

Afghanistan peace talks and the debacle of the war on terror

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The Trump administration's special envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, on Monday announced the drafting of a "framework" for a peace agreement with the Taliban, against which US troops have been fighting for over 17 years.

Khalilzad has a long record in the elaboration and implementation of the criminal US policies that have led to the deaths of millions of Afghans over the past four decades, while turning millions more into refugees.

In 1979, he served as a close aide to Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser in the Carter administration, in the organization of "Operation Cyclone." This was the code name for a covert CIA-orchestrated war, which provided billions of dollars' worth of arms and funding to support the mujahideen, a collection of Islamist militias that would ultimately give rise to both the Taliban and Al Qaeda, in an attempt to topple the Soviet-backed government in Kabul and to draw the USSR into what Brzezinski described as "its own Vietnam." He continued to work under the Reagan administration to coordinate policy for sustaining this bloody operation.

After a brutal civil war in which the Taliban ultimately established its control over most of the country, Khalilzad signed on as a "consultant" for the energy conglomerate Unocal—now part of Chevron—in negotiating with the Taliban on a deal for a trans-Afghanistan gas pipeline.

In 1996, he wrote a memo insisting that "The Taliban does not practice the anti-US style of fundamentalism practiced by Iran. We should... be willing to offer recognition and humanitarian assistance and to promote international economic reconstruction," i.e., promote deals for big oil.

In 2001, he was one of the architects of the illegal October 7 US invasion to overthrow the Taliban, carried out in the name of avenging the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington. In the final analysis, the

invasion of Afghanistan, like the criminal war on Iraq begun in 2003, was not about terrorism, but rather US military dominance over two major oil- and gas-producing regions on the planet, the Caspian Basin and the Middle East.

Khalilzad, a reliable steward of these interests, was named in December 2001 as US envoy to Afghanistan. Serving as an imperialist proconsul, he worked in Kabul to solidify the puppet regime of Hamid Karzai, a former associate of his at Unocal.

That Khalilzad is hardly a reliable apostle of peace goes without saying. Whether the talks he has supervised with a senior Taliban delegation in Qatar result in the withdrawal of the 14,000 US troops in Afghanistan—along with that of 8,000 troops from a number of other countries—remains to be seen.

What is unquestionable, however, is that his announcement signals a shift in US militarist and geostrategic policy that is bound up with the debacle of the more than 17-year-long "war on terrorism" and the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan—by far America's longest war—as well as a shift toward preparation for military confrontation with nuclear-armed China, Russia and other "great powers."

The outline of the "framework" discussed in Qatar reportedly involves an 18-month drawdown of US forces in exchange for a guarantee by the Taliban that it will prevent the country from "becoming a platform for international terrorist groups," Khalilzad said.

Such a demand could with even greater justification be made of Washington, which utilized Al Qaeda-linked militias as proxy forces in its wars for regime change in Libya and Syria, and, according to some accounts, has not been averse to promoting the activities of ISIS in Afghanistan as a counterweight to the Taliban.

A senior official cited by the *New York Times* reported that the US position is that the withdrawal of US troops

would take place only after the Taliban entered into talks with the US-backed government in Kabul and agreed to a cease-fire.

The Taliban's leadership has in the past rejected such negotiations with the US-backed regime, seeing it as a puppet of foreign occupation, a view that is confirmed by Khalilzad's holding the talks in Qatar behind the backs of the corrupt cabal in Kabul.

What have over 17 years of direct US intervention in Afghanistan wrought? According to conservative estimates, 175,000 have died outright as a result of the war, while with inclusion of indirect deaths, the figure is probably closer to one million. Millions more have been driven from their homes.

The war has unfolded as an unending series of atrocities, from the massacre of 800 Taliban prisoners in November 2001, through to the savage escalation in US bombing under the Trump administration, with US warplanes and drones unleashing nearly 6,000 munitions on targets in Afghanistan in the first 10 months of last year alone.

The toll has also included the deaths of nearly 2,300 US military personnel along with 1,100 other foreign troops and large numbers of private contractors. The wounded and maimed are at least ten times that number. Many more have been left with PTSD as a result of their service in a dirty colonial war, with the suicide rate among US veterans reaching a level of 20 a day.

As for the material cost, the Afghanistan war has drained, by conservative estimates, over \$1 trillion from resources to meet the vital social needs of the US population, from jobs and decent living standards to education and health care.

The "war on terror," initiated with the invasion of Afghanistan, was used as the pretext for a frontal assault on democratic rights, including the passage of the 2001 Patriot Act, the proliferation of unchecked spying, the "extraordinary rendition," indefinite detention, torture and military tribunals associated with Guantanamo and CIA black sites, along with the militarization of police agencies and the persecution of Muslims and immigrants. Governments around the world have followed the US example, all of them preparing, like Washington itself, for a confrontation with their most dangerous enemy, the working class.

A war launched with the aim of asserting US domination of an oil-rich region in order to reverse US imperialism's decline by military means has achieved nothing of its original aims. The two-headed monstrosity

that constitutes the Afghan government, among the most corrupt in the world, is hated and isolated, with the Taliban controlling more territory than at any time since 2001.

As for the strategic oil and gas reserves of Central Asia, they have only become increasingly dominated by Russia and China.

While there can be little doubt that US imperialism will attempt to continue exerting its influence in Afghanistan, whether by aerial bombardment, the retention of strategic bases like the one at Bagram or the deployment of private mercenaries, the discussions about a troop pullout are bound up with a shift in US strategy toward military confrontation with Russia and China.

This was spelled out in the "National Security Strategy" document unveiled by the Trump administration a little over a year ago, making "great power competition" and countering so-called "revisionist states," i.e., Russia and China, the new axis of US global strategy, supplanting the so-called "war on terror."

There exists within the US ruling establishment no constituency opposed to the drive toward a new world war. On the contrary, to the extent that opposition exists within the Democratic Party and the military and intelligence apparatus whose views it reflects, it is based upon the wholly reactionary narrative of Trump's supposed "collusion" with Russia and failure to prosecute with sufficient force the ongoing US wars, particularly in Syria and Afghanistan. Indeed, in an editorial column published Monday by the *Washington Post*, hostility to Khalilzad's negotiations with the Taliban was based on the charge that the war would be ended "on the enemy's terms," betraying the "political order they [US forces] have spent 17 years defending, at enormous cost." That this rotten "political order" rests solely on foreign bayonets is left unmentioned.

The only means of putting an end to US imperialism's endless wars and preventing the outbreak of a global cataclysm lies in the growth of the class struggle in the US and internationally. The conditions are rapidly emerging for the development of a mass political movement of the working class, in opposition to imperialist war and its cause, the capitalist system.



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