasons,” when the Taliban and other armed groups opposing the US-led occupation launch their military offensive. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who is leaving his post at the end of this month, has publicly insisted that any withdrawal be “modest” and that the US not “rush for the exits” in Afghanistan.

Leading members of Congress, including some Republicans, have called for a more accelerated

withdrawal. Senator Carl Levin, the Michigan Democrat who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee, has advocated pulling out 15,000 US military personnel next month, including combat troops.

Levin's proposal would still leave 85 percent of the US force in Afghanistan, fully 50,000 of the additional 65,000 troops that Obama dispatched to the country since early 2009.

While the media has focused its attention on this rather limited public debate in Washington, behind the scenes, US officials are carrying out two sets of negotiations that provide insight into the real objectives of this nearly decade-old war.

Defense Secretary Gates confirmed in a televised interview Sunday that US negotiators are in talks with representatives of the Taliban, the Islamist movement whose regime was overthrown by the October 2001 US invasion.

At the same time, the US has pushed the United Nations Security Council into separating the international sanctions imposed upon the Taliban from those applied to Al Qaeda. Washington's ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, praised the move, calling it “an important tool to promote reconciliation” that would send “a clear message to the Taliban that there is a future.”

Given the past several years of US commanders delivering body counts—vastly inflated by innocent civilian victims—of alleged members of the Taliban killed or captured, this promise of a “future” might seem incongruous. For nearly a decade the American public has heard politicians and generals alike equate the Taliban with Al Qaeda and insist that the entire war is being fought to defeat terrorism and prevent another 9/11 on US soil.

Even though talks have begun, Gates stressed that this did not mean there should be any let-up in US

military operations. “I think that the Taliban have to feel themselves under military pressure, and begin to believe they can’t win before they’re willing to have a serious conversation,” he told CNN.

Thus, US troops will continue to kill and die in Afghanistan, but for what? The pretense that they are defending America from attack has lost all credibility.

The second set of quasi-secret negotiations is being conducted with the US-backed regime of President Hamid Karzai on a strategic partnership agreement that would assure the access of the Pentagon and NATO to permanent military bases on Afghan soil. Amid the public talk about withdrawals, these private discussions are aimed at keeping American forces in Afghanistan for decades to come.

On Saturday, as a US delegation sent to negotiate this strategic agreement arrived in Kabul, President Karzai delivered a nationally televised speech in which he lashed out at the US and its NATO allies. “They’re here for their own purposes, for their own goals, and they’re using our soil for that,” said Karzai, who also denounced the occupation forces for killing Afghans and degrading the country’s environment, including through the use of depleted uranium munitions.

Karzai’s protest is a pale reflection of the overwhelming popular hostility to the US-led occupation force among Afghans, which the puppet president and his cohorts justifiably fear could destroy them.

At the same time, Karzai and his coterie no doubt fear that the arrangements Washington is trying to make for a long-term US military presence in Afghanistan—including through unilateral negotiations with the Taliban—may include dispensing with their services.

Like previous regimes in Afghanistan, Karzai is increasingly attempting to balance between Washington, whose troops and money keep him in power, and America’s regional rivals, which are growing increasingly wary of US strategic aims in the region.

Thus, last week, Karzai attended the meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Kazakhstan, where the SCO’s leading members, China and Russia, moved a resolution calling for an “independent, neutral” Afghanistan, an unmistakable declaration of opposition to a continued US military presence in the

country.

American troops are fighting and dying in Afghanistan neither to defeat terrorism nor to champion democracy. The real objective of this war is to secure for US imperialism a base of operations for projecting its domination over the energy-rich region of Central Asia and for control over the pipeline routes for funneling this natural wealth to the West.

With its failure to achieve this objective in 10 years of war and occupation, Washington is confronting growing opposition from its strategic rivals in the region, above all China and Russia. The immense suffering and instability wrought by the dirty colonial-style war in Afghanistan increasingly threatens to spill over into a far wider regional and global confrontation with incalculable dangers for working people across the planet.

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