A decade of neo-colonial war in Afghanistan

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Yesterday marked a decade since the US and Britain launched military operations against Afghanistan, initiating a bloody and protracted war of neo-colonial conquest. The war has been a disaster for the Afghan people and a tragic waste of the lives of American and allied soldiers. It has profoundly destabilised regional and world politics.

In its statement of October 9, 2001, the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board condemned the US-led assault on Afghanistan and exposed the Bush administration's claims to be conducting a "war on terror" to defend the American people against Al Qaeda. The statement identified Washington's real objective as the transformation of the country into a permanent US base of operations to extend its hegemony over the adjacent energy-rich region of Central Asia.

In a prescient warning, the editorial board observed: "Were the US to oust the Taliban or kill bin Laden and wipe out what Washington calls his terrorist training camps, the realisation of these aims would not be followed by the withdrawal of American forces. Rather, the outcome would be the permanent placement of US military forces to establish the US as the exclusive arbiter of the region's natural resources. In these strategic aims lie the seeds of future and even more bloody conflicts."

The eruption of US militarism marked by the war on Afghanistan has escalated unabated over the past decade. To compensate for its waning economic position, American imperialism has repeatedly wielded its military might to undermine the interests of its European and Asian rivals. The US exploited the 9/11 terrorist attacks as the pretext to implement long-prepared plans for the invasion first of Afghanistan and then Iraq.

In proclaiming its doctrine of pre-emptive war, the Bush administration asserted the "right" to wage war against any perceived threat to the US, thus providing the justification for the untrammelled use of military force in any corner of the globe. This doctrine, maintained and extended under the Obama administration, violates international law and the basic principles established in the Nuremburg trials, which convicted Nazi leaders for waging a war of aggression.

The war on Afghanistan has been accompanied by the militarisation of American society and sustained attacks on democratic rights and basic legal principles. The Bush administration repudiated the Geneva Conventions and established the Guantánamo Bay prison camp for the indefinite detention of "enemy combatants" in flagrant disregard of both international and American law. The US killing of alleged "terrorists" has culminated in the extrajudicial murder of an American citizen—Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki—in Yemen last month.

Under the banner of the "war on terror," the Bush and Obama administrations have developed the Department of Homeland Security as the nucleus of a vast police state apparatus that will increasingly be used against anyone, at home as well as abroad, regarded as a threat to the present social order.

The impact of the war in Afghanistan has been catastrophic. Having armed and financed Islamist militias including the progenitors of Al Qaeda in its holy war against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul in the 1980s, the US turned on its erstwhile allies. Three decades of war have left Afghanistan one of the world's most backward and impoverished countries. Far from establishing democracy, the US-led coalition has propped up the widely-despised regime of President Hamid Karzai, which rests on a repugnant assortment of warlords, drug barons and tribal militia leaders.

UN figures released last year estimated that 9 million Afghans, or 36 percent of the population, lived in absolute poverty, and a further 37 percent existed on an income

only slightly above the poverty line. Only 23 percent of the population had access to clean drinking water and a mere 24 percent of Afghans above the age of 15 could read and write.

The country had the second highest maternal mortality rate and the third highest rate of child mortality in the world. The injection of around $35 billion in international funding between 2002 and 2009 only exacerbated the social chasm that is all too evident in Kabul, where the poorest of the poor survive by scrounging in the refuse outside the palatial mansions of the wealthy elite.

To terrorise a hostile population, the US military has used the barbaric techniques developed in Vietnam and other neo-colonial wars—arbitrary detention, torture, assassination, night-time raids and indiscriminate air strikes. According to the Brookings Institution's Afghanistan index, 2,735 US and Coalition troops had died as of September 29 of this year.

No precise count of Afghan civilian deaths exists. Estimates put the figure at more than 10,000, but the actual figure is certain to be far higher. A decade of foreign occupation has left a legacy of bitterness and hatred that provides a constant stream of recruits to the Taliban and other anti-occupation forces.

Likewise, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have generated broad popular opposition in the US, its immediate allies and countries around the world. But this sentiment finds no expression within the political establishment in any of these countries.

Political lessons need to be drawn from the collapse of the global antiwar protests against the invasion of Iraq in 2003—the largest internationally coordinated demonstrations in history. That anger and opposition was steered by the various pseudo-radical organisations that dominated the protests into support for the 2008 election campaign of Obama.

Far from being an "antiwar" president, Obama maintained the US occupation of Iraq and "surged" American troop numbers from around 30,000 in early 2009 to the current level of nearly 100,000 to fight the "good war" in Afghanistan. Obama's drawdown of US forces in Iraq and escalation of the Afghan war represented no more than a tactical shift by the American ruling elite in the prosecution of its interests. Moreover, by recklessly extending the conflict into the border areas of neighbouring Pakistan, the Obama administration has dangerously destabilised not only that country, but the precarious strategic balance throughout South Asia and beyond.

The ex-lefts and pseudo-radicals who hailed Obama's election have since become the cheerleaders for new imperialist wars of aggression. These middle-class outfits shamelessly jumped on the bandwagon in promoting NATO's bombing of Libya as the new "good war" for democracy against the dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Just as in Afghanistan and Iraq, the NATO powers are seeking to install a pliable client regime in Tripoli to assert their domination of the country's energy resources and turn the country into a strategic base of operations against the revolutionary movements in neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt.

The root cause of imperialist war lies in the profit system. The deepening global crisis of capitalism is propelling the ruling classes into a class war against the living standards of working people at home and economic and ultimately military conflict against their rivals abroad. A mass antiwar movement must be revived, but that is possible only on the basis of a new political perspective—the independent mobilisation of the working class in a unified struggle based on a socialist and internationalist program to abolish capitalism and its outmoded nation-state system.

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