

US launches airstrikes against Taliban as Afghan forces crumble

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US warplanes carried out at least four sets of airstrikes in Afghanistan this week in support of Afghan government troops who have ceded ever-growing swathes of the country to the Taliban Islamist insurgency.

The Pentagon acknowledged the bombing raids, which took place on Wednesday and Thursday, but refused to provide any details as to the aircraft or munitions involved. The targets struck were in southern Kandahar province, the historic stronghold of the Taliban, and in Kunduz in the north. Among the targets were materiel captured by the Taliban from government forces, including at least one piece of artillery and armored vehicles, Pentagon officials said.

In both Kunduz and Kandahar, the security forces of Afghanistan's puppet government are facing increasing pressure from Taliban on their respective provincial capitals.

In a Pentagon press conference on Wednesday, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, provided a confirmation of the breadth and speed of the Taliban's advances, acknowledging that the insurgency had seized about half of the country's 419 district centers. Just last month, he told Congress that the Taliban held only 81 centers. This official count is no doubt a significant underestimate. And, in many cases, district centers still held by the government forces are islands surrounded by Taliban-controlled countryside.

"Strategic momentum appears to be sort of with the Taliban," Milley said, in what constitutes one of the understatement of the year. Insisting that "a negative outcome, a Taliban automatic military takeover, is not a forgone conclusion," Milley added, "We will continue to monitor the situation closely and make adjustments as necessary." Spelling out what such "adjustments"

would entail, the Joint Chiefs chairman stated that a "package of long-range bombers, additional fighter-bombers and troop formations are postured to quickly respond if necessary and directed."

The withdrawal of US troops and military contractors announced by US President Joe Biden in April is now 95 percent complete, according to the Pentagon, and will be completed by the end of August. Some 650 troops are being left in Afghanistan to guard the massive US embassy as well as the Kabul airport.

The withdrawal and the escalating collapse of the Afghan security forces funded, trained and armed by Washington have exposed the depth of the debacle of US imperialism's 20-year war in Afghanistan—the longest in US history. The trillions of dollars spent on this criminal and tragic adventure, including the \$143 billion on Afghanistan's "reconstruction," have not sufficed to create either a legitimate government or effective security forces.

This week's bombings, however, constitute a warning that Washington's intervention in Afghanistan, one of the most impoverished and war-ravaged countries on the planet, is not over. They utilized what the Pentagon describes as "over the horizon capabilities," which include US airpower based in the Persian Gulf region. The warplanes used in at least one of the raids were identified as Navy FA-18s, likely launched from the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan, which together with its accompanying strike group entered the North Arabian Sea near the mouth of the Persian Gulf last month.

The scale of the rout of Afghan government forces was indicated on Friday, with the Taliban claiming control of 90 percent of the country's borders. While the Kabul regime's Defense Ministry denounced the claim as "an absolute lie," there is no denying that the

Islamist forces have taken over the principal border crossings with most of the country's neighbors.

There are major implications in the government's loss of these border crossings. According to a report by the Afghanistan Analysts Network (ANA), a Kabul-based think tank, the customs duties on goods crossing the borders account for more than \$438 million in government revenues annually, which are now going largely to the Taliban.

Russia's envoy for Afghanistan acknowledged the Taliban's takeover of border areas, describing it as "positive" for regional security, the *Moscow Times* reported. It was one of a series of statements from Moscow indicating a rapprochement with the Taliban, even as the Kremlin announced plans for joint military maneuvers with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in response to the Afghanistan developments.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov commented following a recent visit to Moscow by a Taliban delegation that it had promised not to threaten the Central Asian former Soviet republics on Afghanistan's border and had expressed its willingness to negotiate the future political setup "despite accusations that they want to create an Islamic emirate based on Sharia law."

Lavrov said that the statement issued by the Taliban in Moscow showed that they were "sane people," and the Russian foreign minister called upon the US-backed regime in Kabul to seriously negotiate and not "maintain uncertainty as long as possible."

The Taliban declared Friday that a ceasefire and political settlement could be reached only with the ouster of US-backed President Ashraf Ghani and the creation of a new transitional government. Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen told the Associated Press that the movement was not seeking a "monopoly of power," but that a new government had to be established "acceptable to us and to other Afghans."

The Taliban has justifiably described Ghani as an illegitimate president and a puppet of the US. He won the presidency in an election in which barely 20 percent of the Afghan electorate participated and which was denounced as fraudulent by his challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, a dispute that was settled only by the intervention of Washington. Last weekend, Abdullah conducted his own talks with the Taliban in Qatar.

The US bombings in Afghanistan occurred in the

same week that the US military launched its first airstrikes in Somalia since Biden took office, and carried out a helicopter attack on a house in northeastern Syria, killing three and wounding many others.

US militarism in the Middle East and Africa continues uninterrupted, even as Washington seeks to focus its military power on its "great power" confrontations with Russia and, particularly China.



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