

US military chief disputes Trump's Afghanistan troop withdrawal pledge

Bill Van Auken
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Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated this week that any further withdrawal of US troops from the nearly two-decade-long war in Afghanistan will be “condition-based,” tied to a reduction of violence in the country and Washington’s “vital national security interests that are at stake in Afghanistan.”

The remarks by the top US military commander in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) on Monday came just five days after US President Donald Trump tweeted a pledge to bring all American forces in Afghanistan “home by Christmas.”

The statement was in line with Trump’s 2016 campaign pledge that he would end US imperialism’s “forever wars.” This campaign demagogy notwithstanding, the Trump administration has kept US troops in Afghanistan, as well as Iraq and Syria, while maintaining tens of thousands more military personnel in the Persian Gulf region and building up US air and naval power in preparation for a military confrontation with Iran. Meanwhile, it has pressed ahead with its strategy of preparing for “great power” conflicts, staging continuous military provocations against nuclear-armed Russia and China.

Further complicating the US position on Afghanistan, Trump’s national security advisor, Robert O’Brien, said just hours before Trump’s tweet that the number of US troops deployed there would be reduced to 2,500 by early next year, instead of the 4,500 figure previously announced.

Milley, who along with the rest of the joint chiefs is quarantined at home following the uncontrolled spread of the coronavirus from the White House to the Pentagon brass, dismissed the national security advisor’s forecast. He told NPR, “I think that Robert O’Brien or anyone else can speculate as they see fit,”

while insisting that he would base himself on a “rigorous analysis of the situation based on the conditions and the plans that I am aware of and my conversations with the president.”

This sharp exchange reflects increasing tensions between the White House and the Pentagon under conditions in which Milley has felt compelled to repeatedly deny that the US military would play a role in resolving a threatened November 3 election crisis. Milley came under sharp fire from within the military for his participation in the infamous June 1 incident in which National Guard troops and federal police were used to break up a peaceful protest near Washington’s Lafayette Park, clearing the way for a photo-op by Trump.

The internal disputes over troop withdrawals have unfolded in the context of a growing nationwide offensive by the Taliban insurgency, which threatened over the weekend to overrun Lashkargah, the capital of Afghanistan’s southern Helmand Province.

The Pentagon responded with what the US Central Command termed “several targeted strikes in Helmand” in support of elite Afghan government special operations troops that hastily deployed to the province.

The fighting has seen an exodus of over 5,000 families from the city, while roads have been cut off and the destruction of a power station has caused blackouts in both Helmand and Kandahar provinces. At the height of the clashes, two Afghan military helicopters that had flown in more troops and were ferrying out wounded crashed on take-off, killing at least nine of those aboard.

The US military had halted most of its airstrikes—which had risen last year to the largest number since the American invasion of Afghanistan in

2001—as part of a deal struck between Washington and the Taliban in the Qatari capital of Doha on February 29. That agreement called for a halt to offensive operations by the Taliban and US forces against each other and a drawdown of US occupation forces to culminate in a full withdrawal by the middle of next year. It was conditioned upon the Taliban guaranteeing that Afghan soil would not be used for any attack, including by Al Qaeda-linked forces, against the US or its allies. It further called for the initiation of “intra-Afghan” negotiations leading to a comprehensive ceasefire and agreement on a “political roadmap” for Afghanistan’s future.

These negotiations were conducted without any participation by the Kabul government of President Ashraf Ghani, which the Taliban justifiably regards as a puppet of Washington. Talks between the Taliban and the Kabul regime, which were supposed to begin in March, began only last month because of a dispute over the promised release of captured Taliban fighters. Since then, the negotiations in Doha have reportedly made little to no progress.

Meanwhile, the Taliban, which ruled Afghanistan from 1995 until the US invasion of 2001, has seen its agreement with Washington as a victory. It has stepped up an offensive that has extended its grip over increasing areas of the countryside, while for the most part avoiding attacks in major cities. The forces of the Afghan National Security Forces are reportedly demoralized and on the defensive as well as facing increasing pressure to defect to the Taliban.

US officials have denounced the Taliban offensive in Helmand, claiming, in the words of the top US and NATO forces commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Scott Miller, that “It is not consistent with the US-Taliban agreement and undermines the ongoing Afghan peace talks.” For its part, the Taliban insists that the agreement did not demand that it halt operations against the regime’s forces, only that it enter into talks aimed at producing a ceasefire.

The US war in Afghanistan, which has now entered its 20th year, has cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Afghans and devastated the country. While Washington achieved its stated objective of routing Al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan and toppling the Taliban in the first year of its intervention, the war dragged on against an indigenous insurgency, with US

troop levels reaching over 100,000 under the “surge” ordered by President Barack Obama. The war has claimed the lives of some 2,400 US troops, while leaving 20,000 more wounded. It has cost the US an estimated \$2 trillion.

Whatever Trump’s demagoguery about bringing US troops home “by Christmas,” US imperialism views Afghanistan through the lens of its preparations for global war and its bid for control over the Eurasian landmass. Its military intervention, planned well before September 11, 2001, was directed not merely at dispersing Al Qaeda, but at seizing control of a country offering a base of operations near the strategic energy reserves of the Caspian Basin and close to the borders of both Russia and China. These geo-strategic aims have not been abandoned and will be pursued by other, and potentially far more dangerous, means.



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