

Obama green-lights escalation of Afghanistan war

Thomas Gaist
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US President Barack Obama has green-lighted a significant escalation of the war being waged by the American military in Afghanistan, US media reported Thursday evening.

The expanded role, approved by President Obama barely a year and a half after he proclaimed an end to the war in Afghanistan, includes vaguely defined authority to carry out air strikes and engage in ground combat, whenever US commanders deem such operations necessary to “enable strategic effects on the battlefield.”

The new guidelines allow “greater opportunities for U.S. forces to accompany and enable Afghan conventional forces, both on the ground and in the air,” White House spokesman Josh Earnest said Friday.

“U.S. forces will more proactively support Afghan conventional forces,” Earnest said.

The decision came only a few days after a group of retired generals and senior diplomats, including former Afghanistan commanders David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, issued an open letter to Obama urging him to delay a planned reduction in the deployment of US forces.

Ongoing discussions between US Commander in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and the White House are likely to yield further expansions of the Pentagon’s operations in Afghanistan.

In the coming days, the White House is expected to “expand the authority of U.S. commanders to strike the Taliban and do whatever else is necessary” to defend the Kabul government, according to administration insiders cited by the Associated Press.

“There is a broad desire across the Obama administration to give the military greater ability to help the Afghans fight and win the war,” the AP wrote.

Judging from the formulations employed by the corporate media, one can only assume that the new war guidelines include authority to strike at Taliban sanctuaries on the Pakistani side of the increasingly tense and militarized Afghanistan-Pakistan border. In its characterization of the policy changes, the *New York Times* noted: “Airstrikes will no longer have to be justified as necessary to defend American troops. United States commanders will now be allowed to use air power against the Taliban when they see fit.”

“American forces will also be permitted to accompany regular Afghan troops into combat against the Taliban,” the *Times* wrote.

Though portrayed in US media as the outcome of “months of debate,” the decision to authorize expanded combat operations was essentially a foregone conclusion. The Pentagon’s plans to revive and expand the US war in Afghanistan, now in its fifteenth year, have been an open secret for months.

Washington is determined to maintain a strategic presence in Afghanistan, including its massive Bagram military base and a network of facilities throughout the country, which straddles crucial commercial routes connecting South Asia and China with the resources of the Caspian Sea Basin and the Persian Gulf.

After a decade and a half of continuous US warfare and occupation, waged at the cost of more than 2,000 US lives, at least \$700 billion, and unfathomable death and destruction throughout Afghanistan, the Kabul regime remains so fragile that it can only be defended through a comprehensive renewal of the US war.

“Afghan forces need air and ground support from our American ally on an indefinite basis. Afghanistan doesn’t support any reduction of US troops, and their broadened presence is necessary in combating terrorism,” Afghan government spokesman Shah

Hussain said Friday.

With the US-backed Afghan government tottering in the face of Taliban offensives in the southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, and Uruzgan and the northern province of Kunduz, the White House and Pentagon evidently concluded that no agreement produced by the Quad talks—between Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the US—could satisfy the requirements of US strategy in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

In a deliberate ploy to scuttle the Quad negotiations, the Obama administration authorized the assassination of Taliban leader Mullah Aktar Mansour, carried out on May 21 in Pakistan's Baluchistan province. Mansour was on the verge of agreeing to join the US and Chinese-led talks, Pakistani officials said Friday.

The arming of US officers with general authority to conduct air and ground raids against a Taliban insurgency that is rooted in Pakistan's tribal areas, coming just weeks after the provocative killing of Mansour, carries ominous implications.

The strike on Mansour, launched just three days after US representatives vowed to seek a negotiated solution via the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) at the QCG's fifth meeting on May 18, has already strained US-Pakistan relations to the breaking point.

Mansour's targeting has "vitiated US-Pakistan bilateral relations," Pakistani delegates warned Friday, during talks with General Nicholson and US Special Representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan Richard Olson.

Just prior to Friday's talks, Pakistani foreign affairs official Sartaj Aziz warned that "the time has come to review our relations with the US," saying that the killing of Mansour "damaged mutual trust" between Washington and Islamabad.

In declaring open season on the Taliban, American imperialism is playing with fire in a Central and South Asia geopolitical tinderbox that has already been driven to the brink of war by Washington's anti-China "Pivot to Asia."

A US offensive against the Taliban will inevitably draw American forces into combat along the imperialist-drawn Durand line, where the Afghan and Pakistani governments are engaged in a worsening confrontation.

In early May, Pakistani efforts to develop new fortifications provoked a standoff with Afghan forces, including the complete closure of the frontier for

several days. Islamabad has lodged protests in recent days over alleged Afghan intelligence agents caught attempting the crossing while disguised as refugees. On Friday, at least 40 people were killed by a bomb attack in the Afghan border province of Nangarhar.



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