

Mattis, Tillerson testify before Senate committee

Bipartisan push for new US force resolution to rubber-stamp expanded war

Tom Hall
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On Monday, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis testified at a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to discuss proposals for a new congressional resolution that would authorize the White House and Pentagon to escalate US military violence around the world.

At issue was a proposed replacement for the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), passed in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks. The AUMF, which grants the president sweeping authority to use military force against Al Qaeda and “associated” forces, has provided the primary pseudo-legal basis for the escalation of US imperialist interventions carried out in the name of the “war on terror.”

The revelation this month that four US soldiers were killed during a mission in Niger has fueled an ongoing debate within the political establishment over whether the AUMF should be replaced with new legislation.

The senators of both parties were predictably deferential toward the chief overseers of US bullying and aggression around the world, particularly in their questioning of Gen. “Mad Dog” Mattis, who made his name by commanding the destruction of Fallujah during the Iraq war. There was no suggestion from any of the senators that the open-ended operations of US imperialism should be significantly curtailed.

Tillerson, in his opening remarks, declared that he would welcome the passage of a new AUMF, but demanded that such legislation, in keeping with the current law, constitute a blank check, with no restrictions as to length of time, geographic scope or the entities to be targeted. Mattis, for his part, declared his opposition to any repeal of the current AUMF,

while expressing support for the passage of new legislation on top of the existing law, so long as it placed no limits on the powers of the military.

The senators essentially concurred with this position, with some making mild criticisms of the use of the 2001 AUMF to justify certain military interventions. “I think we all agree that we’re not anxious to repeal the AUMF authorization without a new authorization being enforced,” said Ben Cardin, the ranking Democrat on the committee. “[T]here are significant differences here about whether [the current AUMF] covers counterterrorism operations against ISIS,” but, he hastened to add, “we do agree that Congress needs to make sure that there is authorization to pursue our counterterrorism efforts.”

Mattis repeatedly declared that the US forces stationed in Niger are conducting “training” operations with the Nigerien military. In fact, the evidence shows that the Green Berets killed in Niger were actually on an assassination mission with their Nigerien counterparts, and were ambushed as a result of either faulty intelligence or having been led into a trap by local informants.

None of the senators challenged Mattis’s version of events. The furthest any of them went was Democrat Chris Murphy’s request for Mattis to respond to “concerns that our constituents have that a training mission can very easily morph into something that looks much more like operational and offensive capabilities that are unauthorized by Congress.”

When asked how 1,000 American troops came to be stationed in Niger, the third-largest US combat deployment behind Afghanistan and Iraq, Mattis explained that the mission began in 2013 under the

Obama administration, which informed the president pro tempore of the Senate and the speaker of the House. This exposes as a lie the claim by numerous congressional leaders, including Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, that they had no knowledge of US troops being deployed to Niger.

The position of the Trump administration, spelled out by Mattis and Tillerson, that the executive branch has the right to wage war wherever and whenever it sees fit, was essentially shared by the members of the Senate committee. The chief concern among some of them is that the 2001 AUMF is no longer a sufficient pseudo-democratic fig leaf.

This was summed up by Republican Senator Jeff Flake, who last week made headlines for calling Donald Trump a threat to democracy. Pointing out that none of the current members of the Foreign Relations Committee even voted on the 2001 law when it was passed, he said, “[W]hether or not [authorization for use of force resolutions] are needed to provide a legal basis, it’s certainly needed politically. We can’t continue to go on in a situation where, you know, 70 percent of the House and the Senate has never voted on an AUMF and has no reservation at all to criticize whatever administration is in power and their use of military force because they didn’t vote on it.”

In other words, a new AUMF was needed to shut down even the mildest of congressional criticism and strengthen the military’s mandate to wage war on its own authority. This argument was echoed at several points by other senators and by Tillerson, who declared that a show of “unity” by Congress would send a positive signal at home and abroad.

The discussions within the ruling class over a new AUMF are bound up with preparations for a major expansion of American imperialist violence. This is clearly demonstrated by the language of a proposed resolution to replace the 2001 AUMF, co-sponsored by Flake and Democratic Senator (and Hillary Clinton’s former running mate) Tim Kaine, which is even more expansive than the 2001 measure.

While the 2001 resolution references only Al Qaeda and associated forces, the Flake-Kaine bill would authorize the president to use military force against “Al Qaeda, the Taliban and the Islamic State” and “associated persons or forces.” The latter term is defined as someone who “substantially supports” the

named groups, or “is engaged in hostilities against the United States, its armed forces, or its other personnel.” Thus, “associated persons or forces” includes groups that by the government’s own admission have no association whatsoever with Al Qaeda, the Taliban or ISIS, but which are deemed by the executive branch to be “engaged in hostilities” against the United States.

If passed, this measure could provide justification for war anywhere and against anyone on the planet. Given the fact that the Trump administration has been carrying out military provocations against North Korea for months, resulting in declarations by the regime in Pyongyang that a state of war already exists between the two countries, this could be used by the Trump administration as a legal pretext for launching a war against North Korea without so much as a prior notification to Congress, let alone a congressional rubber-stamp vote.

The hearing was in reality a stage-managed affair aimed at justifying the continuation and expansion of wars of aggression behind the backs of the American people, the majority of whom are opposed to war.



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