

NATO backs US plan on Afghanistan

Bill Van Auken
22 May 2012

NATO concluded its two-day summit in Chicago Monday with a formal ratification of the Obama administration's plans for a phased drawdown of occupation forces from Afghanistan over the next two-and-a-half years, while laying the groundwork for a continued US-led military presence in the country through 2024 and beyond.

US President Barack Obama used the summit to send two conflicting messages. The first, that "the Afghan war as we understand it is over," is directed at placating the overwhelming opposition among the American people to the US military's presence in Afghanistan in advance of the 2012 presidential election. The second was aimed at Washington's NATO allies and centered on the appeal for them to support American plans to keep troops and bases in the country at least through 2024. This he referred to as the US and NATO "painting a vision" for Afghanistan's future.

This "vision" includes the continued occupation of the country by upwards of 20,000 US troops and pursuit of Washington's efforts to maintain Afghanistan as a US base on the edge of oil-rich Central Asia. While re-branded as "trainers" and "advisers," rather than combat forces, these troops are to include substantial numbers of special operations squads, backed by US air power, that will continue the night raids and bombardments that have claimed large numbers of civilian casualties and provoked the hatred and anger of the Afghan people.

The key preparation for the summit in Chicago was the signing of an "Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement" by Obama and President Hamid Karzai after the American president flew in and out of Afghanistan under the cover of darkness earlier this month.

While short on details, the pact did provide the means for US troops to remain in the country after the end of 2014, the date set by NATO for the withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan. It likewise committed Washington and its allies to continue funding the Afghan security forces, whose numbers are set to peak at 352,000 next October and then

drop to 230,000 by 2017.

The annual cost of sustaining Afghan troops and police is estimated at \$4.1 billion, and a principal US aim at the summit was to pressure NATO's European member states, which are confronting deep-going economic crises and implementing drastic austerity measures, to shell out for the support of these puppet forces. NATO officials indicated that the plan is for Afghanistan to cover \$500 million, for other NATO members to pay \$1.3 billion and the US to fund the rest.

There was little public discussion of the military funding, which is deeply unpopular in both the US and Europe, under conditions in which working people are being told that there is no money to pay for jobs, health care, education and other basic necessities.

According to an estimate produced this week by the Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the cost of the Afghan war between fiscal years 2001 and 2013 has risen to \$641.7 billion, with over 30 percent of that to be spent in fiscal years 2012 and 2013. Virtually nothing has been done with these staggering sums to improve Afghanistan's infrastructure or the abysmal conditions in which the majority of its population lives, with the vast bulk of this money spent for military operations or paid out to corrupt officials who have funneled much of it into foreign bank accounts.

Obama's rhetoric about an end to war and a new "vision" for Afghanistan was joined with a warning that "the loss of life continues" and there will be "hard days ahead." Gen. John Allen, the top US commander in Afghanistan, was somewhat more blunt about the immediate future. He dismissed "the narrative out there"—promoted by the Obama administration—that US and NATO forces would turn over all security operations to Afghan forces in 2013. "Combat operations will continue in the country throughout the period" ending on December 31, 2014, he said. The US

military will use this period to conduct counterinsurgency operations aimed at bleeding the forces resisting foreign occupation.

General Allen added that as the phased withdrawal of US troops goes forward, the Pentagon is prepared to reinforce the occupation in the event of a major advance by the Afghan armed opposition forces. "If we detect that there is, in fact, a Taliban presence beginning to surge in behind our forces, we have forces that are available that we intend to put against that to prevent that from happening."

The summit was overshadowed by the failure of Washington to secure a deal in advance with the Pakistani government to reopen a supply route from the port of Karachi to the Afghan border that has been shut down for six months in protest over US military strikes on Pakistani border posts last November that killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers.

The Pakistani government issued a series of demands as a condition for reopening the route, which carried between 30 and 40 percent of US supplies and which will become of vital importance as the Pentagon withdraws significant amounts of heavy equipment from Afghanistan. These demands included an apology for the massacre of the Pakistan troops, a review of the US drone campaign against Pakistan, and an increase in transit fees from \$250 to \$5,000 per vehicle, a rate that US officials described as "extortionate."

Obama met briefly with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari on the sidelines of the summit Monday, amid widespread reports that the US had deliberately snubbed him to express anger over his failure to meet US-NATO demands for reopening the supply route. The US president failed to make any mention of Pakistan in his opening remarks to Monday's summit session, while he praised the former Soviet republics of Central Asia that have allowed US transshipments along the so-called Northern route from the Baltic and Caspian ports, a far more costly and time-consuming means of resupplying US and NATO forces.

While the unstable Pakistan Peoples Party government reportedly wants to restore the supply route, particularly in order to get US aid money flowing again, it is fearful that it could face attacks from not only Islamist parties, but also elements within the Pakistani military.

Also disrupting the facade of unity over future operations in Afghanistan was the announcement by newly elected

French President François Hollande that he intends to keep his election promise of withdrawing all French troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2012, a year earlier than planned by his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy. France has only 3,400 troops in Afghanistan, and Hollande has given indications that he may be prepared to keep forces there in the guise of "trainers." Nonetheless, the move triggered fears that there could be, in the words of NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "a rush for the exits."

While the summit was dominated by the more than decade-old Afghan war, it also served as a forum for new provocative military and diplomatic initiatives by the Western alliance. It announced that a European missile defense shield has become "provisionally operational." While Washington and NATO have claimed that the anti-missile shield is meant as a protection against Iran and North Korea, Russia has denounced the proposed system as a direct threat to the credibility of its own nuclear deterrent.

The Chicago Summit Declaration included a passage "regretting recurrent Russian statements on possible measures directed against NATO's missile defense system" and expressing hopes for future dialogue. Earlier this month, Nikolai Makarov, chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, warned that Moscow did not rule out a preemptive strike against a NATO missile shield in Europe.

The Chicago summit also saw the first-ever participation in the gatherings of the US-led alliance by Mongolia, the land-locked Asian nation that is surrounded by Russia and China. The NATO declaration welcomed the Mongolian government as the alliance's "newest partner." Mongolia has been given status within the alliance under its Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program as part of US imperialism's "pivot" toward Asia and militarily confronting challenges it sees from the growing power of China.



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