

Obama threatens total US withdrawal from Afghanistan

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The Obama administration has ratcheted up pressure on the US-backed regime of President Hamid Karzai to sign a Bilateral Security Agreement with Washington, threatening a total withdrawal of US troops by the end of this year in the absence of such a deal.

At the center of the proposed agreement, under which a residual occupation force of some 10,000 to 12,000 US troops would remain, is a guarantee of total immunity for all US forces from Afghan and international law, assuring that they cannot be held accountable for any war crimes carried out against civilians in the course of military operations.

Also demanded in the deal is the Afghan government's approval of US rules of engagement for so-called "counter-terrorism" units that would continue the hunting and killing of armed opponents of the US-led occupation, as well as the Pentagon's continued use of strategic bases scattered across the country.

Karzai has refused to sign the deal, repeatedly raising criticism of night raids by US special forces and aerial bombardments that have claimed the lives of civilians, and demanding that Washington offer support for peace talks aimed at reaching a settlement between the Afghan regime and the Taliban, which was overthrown by the US invasion of October 2001.

Obama issued his ultimatum to Karzai in a telephone call on Tuesday. That the conversation was the first between the two since last June is the clearest expression of the escalating tensions between Washington and its erstwhile Afghan puppet.

"President Obama told President Karzai that because he has demonstrated that it is unlikely that he will sign the BSA, the United States is moving forward with additional contingency planning," according to a White House readout of the conversation. "Specifically, President Obama has asked the Pentagon to ensure that

it has adequate plans in place to accomplish an orderly withdrawal by the end of the year should the United States not keep any troops in Afghanistan after 2014."

At the same time, the statement stressed that, should the BSA be signed, "a limited post-2014 mission focused on training, advising, and assisting Afghan forces and going after the remnants of core Al Qaeda could be in the interests of the United States and Afghanistan."

Obama was reported to have told Karzai that Washington would "leave open the possibility of concluding a BSA with Afghanistan later this year," while warning that the longer the delay in signing the agreement, "the more likely it will be that any post-2014 U.S. mission will be smaller in scale and ambition."

The *Washington Post* reported last Sunday that one of the options under consideration by the White House would keep just 3,000 US troops in the country, with their activities largely confined to the capital, Kabul, and nearby Bagram Air Base. Military commanders have opposed this option on the grounds that it would provide an insufficient number of troops for force protection.

NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen reiterated Obama's message on Wednesday, adding that without Kabul signing the BSA with Washington, other NATO military contingents would not remain in the country either. There are presently approximately 19,000 non-US troops participating in the Afghanistan occupation.

"Let me stress, this is not our preferred option ... but these are the facts," declared Rasmussen.

In advance of this week's NATO defense ministers' meeting in Brussels, a "senior NATO official" speaking on condition of anonymity acknowledged that

there was no need to keep NATO forces in the country to carry out counterterrorism operations against Al Qaeda, because the group no longer operated inside Afghanistan.

“NATO has been in Afghanistan to fight Al Qaeda, not the Taliban,” he said. “From now on, it will be the Afghan government’s responsibility to deal with the Taliban.”

The remark exposed as a pretext Washington’s claims that it wants to keep troops in Afghanistan to fight terrorism. The principal aim of US imperialism is to secure its grip on strategic military bases that provide the means of projecting military force against neighboring countries, including Iran, China and the energy-rich former Soviet republics of Central Asia.

This is why Obama’s threat is more of a gambit aimed at pressuring the Afghan government than any indication of Washington’s intended policy. In reality, the president’s message to Karzai established that, after months of insisting that the Afghan president had to sign the deal “within weeks,” Washington is prepared to wait until he is replaced as president by a successor to be chosen in an election slated for April 5. That process could drag on, however, into a second round delaying the inauguration of a new head of state until June.

The US position was further spelled out by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, who flew to Kabul to discuss the matter with US commanders in Afghanistan. He said that the decision taken by Obama was based on recognition that “we’ve reached a point where we have to plan for other options—to include a complete withdrawal by the end of 2014.” Dempsey quickly added, “But it is not an indication that we’re not committed to a mission beyond the end of 2014, because we very much believe the Afghan security forces could use our help.”

Dempsey said that a decision to scrap “Operation Resolute Support,” as the plan for keeping upwards of 10,000 troops in Afghanistan indefinitely has been dubbed by the Pentagon, could be delayed until “well into the summer.”

The top US uniformed officer also stressed that “there is still a lot of work that needs to happen through the end of the year.” It has been reported that the Pentagon is coordinating a new offensive aimed in particular against the Haqqani network, an armed

opposition group that has carried out a number of major attacks, including against the US embassy in Kabul.

Whatever Washington’s intentions, as the Iraq experience proved, an agreement could still prove unreachable. While the leading candidates to succeed Karzai have indicated they would sign the BSA, questions have been raised whether such an agreement would also have to be approved by the Afghan parliament, where it is not clear that there is sufficient support.

The prospects for the Afghan regime maintaining itself in power without the US presence appeared dimmer this week following a Taliban operation in which a fortified post of the Afghan National Army in eastern Kunar province was overrun last Sunday by hundreds of militants, leaving 21 ANA soldiers dead, three wounded and six taken prisoner. A battalion sent in to relieve the position was then ambushed by a suicide bomber. The attackers reportedly had support from within the military unit, and in the aftermath of the attack at least nine Afghan army commanders were sacked for “dereliction of duty.”



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