

Dropping the mask: A war of plunder in Afghanistan

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In less than three months, Washington will mark the 16th anniversary of its invasion of Afghanistan, which initiated the longest war in American history.

The attack on this impoverished and war-torn south Asian country was cast as the opening shot in a “global war on terrorism,” a crusade for justice and revenge for the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 centered on the ludicrous pretext of hunting down one man, Osama bin Laden.

In response to the invasion, the *World Socialist Web Site* dismissed these official claims, condemning the US action as an imperialist war. In an October 9, 2001 statement titled “Why we oppose the war in Afghanistan,” we wrote:

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...

These critical resources are located in the world’s most politically unstable region. By attacking Afghanistan, setting up a client regime and moving vast military forces into the region, the US aims to establish a new political framework within which it will exert hegemonic control.

Nearly 16 years later, nearly 9,000 US troops remain in Afghanistan. Without them and the immense fire power brought to bear by the US Air Force, the puppet regime of President Ashraf Ghani would not last a week.

According to conservative estimates, the Afghan death toll since 2001 has reached 175,000. Hundreds of thousands more have been wounded and millions driven from their homes. The last six months have seen a record number of civilians killed, with a 43 percent rise in the number dying in US air strikes compared to the same period last year.

This slaughter has been carried out in the name of fighting terrorism, building democracy, liberating women, human rights and various other phony pretexts.

In the end, however, this brutal, corrupt and bloody enterprise has been driven by the imperialist interests spelled out by the WWSW in its 2001 statement. This has been made abundantly clear as the Trump administration conducts an acrimonious internal debate over how to confront what American generals delicately describe as a “stalemate,” in which the Taliban and other insurgents have gained control of an unprecedented amount of Afghan territory and the country’s security forces are suffering unsustainable losses in casualties and desertions.

While Trump has given his defense secretary, the recently retired Marine Gen. James “Mad Dog” Mattis, the authority to escalate the war by sending 4,000 to 5,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, the buildup has yet to take place.

The new war strategy, first promised in advance of the NATO summit last May and then for mid-July, has yet to emerge, and Trump last week told White House reporters that he was still trying to figure out “why we’ve been there for 17 years.” This after Washington has reportedly spent some \$1 trillion on the war. Asked as he headed into a Pentagon meeting last Thursday whether more troops would be deployed, he responded, “We’ll see.”

Now, however, the administration appears to be warming to the idea of an escalation, focusing on the war’s bottom line: plunder and profit.

According to a report published Wednesday in the *New York Times*, Trump has “latched on to a prospect that tantalized previous administrations: Afghanistan’s vast mineral wealth, which his advisers and Afghan officials have told him could be profitably extracted by Western companies.”

Pitching the idea to Trump are both the CEO of American Elements, a firm that contracts with the Pentagon and specializes in rare earth minerals that exist in apparent abundance in Afghanistan, and Stephen Feinberg, the hedge fund and private equity billionaire. A prominent Wall Street

supporter of Trump, Feinberg also owns the giant military contractor DynCorp International and has reportedly offered the services of his mercenaries to guard US-run mines against attacks by the Taliban and other insurgents.

Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani, recognizing the profiteering mindset of his new master in Washington, has, according to the *Times*, "promoted mining as an economic opportunity" since his first conversation with the US president.

The idea that American capitalism could use its military might to loot Afghanistan's mineral resources is not an invention of Donald Trump. The CIA was well aware of the riches that could be tapped before the first US Special Forces troops hit the ground in 2001. "In 2006, the George W. Bush administration conducted aerial surveys of the country to map its mineral resources," the *Times* reports.

And the "newspaper of record" published its own glowing report in 2010, when it was supporting the Obama administration's 100,000-troop "surge," under the headline "US Discovers Mineral Riches in Afghanistan." The article proclaimed that, with the "help" of US-based transnational corporations, Afghanistan could "be transformed into one of the most important mining centers in the world."

But with Trump, the mask has come off. The "humanitarian" and "democratic" pretenses used to disguise US imperialism's predatory interests are being dispensed with, and the ruthless, parasitic and criminal character of the American ruling elite, personified by Trump, openly drives US foreign policy. It is altogether likely that in considering the next stage in the Afghanistan war, Trump is working out what deals can be secured by US troops for his son Donald Jr. or his son-in-law Jared Kushner.

In one of his first post-inauguration speeches, delivered at the CIA's headquarters in Langley, Virginia to an assembled audience of agents and agency functionaries, Trump spelled out his approach, extolling the principle of "to the victor belong the spoils." He said in relation to the Iraq war that "we should have kept the oil," adding for the benefit of the US military and intelligence apparatus, "But, OK, maybe you'll have another chance."

In the attempt to use US military might to lay hold of the strategic mineral wealth of Afghanistan, and more broadly, the vast energy resources of Central Asia, US imperialism is confronting not merely the problem of the Taliban insurgency, but also the opposition of major rivals that are pursuing their own interests in Afghanistan and the broader region.

China is seeking to advance a long-stalled \$3 billion deal between its state-owned mining corporation and Afghanistan to exploit the country's largest copper deposits. Russia has launched its own initiative to broker a peace between the

Kabul government and the Taliban, holding three rounds of talks. On the eve of the last round in mid-April, the US dropped the largest weapon used since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, hitting a target in eastern Afghanistan, but clearly sending a message to both Moscow and Beijing.

For the past quarter century, US imperialism has been engaged in continuous warfare, directed in the first instance at utilizing its military superiority to offset the decline of its influence over the affairs of global capitalism. It has sought to assert its hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East and expand its influence into the regions opened up to capitalist penetration by the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Now, under the banner of "America First," it is prosecuting a naked struggle for markets, raw materials and related strategic interests at the expense not only of its supposed enemies, but also its erstwhile allies, particularly in Europe, whose major powers are driven to pursue their own foreign as well as military policy.

Such tensions and conflicts, which preceded both World War I and World War II, raise the threat of a third world war and with it the prospect of nuclear annihilation.

In the US, the bitter internecine struggles in Washington notwithstanding, both Democrats and Republicans support the increasing turn to militarism, while deliberately concealing the implications of their policies from a population that is overwhelmingly hostile to war.



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