End the US war on Afghanistan

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11 May 2021

In the wake of Saturday's horrific terror bombing outside a school in Kabul, there has been a significant escalation of a campaign within the US ruling establishment for a continuation of the murderous two-decades-long war in Afghanistan.

A massive car bomb followed by two other bomb blasts claimed 85 lives, while wounding nearly 200 others in a poor neighborhood of western Kabul that is predominantly Hazara, a Shia minority population. The majority of the victims were schoolgirls between the ages of 13 and 18.

Both the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* published editorials Tuesday seizing upon this atrocity to attack US President Joe Biden's announcement last month that all US troops will withdraw from Afghanistan by September 11. The date chosen is the 20th anniversary of the attacks on New York and Washington D.C. that were utilized as the pretext for the October 7, 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan.

Titled "Afghanistan's Terror Future," the *Wall Street Journal* editorial states, "The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan undermines American security interests, but the humanitarian disaster may be more immediate. The attack on a school in Kabul over the weekend is a likely preview." It concludes that "A U.S. presence can't thwart every horrific attack, but leaving means accepting there will be more of them."

The *Post*, under the very similar headline "A Grim Preview," editorialized: "The horrific bombing of a school for girls in Kabul on Saturday was a grim presage of the catastrophe Afghanistan—and, in particular, its women - may suffer with the withdrawal of U.S. and other international forces." It questioned "why the United States does not simply retain its relatively small footprint in Afghanistan, which in recent years has consumed less than 10 percent of the Pentagon's budget and cost few U.S. casualties."

In the context of the bitter divisions within the US state over the Afghanistan withdrawal, the bombing attack in Kabul assumes a particularly sinister character.

While the US puppet government in Kabul along with the American media has sought to blame the Taliban for the mass killing, the Taliban has condemned the bombing and has generally sought not to provoke Washington ahead of its promised withdrawal. As yet, no one has claimed responsibility for the bombing.

From the standpoint of who benefits from these killings, there is ample reason to question whether elements within the US military-intelligence apparatus or Afghan ruling circles whose fortunes are directly dependent upon a continued US occupation had a hand in the attack. In terms of both its timing and its target, the bombing was tailor-made to fit the phony narrative promoted opponents of withdrawal that, without US troops, the "gains of the last 20 years" and, in particular, "the rights of women and girls" will be extinguished.

This cynical propaganda falls into the category of the "big lie." It casts the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan as not merely a crusade against terrorism, but also an exercise in "humanitarian" interventionism aimed at promoting democracy and gender equality.

What the big lie conceals is that Afghanistan's tragic encounter with US imperialism began not in 2001, but more than two decades earlier, when the CIA, in collaboration with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, recruited Islamist fighters from throughout the Muslim world for a proxy war against Soviet forces supporting a secular government in Kabul. Prominent among the CIA's collaborators was Osama bin Laden, who founded Al Qaeda with the agency's assistance. The Taliban itself was a product of the chaos and destruction wrought by this decade-long war, which claimed the lives of as many as 2 million Afghans. It was initially backed by Washington as the force most capable of restoring order in the country and with which US imperialism could "do business" on pipelines and other interests.

What are the supposed "gains" of two decades of US bombings and massacres? The conservative estimate is that 175,000 Afghans have lost their lives, though the real toll, including deaths indirectly caused by the war, is

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likely closer to a million. According to the United Nations' Human Development Index, Afghanistan ranks 169, behind most of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. The vast majority of the population, women as well men, live under conditions of grinding poverty and oppression. This, after Washington has spent $143 billion on Afghanistan's "reconstruction," enriching a narrow stratum of corrupt politicians and warlords.

Whether the Biden administration will make good on its September 11 withdrawal pledge remains to be seen. It should be recalled that Donald Trump announced a complete withdrawal from Syria in 2019. In the face of a firestorm of opposition from the military and intelligence complex, he reversed course, claiming that he was leaving troops behind only to "keep the oil." If Biden confronts a similar level of blowback, he will, no doubt, say he is leaving troops only to "save the women."

Underlying the divisions over the Afghanistan withdrawal are neither concerns over terrorism, nor, much less, the rights of women. At stake are geostrategic interests in a country that provided US imperialism with a beachhead in energy-rich Central Asia and a potential launching pad for wars against China, Iran or Russia.

A glimpse into the real reasons for the US intervention in Afghanistan was provided in a 2018 speech by retired US Army Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, who was chief of staff to then Secretary of State Colin Powell at the time of the October 2001 US invasion.

Wilkerson said that among the aims was the deployment of "hard power" within military striking distance of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which runs through Central Asia. Pointing to Afghanistan's narrow border with China's western Xinjiang Province, he stated that it would provide the CIA a base of operations "to foment unrest" among the predominantly Muslim Uighur population and "destabilize China." He noted the participation of thousands of Uighurs in the Al Qaeda forces that have served as the CIA's proxy ground troops in the war for regime change in Syria.

The Pentagon is preparing for an Afghanistan withdrawal by seeking new bases that will serve the same purposes. Veteran US Afghanistan envoy Zalmay Khalilzad has been sent to the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which border Afghanistan and provide similar proximity to China, Iran and Russia. Washington is also placing pressure on Pakistan to provide an air base.

The military brass speaks of maintaining "over the horizon" forces that can continue the Afghanistan war indefinitely, with bombing raids, drone strikes and ground operations as needed. Meanwhile, it remains far from clear that all US military, not to mention CIA, assets will be withdrawn from Afghanistan. While there are officially approximately 3,300 members of the US armed forces deployed in the country, there are three to four times that number in terms of US "contractors," including those directly involved in "counter-terrorism" operations.

Meanwhile, as no troops have reportedly left the war-ravaged country, the Pentagon has deployed B-52 bombers, F-18 fighter jets and an aircraft carrier strike group to the region to supposedly cover the planned withdrawal.

Washington has no intention of ending the longest war in US history; at best, it plans only to continue it by other means. Moreover, its strategy in Afghanistan is inextricably bound up with the strategy of "great power" conflict spelled out in US national security documents, i.e., the preparations for world war against nuclear-armed China and Russia.

The propaganda campaign to justify continued war in Afghanistan in the name of "human rights" and "women's rights" is mirrored in the lies spread by Washington and its allies about Chinese "genocide" against the Uighurs. The resurgence of "human rights" imperialism under Biden is paving the way to a global conflagration.

The only way to end the 20-year war in Afghanistan and prevent the eruption of new and even more catastrophic wars is through the mobilization of the working class in Asia, the Middle East and internationally, unifying their growing struggles with those of workers in the US, Europe and the rest of the world in a socialist anti-war movement. Without the revolutionary intervention of the working class, the threat of a third world war will only intensify.

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