

NATO prepares troop withdrawal from Afghan quagmire

Peter Symonds
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The meeting of NATO defence and foreign ministers this week in Brussels was dominated by a sense of desperation and crisis over the worsening military quagmire in Afghanistan. The US is escalating military operations in an effort to shore up the detested Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai, even as the US and its allies prepare to withdraw the bulk of foreign combat troops by the end of 2014.

The vulnerability of the US-led occupation was driven home last Sunday by co-ordinated, high-profile attacks against NATO and Afghan government targets in Kabul. While NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu praised the response of the Afghan security forces, nothing could hide the fact that a handful of Taliban fighters penetrated the highest security areas of the capital, held Afghan police and troops at bay for 18 hours, and were defeated only with the support of US helicopter gunships.

Speaking in Brussels alongside Defence Secretary Leon Panetta, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged last weekend's attack in Kabul. She nevertheless intoned the mantra: "The transition is on track, the Afghans are increasingly standing up for their own security and future, and NATO remains united in our support."

In reality, the US strategy in Afghanistan is in tatters. Under the guise of its bogus "war on terror," American imperialism invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to transform it into a client state and base of operations to further its ambitions in Central Asia. After more than a decade of war, large areas of the country, especially in the south and east, are controlled by anti-occupation militias, including the Taliban and the Haqqani network.

The Obama administration "surged" American troop strength to 90,000 and extended the war into Pakistan's border areas, seeking to suppress and foster divisions among insurgent groups in order to cut a deal with at least some anti-occupation groups. The US military focus on southern Afghanistan, particularly Kandahar and Helmand provinces, only resulted in shifting Taliban attacks to the east and into the cities, including Kabul.

Negotiations with the various insurgent groups have to date been a dismal failure. In a lengthy report issued in late March, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) concluded that "the Karzai government is poorly positioned to cut a deal with the leaders of the insurgency. Afghanistan's security forces are ill-prepared to handle the power vacuum that will occur following the exit of international troops."

The ICG report pointed to the cynical calculations behind the entire "transition" strategy, noting: "Far from being Afghan-led, the negotiating agenda [with the Taliban] had been dominated by Washington's desire to obtain a decent interval between the planned US troop drawdown and the possibility of another bloody chapter in the conflict."

In other words, the Obama administration is well aware that Afghanistan will descend into civil war once foreign troops withdraw. Its "transition" efforts seek to prevent an immediate military debacle, prop up the puppet Karzai regime, at least in the major cities, and secure continued access to major military bases.

US officials have been at pains to avoid comparisons

with the end of the Vietnam War, dismissing any characterisation of last weekend's attacks in Kabul as a Tet-like offensive. Nevertheless, Obama's strategy bears a remarkable resemblance to the criminal actions of the Nixon administration, which secretly bombed Cambodia and Laos, and "Vietnamised" the war, handing responsibility for fighting to South Vietnamese troops as the US military withdrew.

What is being billed as the final US military offensive before withdrawal is going to be a particularly bloody campaign. It is aimed in particular at terrorising areas of eastern Afghanistan, where the Haqqani network is entrenched and insurgent attacks increased by an estimated 20 percent last year. "It's going to be a very busy summer," US commander General John Allen declared recently. The ground war will be accompanied by continuing drone attacks inside Pakistan and pressure on the Pakistani military to attack insurgent bases.

NATO has already handed over frontline fighting to Afghan security forces in half the country and plans to complete the process by the end of 2013, ahead of the withdrawal of most foreign troops the following year. Despite the massive size of the Afghan army and police—set to peak at 352,000 in October—none of the units, as judged by the US Defence Department last October, is capable of operating without international support.

Behind the show of NATO unity in Brussels, intense haggling took place over the timing of the withdrawals, the size of the Afghan army and police, and who was to pay the bill to sustain them. The number of Afghan security personnel, and thus the cost, is due to be slashed by more than a third to 228,000 by the end of 2017, despite warnings by military analysts of a resulting disaster.

The US has pledged to pay \$2.2 billion of the \$4 billion required, and is twisting the arms of its allies to pay \$1.3 billion, with the remainder provided by the Afghan government. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen told the media that Afghan troops were cheaper than international troops. "It is a good deal and it is very easy to make the case this is a good

way forward," he said.

The US and all its allies confront overwhelming opposition at home to the Afghan war and are seeking to speed up their withdrawals. Former commander of Australian forces in Afghanistan, retired General John Cantwell, commented on the Australian Broadcasting Commission's "Four Corners" program this week: "The electoral cycles of nations contributing to the fight in Afghanistan mean that politicians everywhere are looking for the exits."

President Obama plans to withdraw 22,000 of the 90,000 US troops in Afghanistan by September, before the US presidential election. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, also currently campaigning for re-election, announced a complete French withdrawal by the end of 2013, instead of 2014, after four French troops were killed by an Afghan soldier. Likewise, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who faces election next year, has announced the pullout of most Australian troops by the end of 2013.

More than a decade of conflict in Afghanistan has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians, the imposition of a vast police-state apparatus throughout the country and continued mass unemployment and poverty. The ugly face of the neo-colonial occupation was bared this week with the publication of revolting photos of American troops posing with dismembered Afghan bodies.

While short-term electoral considerations are a factor, the withdrawal of the US and its allies from Afghanistan is primarily designed to free up troops and money for new military operations. As the Afghan "transition" is being discussed, the Obama administration is threatening military intervention in Syria and a war against Iran, as well as intensifying its aggressive confrontation against China in the Indo-Pacific region.



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