NATO summit stresses anti-China strategy as wars in Middle East, Afghanistan continue

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The two-day NATO defense ministers meeting that concluded Thursday was marked by the attempt of the Biden administration and its defense secretary, retired General Lloyd Austin, to adopt a new "tone and approach, a desire to work with our allies and partners," as a senior Pentagon official put it.

Whatever the claims that "America is back" after the four years of Donald Trump, the US used the meeting, held via a secure videoconference because of the pandemic, to press for the same essential policies: continued imperialist operations in the Middle East and a strategic shift toward the preparations for "great power" confrontation with China and Russia.

This was combined with a continuation of Washington's insistence that the European powers devote a greater share of their budgets—two percent of GDP—to military spending, including buying American-made hardware, a demand that has remained consistent from Obama to Trump to Biden.

The most pressing immediate issue confronting NATO, a May 1 withdrawal deadline for 10,000 NATO and allied troops occupying Afghanistan, was left unresolved, waiting for a decision to be made in Washington.

The deadline is part of the peace agreement signed last year in Qatar between the US and the Taliban, which was supposed to trade the withdrawal of US and other foreign troops for the Taliban's commitment to denying the use of Afghan soil to Al Qaeda or any other forces seeking to attack the US and its allies. In the year since the negotiation of the accord, not a single US soldier has been killed in the country.

Now, the Pentagon is claiming that the level of "violence" in the country makes it impossible to move forward. The US-backed security forces of the puppet regime in Kabul are facing a debacle, giving up bases and checkpoints to the Taliban, which is encircling major regional capitals. The insurgent movement's traditional spring offensive is still to come.

While European forces account for the majority of the foreign troops still in Afghanistan—officially, the US has only 2,500 soldiers deployed in the country—the occupation is wholly dependent upon US airpower, supply lines and logistical support.

If Washington was moving toward a May 1 withdrawal, orders would already have been given to begin shutting down the extensive US military infrastructure that has been built up over the course of the two-decades-long war and shipping back the massive amount of military hardware sent into the impoverished country. There is every indication that the longest war in American history is to continue.

Meanwhile, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced a major escalation of the alliance's military presence in Iraq, with the current contingent of 500 "trainers" being increased to 4,000. The US, whose own troop deployment is reported as numbering 2,500, threatened this week to carry out unspecified retaliation against a rocket attack on a US base in Erbil that killed a contractor and wounded several others, including an American soldier. The strike was claimed by a little-known group.

While NATO claims that the increase in its presence in Iraq is motivated by a concern over the resurgence of the ISIS Sunni Islamist militia, the main focus of US-led operations in the country, as throughout the region, is militarily countering the influence of Iran.

Even as it remains mired in the decades-old wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan, the Biden administration has ordered a Pentagon "global posture" review with the aim of re-directing US firepower against China and Russia. Biden has already put a hold on Trump's order to withdraw US troops from Germany and sent B-1 bombers into Norway.

On the eve of the ministers conference, a top Pentagon official spelled out a belligerent US policy toward Russia, declaring it "a threat to all NATO allies, including the United States." He charged Moscow with "using military force to achieve their goals," a prerogative Washington regards exclusively as its own, and "undermining the rules-based international order" established by US imperialism.

NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg stated after the first day of the videoconference that he intended to recommend

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that the alliance's "Strategic Concept" drafted in 2010 be reworked principally to confront Russia and China.

Arguing that the alliance's security environment had "fundamentally changed," Stoltenberg stated, "[F]or instance, in the current strategic concept we are not addressing the shifting balance of power and the security consequences of the rise of China. ... Back in 2010, we were working for establishing what we thought to be a strategic partnership with Russia. Since then we've seen Russia being responsible for aggressive actions against neighbors, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and the things have fundamentally changed."

For his part, Defense Secretary Austin told the NATO ministers that he "welcomed recognition by NATO allies that China's growing influence and international policies present challenges to trans-Atlantic security and looks forward to working together to address these challenges," according to the Pentagon.

To this end, Washington and the US corporate media have mounted an unrelenting propaganda campaign to demonize China as responsible for everything from the coronavirus pandemic to "genocide" against its Muslim population. This campaign has as one of its critical aims diverting mounting popular anger over social inequality and the catastrophic handling of the pandemic outward toward a new enemy.

NATO's unity based on such an agenda is hardly assured. Conflicts and strains within the nearly 75-year alliance were no doubt exacerbated by the crudely transactional character of Trump's "America First" policy and the ex-president's open contempt for NATO. However, they pre-date Trump, and their roots are far more profound. A change in "tone" will hardly serve to overcome them.

When the trans-Atlantic military alliance was forged in 1949, US imperialism exercised dominance over the capitalist world. The alliance was directed against the Soviet Union in the 40-year Cold War between the two nuclear-armed powers. To offset the decline of its global economic hegemony and in particular, since the dissolution of the USSR, US imperialism has increasingly resorted to the use of military force, leading to three decades of uninterrupted wars.

Western European powers, in particular Germany and France, have repeatedly expressed opposition to being turned into pawns in Washington's conflicts with Beijing and Moscow. At the end of last year, the European Union concluded a major trade and investment pact with China over US objections, and last week it was revealed that China has overtaken the US as the EU's leading trade partner.

Meanwhile, the German government has maintained its support for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which is to deliver more Russian gas directly to Germany, circumventing Ukraine, despite US threats and sanctions.

The deepening of the world capitalist crisis, which has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, is inflaming conflicts, not only between the US and Russia and China, but also within NATO, whose member states twice engaged in world wars against each other in the 20th century.

A report issued this month by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) entitled, "The United States, China, and Taiwan: A Strategy to Prevent War," warns that Washington cannot count on the support of its erstwhile NATO allies in a war with China. "In matters ranging from technology issues to criticism of China's handling of Hong Kong, U.S. allies have sometimes been hesitant to support Washington when American rhetoric and actions are deemed too provocative or come with high economic costs," the CFR states. "France and Germany refused to support the United States in the 2003 Gulf conflict. In a U.S.-China war, even Japan might not join the battle, given its domestic politics and constitutional constraints, and the United States could well fight alone, shattering its alliance system."

The report makes a chilling warning as to the consequence of such a conflict. "Millions of Americans could die in the first war in human history between two nuclear weapons states. A 2015 RAND Corporation study of the effects of U.S.-China combat determined that estimating military losses would be 'exceedingly difficult.' World War II, however, was the last time the United States lost a major warship, and one sunk vessel could turn into the deadliest U.S. military event since the Vietnam War."

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