

Senate approves Ashton Carter as new Pentagon chief

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The US Senate voted Thursday by a margin of 93-5 to approve President Obama's nomination of Ashton Carter as secretary of defense. The new Pentagon chief was backed by every Democrat voting, and the vast majority of the Republicans. Carter will be Obama's fourth secretary of defense, following Robert Gates, Leon Panetta and Chuck Hagel, who was forced to submit his resignation last fall.

The action by the full Senate follows a unanimous vote by the Senate Armed Services Committee, where Carter was repeatedly praised by the panel chairman, Senator John McCain, and other advocates of the escalation of US military aggression in the Middle East and throughout the world.

Their only complaint was that Carter would not be able to set policy in keeping with his own preferences, but would be subordinate to decisions made at the White House and transmitted to the Pentagon by the National Security Council.

Carter, the former deputy secretary of defense during Obama's first term, is one of the most militarist figures in the Democratic Party's foreign policy establishment. In the course of his testimony to the Senate Armed Service Committee, he voiced his personal support for arms shipments to the ultra-right government of Ukraine, a move currently being considered by the Obama administration. He also said that he could support loosening or reversing restrictions on the deployment of US troops to Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, depending on the conditions in each country.

A devastating profile of Carter appeared Monday on *Politico.com*, under the headline "The Democrats' Dick Cheney," noting Carter's record of support for dictatorial measures in the event of a future mass-casualty attack on the United States. He co-authored a 2007 policy paper titled "The Day After: Action

Following a Nuclear Blast in an American City." According to *Politico*, "It floated the idea of setting up an emergency, extra-constitutional governing body advised by the chief justice of the Supreme Court."

Carter also co-wrote a 1998 article for *Foreign Affairs* on future terrorist attacks, suggesting that the US government would respond by "scaling back civil liberties, allowing wider surveillance of citizens, detention of suspects, and use of deadly force." He also publicly advocated a US preemptive strike against North Korean nuclear installations in 2006, in a op-ed co-authored by former Clinton administration Pentagon chief William Perry.

The unanimous vote for Carter by Senate Democrats was a much better measure of their attitude to American militarism than the phony complaints raised over the last 24 hours that the Obama administration was seeking too sweeping an Authorization for the Use of Military Force against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Not a single Democratic senator or congressman has publicly backed the AUMF draft released by the White House February 11. This is all cynical political pretense, given that Obama has declared that he already has legal authority for the military operations against ISIS and the war will continue regardless of any action by Congress, which in any case is controlled by Republicans.

Senator Timothy Kaine of Virginia criticized the AUMF draft because its prohibition of "enduring offensive ground combat operations" was too vague—none of the terms are defined. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who calls himself an independent but plans to seek the Democratic presidential nomination, declared he "cannot support the resolution in its current form without clearer limitations on the

role of US combat troops.”

Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, the darling of left-liberal publications like the *Nation* magazine, said she supported “a strong coordinated response” to ISIS, but added, “I do not want America to be dragged into another ground war in the Middle East.”

When it came to actual decision-making, however, as opposed to political gestures towards popular antiwar sentiment, Kaine, Sanders and Warren all cast votes to approve Ashton Carter as the new secretary of defense.

Comments by administration officials after the release of the AUMF text suggest that the resolution would be used to justify further expansion of US military operations around the world, including within the United States itself.

White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest acknowledged Wednesday that the language drafted was intentionally ambiguous, “because we believe it’s important that there aren’t overly burdensome constraints that are placed on the commander in chief.” He defended the resolution’s failure to place any geographic limit on the war with ISIS, saying Obama and the US military “need the flexibility to be able to respond to contingencies that emerge in a chaotic military conflict like this.”

Significantly, US military spokesmen in both Washington and Kabul said Wednesday that ISIS militants were now operating in Afghanistan. This would give the administration a pretext to resume combat operations in Afghanistan, which officially ended six weeks ago, and to renege on its pledge to withdraw all US military forces by the end of 2016.

The United States too is a potential arena for military action against ISIS under the AUMF. FBI Deputy Assistant Director Michael Steinbach told the House Homeland Security Committee Thursday that US intelligence agencies did not know how many ISIS supporters had returned from the Middle East to prepare terrorist attacks within the US. “It would not be true if I told you that we knew about all of the returnees,” he said. “We know what we know.”

Nicholas Rasmussen, head of the National Counter-Terrorism Center, told the same committee that “a few hundred individuals” inside the US might launch terrorist attacks based on contact with social media produced by ISIS. He said that the public should expect

as many as ten such attacks each year.

These two officials used the alleged threat of terrorist attacks to justify expanded electronic surveillance of the American population. Under terms of the AUMF, however, any action linked to ISIS could become the pretext for the use of military forces within the United States—an escalation beyond the military-style police shutdown of Boston after the 2013 Marathon bombing, to the actual deployment of soldiers.

While the American media for the most part presented the proposed AUMF as a “compromise” measure, too sweeping for most Democrats, too restrictive for most Republicans, the British publication *Guardian* highlighted the unlimited character of the war measure. Obama’s resolution would authorize “a second simultaneous global war that will outlast his presidency,” on top of the global war against Al Qaeda approved by Congress after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Micah Zenko of the Council on Foreign Relations told the newspaper, “Obama has given everyone who will serve in his administration the ability to prosecute this war in as expansive a manner as they choose.”



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