

Bonn conference on Afghanistan dominated by crisis and pessimism

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A decade after the first international conference on Afghanistan in Bonn, delegates returned to the former West German capital Monday amid a growing regional crisis and increasing pessimism over the 10-year-old war.

Bonn II, as the conference has become known, was convened ostensibly to prepare continued support for the regime of President Hamid Karzai, installed by the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, after the formal end of US-NATO combat operations in the country, which was set by a NATO summit last year to take place by the end of 2014.

It has been overshadowed, however, by, on the one hand, Washington's efforts to negotiate a "strategic partnership" agreement with Karzai that will allow it to keep tens of thousands of troops and military bases in Afghanistan, and, on the other, tensions between the US and Pakistan.

Pakistan boycotted the conference in response to the November 26 US air assault on two military posts on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border which killed some two dozen Pakistani soldiers. While Washington has described the incident as a "tragic accident," the Pakistani military has termed it "a deliberate act of aggression." In addition to its refusal to send a delegation to the conference, Islamabad cut off NATO supply routes through Pakistan and ordered the US to evacuate an airbase in Baluchistan that has been used to launch CIA drone strikes.

Pakistan's absence only underscored the failure of what has been presented as a key element in the planned "transition" to Afghan control over military operations in the country: a reconciliation leading to an end to the resistance by the Taliban and other forces opposing foreign occupation.

The US-NATO strategy has focused on a series of "surges" in the south and east of the country—together with relentless drone missile attacks inside Pakistan—aimed at bleeding the Taliban and forcing it to negotiate from a position of weakness. At the same time it has sought to pressure the government of Pakistan to push the Taliban leadership, believed to be based in the Pakistani city of

Quetta, into negotiations and to carry out new offensives by the Pakistani military against insurgents in the tribal territories on the Afghan border.

For its part, the Taliban have spurned approaches for a negotiated settlement, insisting, as they did in a statement on the Bonn conference this week, that a precondition for any such agreement is the complete withdrawal of all foreign military forces from the country. They warned that the Bonn conference could only serve to "further ensnare Afghanistan into the flames of occupation."

The first Bonn conference, held in the immediate aftermath of the toppling of the Taliban government, deliberately excluded any Taliban participation. It was dedicated to cobbling together a colonial-style regime based largely on the warlords of the Northern Alliance—which had destroyed Kabul and carried out other war crimes before the rise of the Taliban—and Washington's chosen puppet, Karzai, who was then installed as president. Ten years later, he still heads the corrupt government in Kabul, which is seen as illegitimate by much of the Afghan population. According to reports in the German media, he intends to remain in office well past the end of his second term in 2014.

Since the launching of the war in 2001, 2,823 US, British, and other foreign troops have been killed in Afghanistan. The death toll for the Afghan people numbers in the tens of thousands. A recent UN report indicated that 1,462 Afghan civilians had been killed in the first six months of 2011 alone, a 15 percent increase in the death toll over the same period last year. This figure, undoubtedly a severe undercount of the real number of people who have been killed, demonstrates that the level of violence is only increasing more than 10 years after the war began.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told the Bonn conference that the United States "intends to stay the course with our friends in Afghanistan." German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle sounded a similar note. "We send a clear message to the people of Afghanistan: We will not leave you on your own. We will not leave you in the lurch."

Such talk of staying the course and not leaving the

Afghans in the lurch boils down to the United States and NATO seeking to maintain a permanent military presence in the country long after the official 2014 deadline for withdrawal of foreign troops. Washington is continuing to pursue its original strategic aims in Afghanistan: securing a military foothold in the energy-rich Central Asian region, while at the same time maintaining bases aimed at projecting US power against China.

Washington has sought to secure a strategic partnership agreement with the regime in Kabul to lend legal cover to its continued occupation. For his part, Karzai convened a Loya Jirga, or grand council, to secure support for negotiating a 10-year deal with the US for the continued presence of American troops. The move sparked student demonstrations against any continuation of the occupation, while many charged that the meeting was stacked with Karzai loyalists and in no way represented the will of the Afghan people.

In an interview with *Spiegel Online*, Karzai suggested that some 20,000 US troops would remain in Afghanistan after the formal end of combat operations.

Just last Friday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that German troops could also stay in Afghanistan past the 2014 withdrawal deadline to serve as “trainers” for the Afghan forces.

One condition that Karzai raised at the Loya Jirga—and reiterated in Bonn—in relation to an agreement with Washington was an end to “night raids” against Afghan homes by US Special Forces. Such raids have led to large numbers of civilian casualties and sparked popular outrage throughout Afghanistan.

While Karzai made the demand largely in an attempt to deflect popular opposition to foreign occupation and his own regime, the US military made it clear that it is not about to alter its brutal tactics in Afghanistan.

Indeed, US commanders have indicated that they are preparing for yet another “surge”, this one redeploying American forces from Helmand and Kandahar provinces in the south of the country to the eastern provinces near the Pakistan border. It is estimated that heavy fighting could continue there throughout 2012 and 2013, along with an escalation of drone missile attacks against targets across the border in Pakistan. According to a report in the British daily *Guardian*, plans have been drawn up to launch US Special Forces raids against targets in Pakistan as well.

Iran, which shares a long eastern border with Afghanistan, stressed its opposition to US attempts to secure permanent bases in the country. “Certain Western countries seek to extend their military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014 by maintaining their military bases there,” Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi told the conference. “We deem such an approach to be contradictory to efforts to sustain

stability and security in Afghanistan.”

Tensions between the West and Iran have been steadily escalated over allegations over the Iranian nuclear program. The prospect that this dangerous confrontation could spill over into the war in Afghanistan became apparent this week with Tehran’s report Sunday that it had shot down a US spy drone over its territory near the Afghan border.

In his address to the conference, Karzai insisted that the Afghan regime installed by Washington would require substantial economic and military support “for at least another decade.” It was suggested that the Afghan government would require at least \$10 billion a year in aid, with as much as \$6 billion going just to sustain Afghan security forces that are set to number some 350,000.

A communique issued at the close of the conference included a pledge by the Afghan regime to combat corruption and improve governance in return for a continued flow of Western military and economic aid.

“Afghan government institutions at all levels should increase their responsiveness to the civil and economic needs of the Afghan people and deliver key services to them,” the document stated. “In this context, the protection of civilians, strengthening the rule of law and the fight against corruption in all its forms remain key priorities.”

Such pledges are worth less than the paper they are printed on, particularly coming from Karzai, whose closest associates and family have been intimately involved in the most egregious acts of corruption, including the Kabul bank scandal and the drug trade.

One of the more pessimistic views of the current conditions in Afghanistan came those from Thomas Ruttig, a former United Nations and European Union official in the country. “What we are now seeing,” Ruttig told *Spiegel Online*, “is an uncontrolled proliferation of competing militias, as well as oversized armed forces whose loyalties tend to lie with their former commanders rather than the Kabul government—and with nothing that could hold them together, especially not after a withdrawal of the Western troops. This is a recipe for civil war.”



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