

Washington prepares new escalation as Afghanistan unravels

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The Trump administration is preparing to deploy at least 1,000 more US troops to Afghanistan over the coming months amid mounting signs that the 16-year-old US war and occupation is confronting its gravest crisis since the invasion of October 2001.

In his first State of the Union speech on Tuesday night, US President Donald Trump boasted of having given “our warriors in Afghanistan ... new rules of engagement.” He continued, “Along with their heroic Afghan partners, our military is no longer undermined by artificial timelines, and we no longer tell our enemies our plans.”

To put it more bluntly, with the Afghanistan war now in its 17th year, there is no end in sight. The “new rules of engagement” have included a tripling of the number of US airstrikes against the country in 2017 compared to the previous year, leading to a sharp increase in civilian casualties, most of them women and children. The number of US troops, including “advisers” operating with Afghan units and special forces units participating in search and destroy operations against insurgents, is increasing from approximately 11,000 to over 15,000.

The increased carnage, however, has done nothing to stabilize Afghanistan’s corrupt and impotent government or to reverse the territorial gains made by the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

The inability of Afghan security forces and their US “advisers” to secure even the most heavily guarded zones of the capital of Kabul has been underscored over the past two weeks in a series of spectacular attacks. These included a January 21 assault on the luxury Intercontinental Hotel that killed 22 people, including 14 foreigners, a suicide bombing last weekend that claimed the lives of 103 people and wounded another 200 at a police checkpoint near foreign diplomatic

missions and government buildings and an armed assault on Monday against Afghanistan’s military academy in Kabul in which at least a dozen soldiers died.

As for Trump’s assertion that “we no longer tell our enemies our plans,” this policy found its genuine expression with the release Tuesday of the latest quarterly report of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), which said that the Pentagon had refused to provide key data on the war. The agency reported that it had been “informed that DOD [Department of Defense] has determined that although the most recent numbers are unclassified, they are not releasable to the public.”

Withheld were both estimates as to the extent of control exercised by government forces and the Taliban over Afghan territory and the casualty figures for the Afghan security forces.

SIGAR was formed by an act of Congress and is mandated to produce the quarterly reports on the progress of the war, which has to date cost over \$1 trillion, and killed at least 120,000 Afghans and 2,269 American military and civilian personnel, while turning millions of Afghan civilians into refugees.

The withholding of such information, the SIGAR report commented, was “troubling.” The figures on government versus insurgent control of territory “had been one of the last remaining publicly available indicators for members of Congress ... and for the American public of how the 16-year-long U.S. effort to secure Afghanistan is faring,” the report stated.

It added that “the number of districts controlled or influenced by the government has been falling since SIGAR began reporting on it, while the number controlled or influenced by the insurgents has been rising—a fact that should cause even more concern about

its disappearance from public disclosure and discussion.”

The Pentagon has also barred SIGAR from reporting data on the attrition of Afghan security forces as a result of casualties and desertions last year. In its last quarterly report it described “historic losses” but could not give any specific number. It had noted earlier in 2017 that a total of 2,531 Afghan security forces were killed and 4,238 wounded in the first four months of the year, which would translate into some 20,000 casualties on an annual basis, losses which US commanders have described as “unsustainable.”

Following the release of the SIGAR report, the Pentagon backtracked on its attempt to censor the data on territorial control, with a US military spokesman claiming that it had been the result of “a human error in labeling.”

The previously censored figures provided by the Pentagon showed the US-backed Afghan regime in control of just 56 percent of the country, the lowest amount since the US war began. It claimed insurgents held sway over 14 percent of Afghan territory, also a record, while 30 percent was “contested”.

Earlier, the BBC issued its own findings based on an extensive investigation, reporting that the Taliban and other insurgents were contesting the government for control in up to 70 percent of Afghanistan.

A statement released by the White House on Tuesday night included a threat to further extend the US war into Pakistan. The statement said: “President Trump’s conditions-based South Asia Strategy provides commanders with the authority and resources needed to deny terrorists the safe haven they seek in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

Earlier this month, Washington cut off virtually all military and security aid to Pakistan, worth roughly \$1 billion annually, with Trump claiming in a tweet that Islamabad had given “safe haven to the terrorist we hunt in Afghanistan.”

The virulent turn by the US against Pakistan found direct expression in the response of the US puppet regime in Kabul, which publicly blamed all of the attacks this month on the Pakistani government and its military intelligence service the ISI.

On Wednesday, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani refused to accept a condolence call from Pakistani Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi. Later, however,

he did accept one from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the leader of Pakistan's regional rival, India, saying the two discussed “the need for an end to terrorist sanctuaries in our neighborhood.”

The grinding war in Afghanistan has become increasingly bound up with the US attempt to forge an Indo-Pacific anti-China bloc that includes India, as well as Japan and Australia. Washington’s backing has encouraged the Indian government to pursue a more aggressive policy against Pakistan, heightening tensions between the two nuclear-armed regional rivals.

US hostility has driven Pakistan into closer alignment with China. In light of Washington’s actions, Pakistani Defense Minister Khurram Dastgir Khan told Bloomberg on Wednesday that his country would begin seeking arms purchases from China, as well as Russia and Eastern European countries.

Meanwhile, China has announced tens of billions of dollars in infrastructure projects in Pakistan, including the building of an off-shore naval base near the strategic Gwadar Port in the Pakistani province of Balochistan. The facility would be the second Chinese overseas military base after its installation in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa.

Washington is above all determined to prevent Pakistan, China and Russia from brokering any peace agreement that would end the protracted bloodletting in Afghanistan. After the recent attacks in Kabul, Trump declared that talks with the Taliban were off the table.

“So we don’t want to talk with the Taliban. There may be a time, but it’s going to be a long time,” Trump said on Monday. “We’re going to finish what we have to finish. What nobody else has been able to finish, we’re going to be able to do it.”

What the Obama administration failed to achieve with over 100,000 US troops in Afghanistan will not be accomplished by Trump with 15,000. What is threatened is a massive US escalation and with it the danger of a wider war that could draw in the region’s three nuclear powers, China, India and Pakistan.



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