US ultimatum on permanent occupation of Afghanistan

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Susan Rice, the Obama administration's national security adviser, issued an ultimatum Monday to Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai: either sign a bilateral security agreement with Washington immediately, or face the withdrawal of all US military forces and a cutoff of Western funding by the end of 2014.

The exercise in mutual brinksmanship by US imperialism and its Afghan puppet continued to unfold during Rice's secretly organized visit to Kabul. In his late-night meeting with Rice, Karzai not only insisted that he would not sign any deal until after elections next April to choose his successor, but also conditioned any agreement on demands that the US not interfere in these elections, act to further peace talks with the Taliban, and release 17 Afghan prisoners held at the Guantanamo detention camp. He also reiterated his demand that the US military halt all raids on Afghan homes.

The written response issued by the White House was blunt: "Without a prompt signature, the US would have no choice but to initiate planning for a post-2014 future in which there would be no US or NATO troop presence in Afghanistan."

Rice, the statement continued, "stressed that we have concluded negotiations"—meaning Washington will not consider any new demands from Karzai—and warned that delaying the signing of the accord until next April "is not viable."

The national security adviser also spelled out that a withdrawal of US troops would lead to a cutoff of hundreds of billions of dollars in US funding upon which the Afghan government and US-organized security forces are wholly dependent.

The US political establishment and media refer to this as the "zero option," which generally is portrayed as unthinkable, while Karzai himself is painted as a madman for even risking such an outcome.

One would hardly guess that the "zero option" was what the American people was led to believe was the policy of the Obama administration all along. In 2012, the Democratic incumbent campaigned for reelection vowing that all US troops would be out of Afghanistan by December 31, 2014. His running mate, Joe Biden, declared, "We are leaving Afghanistan in 2014, period. There are no if, ands or buts."

As it turned out, there were plenty of all three. The bilateral security agreement that Obama and Rice are demanding that Karzai immediately sign calls for an unspecified number of troops—the Afghan president says up to 15,000—to stay in Afghanistan indefinitely, while US forces will have effective control of nine strategic bases scattered across the country. In addition to "trainers" and "advisers," the Pentagon plans to leave a large contingent of special operations troops in Afghanistan to hunt down and kill those opposed to the permanent foreign occupation of their country. US air power, logistical support and intelligence, meanwhile, would remain in place to prop up the Afghan puppet security forces.

Karzai's hesitation in signing this accord and attempts to score more concessions from Washington are entirely understandable. It will be the first such agreement in the history of Afghanistan, a country that earned its reputation as the "graveyard of empires." Conscious that war will continue so long as foreign troops remain on Afghan soil and less than optimistic about the ultimate fate of Washington's 12-year-old effort to subjugate the resistance, Karzai is concerned about his own survival and anxious to portray himself as something more than a hired pawn of US imperialism. In the end, he is anxious to sell himself to

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the US, but wants better protection and more money.

This was largely his rationale in convening a *Loya Jirga* (Pashto for grand council) comprised of nearly 3,000 clan leaders and dignitaries. The hope was that granting this body a vote on the pact with Washington would put some distance between the deal and Karzai personally.

Of course, the delegates were handpicked, and broad masses of Afghans saw the assembly as a meaningless exercise.

Even a *Loya Jirga* would constitute a significant improvement upon what passes for democracy in the United States, however. The Obama administration is entering into an open-ended commitment to keep troops in Afghanistan and to finance and effectively direct its security forces for the next decade and beyond without any debate or vote in Congress, much less the approval of the American people.

Poll after poll has shown anywhere between two-thirds and three-quarters of the US population are opposed to the continuation of the US military intervention in Afghanistan.

The claim is being made that the US troops and bases are required in Afghanistan for a never-ending war against terrorism and Al Qaeda, which had camps in the country before the October 2001 US invasion.

Aside from the fact that Al Qaeda has virtually no presence in Afghanistan today, this pretense has been exposed by Washington's close coordination with Al Qaeda and its affiliates, which have provided the main proxy troops in the US war for regime change against both Libya and Syria. These arrangements echo the one between the CIA and Islamist fighters, including Osama bin Laden, in the protracted US-funded war against the Soviets and the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan itself in the 1980s.

At that time, US President Jimmy Carter warned that "A Soviet-occupied Afghanistan threatens both Iran and Pakistan and is a steppingstone to possible control over much of the world's oil supplies."

Now Washington is embarked on permanent occupation and for much the same motives that it attributed to the Soviets. It is not some ubiquitous threat of terrorism, but rather political geography, that drives the US to seek permanent bases in Afghanistan.

The country provides US imperialism with a platform for projecting military power against Iran to the West, China to the east, the oil-rich former Soviet Central Asian republics and Russia itself to the north and Pakistan and India to the south.

Even as it has backed off from direct military intervention in Syria and sought a negotiated settlement with Iran on its nuclear program, Washington has by no means abandoned its attempt to offset the relative decline of its economic power through reliance on its residual military superiority.

Afghanistan is seen as an asset in the struggle for American global hegemony against Washington's principal rivals, particularly China. Thus, the blood that has been shed in that country in 12 years of US war and occupation is only a down payment for even more terrible conflicts to come.

The overwhelming popular opposition to war and occupation in Afghanistan within the US and Western Europe finds no expression within either the existing political establishments or the media. Petty-bourgeois pseudo-left groups that once protested against war have now become unabashed cheerleaders for imperialist intervention, as in Libya and Syria.

The development of a genuine mass antiwar movement capable of forcing the withdrawal of all troops from Afghanistan and halting even more catastrophic military conflicts depends upon the independent mobilization of the working class against capitalism, the source of war and militarism.

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