

Obama signs strategic pact in Afghanistan

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President Obama billed his secretive, fly-in, fly-out trip to Afghanistan in the early hours of Wednesday morning as marking a new dawn—the withdrawal of American troops and an end to more than a decade of war. In reality, the visit has set the stage for an open-ended US military presence in Afghanistan in line with Washington’s aims to transform the country into a permanent base of operations in Central Asia.

Obama’s unannounced trip to Afghanistan on the anniversary of the assassination of Osama bin Laden was also pitched towards his re-election campaign. He took the opportunity once again to glorify his role in ordering bin Laden’s murder and to posture as the leader who had successfully ended the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Obama met briefly with Afghan President Hamid Karzai to sign an “Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement” between the two countries. While the plan is to withdraw the bulk of US troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 and shift responsibility for security operations to the Afghan army and police, US special forces and trainers will remain, ostensibly in a support role, for at least a decade.

In a speech from the huge Bagram military complex, Obama declared that the US did not seek permanent bases inside Afghanistan. However, as well as the continued presence of US troops, the US military will have access to and use of Afghan facilities beyond 2014. A new bilateral security agreement will be negotiated over the next year to supersede the current Status of Forces Agreement giving US troops unfettered access throughout the country.

Obama claimed that the agreement marked the beginning of “an equal partnership between two

sovereign states”, but the terms of the arrangement were clearly dictated by the US to its puppet regime in Kabul. Karzai remains completely dependent economically and militarily on Washington. Afghan security forces, which are due to peak at 352,000 in October before dropping to 230,000 in 2017, will be almost completely funded by Washington and its allies.

The timing of the visit was bound up with a NATO meeting due to take place in Chicago on May 20 to discuss the withdrawal of NATO combat troops. A number of US allies, facing widespread hostility to the war at home, have announced the pull-out of troops prior to the 2014 deadline. The Obama administration will use the meeting to pressure other NATO countries to commit to funding the Afghan security forces and providing other financial aid.

In his speech, Obama claimed that the US had reached its main goal, declaring that the defeat of Al Qaeda “is now within our reach.” Whatever the exact state of the Al Qaeda network, more than a decade of brutal neo-colonial war has embittered the Afghan population, providing a ready stream of recruits for anti-occupation militias such as the Taliban and the Haqqani network.

Just hours after Obama flew out of Afghanistan, Taliban fighters attacked a heavily-fortified residential compound in Kabul housing foreigners including American military contractors and defence employees. Suicide bombers detonated their explosives, blowing open the main gate. Fighting continued for hours before Afghan forces and private guards finally silenced the attackers, leaving at least seven Afghans and a guard dead.

The ability of the Taliban to mount high-profile

attacks in the heavily-guarded capital underscores the tenuous character of the US-led occupation. While Obama claimed that “the tide had turned” against the Taliban insurgency, most analysts are pessimistic about the future of the Karzai regime once most US forces leave the country.

In an essay published on Tuesday, Anthony Cordesman from the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies wrote: “The broader problems in creating effective Afghan forces is increasingly questionable, the insurgents are clearly committed to going on with the fight, and relations with Pakistan seem to take two steps backward for every apparent step forward.”

Despite tactical reversals, Cordesman explained, the Taliban and other insurgents were not defeated. The present US strategy “will almost certainly fail to secure the south and east of Afghanistan” prior to 2014. Given this bleak picture, Cordesman advocated concentrating on shoring up areas still under Afghan government control and boosting pro-government local militias and warlords, despite their corruption and brutality.

Obama claimed that the strategic agreement signed yesterday will help “strengthen democratic institutions”, “advance development and dignity” for the Afghan people, and protect human rights. But this is belied by the corrupt and autocratic character of the Karzai regime and the social crisis confronting the vast majority of the Afghan people.

After more than a decade of American occupation, 70 percent of Afghans struggle to survive on less than \$US2 a day. Unemployment is rampant and will certainly worsen as sectors of the economy dependent on the occupation decline or collapse. Food prices are rocketing due to drought. According to a report in the *Independent* earlier this year, more than 30,000 children die every year in Afghanistan due to the lack of nutritious food, leaving them vulnerable to diseases such as pneumonia or diarrhoea.

Far from ending a decade of war, Obama’s drawdown of US troops from Afghanistan is the preparation for new military adventures. The NATO

war to oust the Gaddafi regime in Libya is being followed by escalating threats of intervention in Syria. At the same time, the US, together with its ally Israel, is threatening to attack Iran.

Even more recklessly, the Obama administration is refocussing the American military in the Asia Pacific region as part of its diplomatic/strategic efforts to undercut Chinese influence. By deliberately raising tensions with China, the US is increasing the danger of a slide towards a catastrophic conflict between two nuclear-armed countries.



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