

Obama's bloody "endgame" in Afghanistan

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Nearly two months after President Barack Obama announced plans for a limited withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, the evolution of US strategy in the nearly 10-year-old war points to a steady escalation of bloodshed.

When Obama made his announcement, which calls for the withdrawal of only the 33,000 "surge" troops he ordered into Afghanistan in December 2009, the president proclaimed that "the light of a secure peace can be seen in the distance." The only real light being given off by this so-called "secure peace" is that produced by explosions of Hellfire missiles and American bombs in a war that is set to continue indefinitely.

Within official circles in Washington there is considerable discussion about prospects for reaching a negotiated deal with the Taliban, whose government was overthrown by the US invasion of October 2001. Having previously ruled out Taliban participation in an upcoming international conference on Afghanistan in Germany, the US ambassador to Kabul, Ryan Crocker, recently suggested that their attendance was a matter to be decided by the Afghan government and the Afghan High Peace Council.

Meanwhile, mid-ranking State Department and CIA officials have met with Taliban representatives at least three times since January in Germany and Qatar. The Taliban, for its part, has consistently declared that there can be no talk of negotiating a settlement of the Afghan conflict until all foreign troops are out of the country.

Especially revealing in regard to this process is "Afghan Peace Talks: a Primer," a newly released study by the Rand Corporation, the Pentagon-backed think tank that has played a prominent role in US military strategy from nuclear brinksmanship with the Soviet Union and the Vietnam War through to the "global war on terror."

The authors of the report are James Dobbins, who was the lead US negotiator in the 2001 Bonn Accords that cobbled together the Afghan puppet government of Hamid Karzai, and James Shinn, a former assistant secretary of defense for Asia and an author of the Bush administration's Afghan Strategy Review.

The study argues that the US can ultimately secure its interests in Afghanistan only by means of a "peace process" that results in a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, while securing the collaboration of neighboring powers, including Pakistan, India, Iran and Russia. The authors warn, however, that "Afghanistan has been fought over for hundreds of years because it is of strategic interest to many nations, and hammering out a peace agreement with so many varying interests and objectives is likely to prove difficult."

They add that "the process will probably require years of talking. During this time, fighting will likely continue and may even intensify."

While there is no evidence that substantive talks have begun—the Taliban claims that its only contacts with US officials have been to discuss prisoner exchanges—the prediction of an intensification of the fighting has been borne out.

Air strikes, which under the counterinsurgency strategy first introduced by Gen. Stanley McChrystal in 2009 were to be sharply curtailed because of the hostility they provoked from the Afghan population, are now being conducted at record levels. According to figures released by the Pentagon, US warplanes carried out 652 attack runs in July, more than 20 a day. This is roughly double the number of air strikes carried out during the same period last year.

Meanwhile, according to Pentagon officials, the number of commando raids by special operations troops has more than tripled since 2009. From the beginning of this year through the beginning of August,

what the military refers to as its “hunter-killer” squads carried out 1,879 missions—roughly 300 a month—compared to just 675 in 2009 and 1,780 for all of last year.

A US military spokesman boasted of the effectiveness of these night raids to Bloomberg news: “Even if the primary target is not killed or captured on these missions, 35 percent of those times, the next closest associate or another individual directly linked to the target is killed or captured.”

It is precisely this feature of the special forces night raids that has aroused so much hatred within the Afghan population. Time after time, they have resulted in the killing of innocent men, women and children, while subjecting Afghan families to the humiliation of being brutalized and dragged out of their homes in the middle of the night.

The increasing reliance on special operations squads was underscored by the shooting down of a Chinook helicopter on August 6, killing 30 US military personnel, including 22 members of an elite Navy SEAL unit.

Four hundred US and other foreign occupation troops have been killed already in 2011, which is on track to become the bloodiest year since the war began nearly a decade ago.

The escalation of an aggressive war against Afghans resisting foreign occupation has been joined with increased attacks by pilotless drone aircraft across the border in Pakistan. Speaking at a forum in Washington Tuesday, Obama’s new defense secretary (and former CIA director) Leon Panetta defended the drone attacks against growing demands from within Pakistan for the murderous strikes to cease. “We’re protecting our national security,” Panetta told an audience at the National Defense University. “We’re defending our country.”

On the same day, the latest drone strike killed four people in North Waziristan, including two women and a child, while two others were injured when a Hellfire missile demolished a home. Attempts to recover the bodies and rescue the wounded were hindered as drones continued to hover over the area, terrifying the local population.

The White House and the Pentagon have effectively dropped the pretense that the US is engaged in “nation-building” or winning the “hearts and minds” of the

Afghan people. Instead, the endgame of Obama’s war is to bleed the Afghan resistance into submission and secure an agreement that will meet the imperialist aims that have driven the war from its outset.

These aims are bound up not with a war on terrorism but with geo-strategic interests and corporate profits. They include establishing permanent bases in Afghanistan, over which “strategic partnership” negotiations are now being conducted between Washington and Karzai. The purpose of such bases would be to assert US control over the strategic energy reserves of the Caspian Basin and the main pipeline routes for funneling it to the West, as well as to threaten China, Russia and Iran.

Having inflicted terrible suffering upon the impoverished masses of both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the ten-year-old war has also been waged at the expense of the American working class, from which the overwhelming majority of the thousands of troops killed and maimed there are drawn. Trillions of dollars have been poured into the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, even as Democrats and Republicans alike insist that there is “no money” for jobs and vital social services.

Public protest against the war has virtually disappeared. The official “antiwar” movement, dominated by a comfortable middle-class layer, has integrated itself into the Democratic Party and busied itself with supplying alibis for militarism under Obama.

Yet hostility to the war in the working class is growing in tandem with anger over the assault on social conditions, jobs and living standards. This popular hostility to war can and must be unleashed through the independent political mobilization of the working class against the Obama administration and the capitalist profit system, which is the source of militarism and war.

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