

Fifteen years of the war in Afghanistan

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On October 7, 2001, the United States launched a full-scale military assault against the Islamist Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Al Qaeda bases in the country.

The invasion of Afghanistan was less a war than a series of massacres. The US military utilised the opportunity to test an array of murderous weaponry and tactics. Suspected bunker and cave networks were obliterated with bombs that can penetrate seven meters of concrete. Areas where Taliban fighters were thought to be concentrated were incinerated with “Daisy Cutters,” which turn a radius of up to 1,700 meters into an inferno, or carpeted with cluster bombs. US, British and Australian special forces stalked the country, assassinating alleged Al Qaeda and Taliban members.

Thousands of Taliban prisoners were murdered by US-backed Northern Alliance militias in cities such as Mazar-al-Sharif and Kunduz. Hundreds of people, many with no connection to Al Qaeda, were sent for torture to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba or to CIA “black sites.” The Bush administration defended its war crimes with assertions that its victims were “unlawful enemy combatants” who were not protected by the Geneva Conventions.

The bloodletting in Afghanistan was followed by Pakistani military offensives, demanded by Washington, in the tribal border regions of northwest Pakistan. Thousands were slaughtered and millions driven from their homes. Over the subsequent years, the US military has terrorized both Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan with drone-launched missile strikes.

The acquiescence of the Pakistani government, formerly the Taliban’s main sponsor, was secured in a particularly crude manner. US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage told Pakistani officials in September 2001: “If you’re against us, we’re gonna bomb your little tinpot country back into the stone age—capiche?”

The representatives and apologists for US imperialism still claim that the motivation for the rampage in Afghanistan and Pakistan was to exact justice on Al Qaeda for the September 11, 2001 terrorist atrocities. The invasion was, President George W. Bush declared, the first battle in a “war on terror.” The Bush administration advanced as the pretext for the invasion the charge that the Taliban had harbored Al

Qaeda and refused to extradite its leader, Osama bin Laden.

These justifications were based on lies. The Taliban and the vast majority of Al Qaeda members in Afghanistan had no involvement in the 9/11 attacks, which were carried out by a terrorist cell in the United States operating with the assistance of representatives of the Saudi Arabian ruling elite, the principal US ally in the Middle East alongside Israel. The attacks succeeded because of a de facto stand-down by US intelligence agencies, which, despite monitoring the activities of known Al Qaeda-linked individuals, took no action to prevent them hijacking commercial airliners. The murderous acts committed on 9/11 were used as the pretext for long-planned American invasions of Afghanistan and, within 18 months, Iraq.

The *World Socialist Web Site* editorial statement published on October 9, 2001, “Why we oppose the war in Afghanistan,” is testimony to the clarity of a Marxist approach to political and social developments, as opposed to the superficiality and bloodlust that pervaded bourgeois commentary on the rush of events that followed 9/11.

The statement stressed from the outset: “The US government initiated the war in pursuit of far-reaching international interests of the American ruling elite. What is the main purpose of the war? The collapse of the Soviet Union a decade ago created a political vacuum in Central Asia, which is home to the second largest deposit of proven reserves of petroleum and natural gas in the world.”

The assessment of the WSWS proceeded from the analysis of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) of the world-historic implications of the restoration of capitalist property relations by the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and China, and the liquidation of the USSR itself in 1991.

As WSWS Chairman David North stated in a 2006 speech on the fifth anniversary of 9/11: “The collapse of the Soviet Union was interpreted by broad sections of the American ruling elite as an unprecedented opportunity to establish the unchallenged global geostrategic hegemony of the United States. Without the Soviet Union, there existed no effective restraint on the projection of American military power anywhere in the world. The American ruling elite believed

that the overwhelming supremacy of the United States, in terms of raw military power, could be deployed to offset the long-term decline in the country's world economic position." (Published in *A Quarter Century of War*, by David North, Mehring Books, 2016, p. 375).

The invasion of Afghanistan cannot be understood except as part of a chain of interconnected developments, stretching from the 1990-1991 Gulf War against Iraq, the establishment of permanent US bases in the Middle East, the US interventions in the Horn of Africa and the Balkans, and the 1999 war against Serbia, to the still unexplained events of 9/11.

The very origins of Al Qaeda and the Taliban lie in earlier intrigues by US imperialism to weaken and destabilise the Soviet Union, which hastened the decision by the Stalinist regime to preserve the position of its privileged bureaucratic caste through the restoration of capitalism. From 1978, on the orders of the Carter administration, the CIA, in collaboration with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, financed and armed Islamist fundamentalists to wage war against the Soviet-backed government in Kabul, drawing Soviet forces into a protracted counter-insurgency. Among those the US government supported was Saudi millionaire bin Laden and the Wahabist extremists from around the world who were brought to train at the Pakistani camps called Al Qaeda—"The Base."

Throughout the 1980s, the Reagan administration hailed the Islamist mujahadeen as "freedom fighters" and denounced the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, deliberately provoked by Washington, as a crime against the Afghan people. Over the past 15 years, Washington has perpetrated violence against the Afghan people on a scale far beyond anything attempted by the Soviet Union. The US has been the central instigator of the Afghan tragedy for a period that now spans 38 years. The toll in dead and wounded numbers well over a million people. More than six million people have fled the country, making Afghanistan the largest refugee-producing country in the world.

The "war on terror" has had vast implications within the United States itself. It became the pretext for the 2001 Patriot Act, virtually unchecked government spying, indefinite detention, military tribunals, the stepped-up militarization of police agencies and the wholesale persecution of Americans of Muslim background. The real purpose of these measures has not been to deter terrorists, but to ramp up the state apparatus in order to suppress rising social and class antagonisms. The assault on democratic rights in the US became the model for similar policies around the world.

Fifteen years after the invasion, the American ruling class is faced with the reality that it has achieved few, if any, of its

predatory aims. Afghanistan is by far the longest war the United States has fought. It has cost well over \$800 billion. Thousands of American and allied troops have been killed or wounded, but there is no end in sight. Far from being defeated, the Taliban and other anti-occupation militias continue to wage an insurgency against the US puppet government and foreign forces. Entire areas of southern Afghanistan are under their control. In recent weeks, bitter fighting has taken place for control of the northern city of Kunduz.

The Afghan government is among the most corrupt in the world, with the ruling stratum basing its privileges on ethno-sectarian divisions, the theft of international aid and the opium and heroin trade. It is commonly accepted that the US-backed regime, despised by the Afghan masses, would collapse if deprived of the ongoing prop of 15,000 US and European troops.

As for Central Asian oil and gas, its exploitation is still dominated by Russia, while increasingly coming under the sway of Chinese energy conglomerates as new pipelines are built. A recent comment in *Diplomat* noted: "If the current trend continues, the International Energy Agency has estimated that China may be importing up to 50 percent of the region's oil and gas by 2020, signaling a decisive shift in Central Asia's energy flow from the west to the east."

While the American capitalist class has no intention of releasing its grip on Afghanistan, it is today increasingly focused on ending the perceived threat that nuclear-armed China and Russia pose to US global dominance. The strategists of US imperialism have determined that if it is going to control Eurasia, it has to install client states in the two countries that dominate the vast land mass, geographically, politically and militarily. Tensions are rising everywhere as every power, great and minor, seeks to assert the interests of its ruling elite in evermore fraught conditions. The prospect of World War III looms over humanity.

The future depends upon the development of an international anti-war movement based on the working class and guided by a revolutionary socialist perspective. The conference "Socialism versus Capitalism & War" being held by the Socialist Equality Party (US) in Detroit on November 5 will be a decisive step in the fight for such a movement. All those looking for a way to oppose war, austerity and repression should register to attend today.



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