Kerry in Afghanistan to salvage US occupation treaty

Bill Van Auken
12 October 2013

US Secretary of State John Kerry made an unannounced trip to Afghanistan Friday in a bid to salvage negotiations on a long-term US occupation of the country.

Talks between the Obama administration and the puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai have been stalemated over differences on a number of key questions related to the continued presence of US troops on Afghan soil.

The war in Afghanistan entered its 13th year at the beginning of this week, with little notice taken by the ruling US political establishment or the media. The carnage continues, with civilian casualties for the first half of this year reaching 1,319 deaths and 2,533 wounded, a 23 percent increase over the same period in 2012, according to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

US and other occupation forces also continue to be killed and wounded, despite the already significant drawdown from the peak in 2011 of 101,000 US troops, together with another 40,000 from NATO and other US-allied countries. A total of 2,286 US troops have been killed, along with approximately another 1,100 from other countries participating in the occupation.

With Afghan puppet forces taking over from US and NATO troops in many areas, their fatalities have soared, reaching 100 a week, according to Marine General Joseph Dunford, the senior US commander in Afghanistan.

A pair of incidents last weekend underscored the bloody grind that continues unabated. In the eastern Afghan province of Nangahar, five Afghan civilians, three of them children, were killed by a US-NATO air strike as they were hunting birds with air rifles. Meanwhile, in southern Kandahar province, four members of an Army Ranger unit, including a nurse, were killed and another 13 wounded by improvised explosive devices set off as they raided a house seeking to capture a Taliban commander.

While the Obama administration has set a December 2014 deadline for the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan, it has simultaneously sought to reach a Bilateral Security Agreement with the Karzai regime to keep anywhere between 5,000 and 20,000 US military personnel in the country as “trainers” and “advisors,” including special forces troops for continued killing operations.

Washington’s aim is to retain control of nine military bases in the country, providing it with a platform for projecting US power into the oil-rich and strategically vital region of Central Asia, as well as into South Asia and against rival powers China and Russia. These were the strategic aims Washington has pursued from the outset of the intervention in October 2001 under the mantle of the “global war on terror.”

For his part, Karzai, who was installed by the US occupation as president of an interim administration in 2002, is barred from running for a third term and must cede his office to a successor next year. Elections are set for April 2014, and a collection of warlords and corrupt politicians have announced their candidacies, including some who are charged as war criminals.

Among the leading contenders is Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, who led a faction of the Mujahideen charged with wholesale massacres of civilians during Afghanistan’s civil war in the 1990s. He is also the man who invited Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda into the country, assisting in the setting up of its first training camps.

Karzai is anxious to both shed his image as Washington’s stooge before ceding power and to reach some kind of negotiated accommodation of his own

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with the Taliban. He has found himself frustrated in these aims, however, as Washington demands he submit to its conditions for a continued military presence and undercuts efforts by the Kabul regime to initiate talks with its Islamist foe.

President Barack Obama, according to the *Washington Post*, issued Karzai an ultimatum last June that a security agreement must be reached by the end of this month or the US will institute the "zero option," genuinely pulling all US troops out by the end of 2014. The deadline has been set in large measure to prevent the treaty from becoming a focus of political attention in the Afghan election campaign.

Earlier this week, Karzai appeared defiant in an interview with the BBC. "The NATO forces have failed to ensure peace and security in Afghanistan and their improper actions have caused problems for the Afghan nation," he said. "A lot of people have been victimized and no progress has been observed during the NATO presence in Afghanistan."

He continued: "If the agreement doesn't suit us then of course they can leave. The agreement has to suit Afghanistan's interests and purposes. If it doesn't suit us and if it doesn't suit them then naturally we will go separate ways."

The prospect of the regime in Kabul surviving after 2014 without massive US military aid is nil. There is clearly a good deal of bluster in Karzai's remarks, but at the same time he apparently sees his own political and indeed physical survival in jeopardy if he cannot extract significant concessions from Washington.

The Afghan president has reportedly already accepted the standard US demand that its troops be exempt from all local laws, giving them impunity in conducting war crimes. It was Baghdad's failure to accept this condition that scuttled plans for leaving a similar permanent force behind in Iraq.

The ostensible sticking points include Washington's demand that it enjoy complete freedom of action in conducting "counterterrorism" operations, including the raids on Afghan villages and bombing of perceived "terrorists"—like the five hunters slaughtered last week—that have so antagonized the country's population.

At the same time, the Obama administration has dismissed Karzai's demand that Washington commit to defending Afghanistan from outside intervention, a measure directed against Pakistan. US officials claim that such a commitment would require asking the Senate to ratify a defense treaty, which Obama does not want to do.

Relations have been further soured by US actions undercutting Karzai's attempts to bring about negotiations with the Taliban. The most egregious of these, reported by the *Washington Post*, consisted of US special operations troops grabbing a Pakistani Taliban leader whom Afghan intelligence had brought into the country in an attempt to recruit him as an intermediary in talks with the Afghan insurgent group. The operation involved US troops ambushing an Afghan government convoy and forcibly seizing the Taliban commander, identified as Latif Mehsud, from his Afghan escorts.

The *Post* also reported that the Karzai regime suspects that the US was behind Pakistan's re-arrest of a senior Taliban official, Abdul Ghani Baradar, whose original release had been made at the request of Karzai so that he could participate in peace feelers.

Karzai has repeatedly charged that Washington is seeking to make its own deal with the Taliban, initiating secret peace talks with the Islamists at their new overseas office in Qatar, set up under an agreement with the Obama administration.

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