Pentagon to fortify Kabul for unending Afghanistan war

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The Pentagon is implementing a plan to expand and more heavily fortify Kabul's "Green Zone," the section of Afghanistan's capital where the American and other foreign embassies, NATO and other military headquarters, international organizations and government ministries are located.

This major project, reported by the *New York Times* Sunday, coincides with a major US escalation of the nearly 16-year-old war, and signals Washington's intentions to maintain what is effectively a permanent occupation of the war-ravaged but strategically situated south Asian nation.

The Pentagon is reportedly sending another 4,000 troops into the conflict, the longest war in US history. This short-term response to escalating reversals for the security forces of the Afghan puppet government has been accompanied by the US military's admission that—with the complicity of the corporate media—it had long deliberately undercounted the number of US troops already in the country, with the real number exceeding 11,000, rather than the 8,400 previously reported.

President Donald Trump has maintained the pretense that he is keeping the exact numbers of troops to be sent into Afghanistan a secret, so as not to tip off the insurgency there, however, the real motive is to conceal the buildup as much as possible from the American people. Nonetheless, there are local reports of ceremonies marking the departure of some 6,000 US soldiers being sent from the 4th Infantry Division in Fort Carson, Colorado, along with an undisclosed number from the 10th Mountain Division in Fort Drum, New York.

There are no grounds for anticipating that the beefed-up force of 15,000 US troops will fundamentally shift the situation in Afghanistan, where the government has lost control of roughly 40 percent of the country to the Taliban, which is stronger than at any point since the October 2001 US invasion that drove the Islamist movement from power.

While it was previously said that the US-backed Afghan government was in firm control of nothing outside of Kabul, the Afghan capital itself has become the target of increasingly devastating attacks, suffering the largest number of casualties of any region in the country. The plan to more than double the size of the Green Zone, absorbing a nearby US military base, and bringing in the kind of heavy security and fortifications utilized in the Green Zone in Baghdad, Iraq is in part a response to a truck bomb attack last May that demolished the German Embassy and killed some 150 people.

The plan reportedly calls for the Green Zone to be expanded from its current 0.71 square miles to 1.8 square miles, with streets leading into the fortified district closed to all but official vehicles.

Pointing to the rhetoric of the Pentagon about a new strategy of a "conditions-based withdrawal" as well as Trump's bombastic speech last month vowing that his administration would "push onward to victory" in Afghanistan, the *Times* report acknowledges that "the Trump administration's new strategy for Afghanistan is likely to keep the military in place well into the 2020s, even by the most conservative estimates."

Among the long-term military plans already on the books is the building of an Afghan Air Force, with the US set to pour some $6.5 billion into the effort between now and 2023.

These plans, along with the proposal for fortifying Kabul, pre-date Trump. As the *Times* reports, "The process of turning Kabul into a fortress started before Mr. Trump took office, of course—security measures were tightened and an obtrusive network of blast walls was established in some places years before President Barack Obama left office."

Aside from the escalation in the number of troops on the ground, the shift in US strategy is characterized above all

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by an increased use of firepower that will inevitably drive up Afghan civilian casualties, which already number more than 1,500 this year alone.

US B-52 bombers flying from Qatar have been staging increased numbers of airstrikes since March, while new artillery units are being sent into the country to shell districts under Taliban control. Trump, ceding control to the cabal of active-duty and retired generals who are setting his administration's foreign policy, has placed rules of engagement for US troops in the country entirely in the hands of local commanders, setting the stage for a sharp increase in the number of atrocities inflicted upon the Afghan people.

It has also been revealed that the Pentagon is working with the Afghan government on a scheme that would create a new irregular combat force by arming up to 20,000 civilian fighters to secure territory rested from insurgents. The plan appears to reprise earlier efforts to create the so-called Afghan Local Police (ALP), a force that placed effective local control in the hands of semi-criminal warlords who carried out killings of their opponents and extortion of local populations. The proposal is driven in large measure by the crisis gripping the Afghan security forces, which have suffered severe losses in terms of casualties as well as desertions.

In a further avenue in the escalation of the US killing in Afghanistan, the CIA has requested the Trump administration's approval to begin carrying out drone assassination strikes in Afghanistan for the first time. While the US intelligence agency was given free rein to wage a murderous drone campaign in northwestern Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), near the Afghan border, killing and maiming thousands of civilians, until now, drone strikes in Afghanistan have been carried out by the US military. As opposed to the Pentagon, the CIA treats its drone strikes as covert operations, refusing to acknowledge them.

A decisive component of the shift in strategy initiated under Trump is a far more aggressive stance in relation to Pakistan, a nuclear-armed country of 190 million. The US president accused Pakistan of "harboring criminals and terrorists," threatening retaliation, including a cutoff of aid.

On Friday, the US resumed its drone strikes against Pakistani territory, with one of its unmanned aerial vehicles reportedly firing missiles at a Taliban gathering in Kurram, part of the FATA region, killing three people and wounding two others.

Tensions between Washington and Islamabad were underscored by an interview in which Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif told the *Wall Street Journal* that the US was "pursuing a folly, a strategy that has already failed" in Afghanistan. He indicated that he would address the issue at this week's opening session of the United Nations General Assembly, accusing Washington of relying on a "militaristic" policy, and insisting that only a negotiated settlement can end the war.

"I think Americans should be more realistic and more pragmatic about their approach in Afghanistan," Asif told the *Journal*. "They have already lost more than 40 percent of territory to the Taliban. How do you keep on fighting with them?"

The deterioration of bilateral relations was made clear with Asif's calling off a previously planned trip to the US for talks with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the Pakistani government's rejection of a planned visit to the country by the senior State Department officer for South and Central Asia.

While canceling meetings with US officials, Asif organized meetings with his counterparts in China, Iran and Turkey, stressing Pakistan's agreement with the governments of these countries on the need for a political solution in Afghanistan. He also indicated his intention to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at the UN session to coordinate Afghan policy with Russia.

Such initiatives, aimed at assuring Pakistan's interests in any settlement of the Afghan war, particularly vis-a-vis its main regional rival, India, cut directly across the aims pursued by US imperialism in its decade and a half of brutal colonial war in Afghanistan. These include establishing a permanent US military presence in a country that borders both Iran and China, as well as the oil rich former Soviet republics of the Caspian Basin.

Washington's response will likely include not only a further military escalation in the region, but also a further tilt toward India, heightening dangerous tensions between the two nuclear-armed powers in South Asia.

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