

Afghan regime's rout exposes crisis of US imperialism

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The rout of Afghan regime forces at the hands of the Taliban insurgency has led to increasingly bitter recriminations in US ruling circles on the theme of “Who lost Afghanistan?” The *Wall Street Journal* Monday published an editorial that termed the US withdrawal a “debacle” and charged that the Taliban was able to make its advances because “Biden ignored military advice and withdrew so recklessly and without a plan to prevent disaster.”

A military catastrophe on this scale, however, cannot be attributed to the lack of a “plan.” The reality is that US imperialism is paying the price for two decades of crimes against the people of Afghanistan carried out under four successive administrations, Democratic and Republican alike. Together they sent three-quarters of a million US troops to Afghanistan to wage a dirty colonial-style war in which it is conservatively estimated that at least 175,000 civilians were killed. The result of this mass killing, as well as the terrorizing of the population with the ever-present threat of bombing raids and drone strikes, night raids and the systematic torture of detainees, succeeded only in swelling the ranks of the insurgency.

Within the space of barely one week, the Taliban has overrun six provincial capitals. On Friday, they captured Zaranj, near the border with Iran, and Sheberghan in the north, and on Sunday they took three more capitals: Kunduz, the commercial hub in the north of the country, as well as Sar-i-Pul and Taloan. On Monday, local officials confirmed that the insurgency was fully in control of Aybak City, the capital of Samangan province, which controls the main highway linking the capital of Kabul with the country's northern provinces.

Ongoing urban warfare has reduced the grip of the US-backed regime in Kabul to just some neighborhoods and, in some cases, blocks in other besieged capitals, including Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province, and Kandahar City in the south. Fierce fighting is also taking place in Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif, the largest city in Afghanistan's north.

Defending forces loyal to the US-backed regime in Kabul have surrendered to the Taliban by their thousands or laid down their weapons and removed their uniforms. In some cases they have defected to the insurgency. The Taliban has insisted that, in most instances, it has been able to negotiate surrenders of

districts and cities without fighting.

Where there has been resistance to the insurgents, as in Lashkar Gah and other besieged capitals, it has been heavily reliant on airstrikes by US warplanes operating from “over the horizon.” This has included the use of B-52 strategic bombers flying from the Al-Udeid airbase in Qatar, F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter jets flying off the deck of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan deployed in the Arabian Sea, and AC-130 Specter gunships.

The use of this airpower against heavily populated urban areas will inevitably inflict a bloody toll in terms of civilian casualties. In Lashkar Gah, US bombs destroyed a health clinic and a school, while officials reported 20 civilian deaths over the space of 48 hours. Afghan security officials, while attempting to minimize the government's loss of control, have taken to touting body counts from the air strikes, claiming the deaths of hundreds of Taliban fighters. How many civilian bodies are lumped into these totals is unknown.

The reasons for the Taliban's success can be grasped in the record of the US occupation in the largest of the cities the insurgency has overrun in recent weeks, Kunduz, with a population of nearly 350,000.

In 2001, shortly after the US invasion, Taliban forces in Kunduz surrendered to US special forces and a militia loyal to the warlord Gen. Rashid Dostum, who forced them into metal shipping containers and transported them to Sheberghan, Dostum's stronghold. Most of some 2,000 prisoners suffocated in the containers, those still alive were shot.

In 2009, a German officer called in a US military airstrike against a crowd in Kunduz province that was siphoning fuel from two tanker trucks stuck at a river crossing. The 500-pound US bombs left at least 142 civilians incinerated.

And in 2015, a US AC-130 gunship slowly and deliberately reduced to rubble a civilian hospital run by Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in Kunduz, killing at least 42 patients and medical staff and wounding many others.

No one has ever been punished for any of these crimes, but they are certainly not forgotten by those who survived them and the relatives, friends and neighbors of those who did not.

The regime that these crimes were meant to defend has never been more than a puppet of the US occupation and a corrupt

kleptocracy, enriching a layer of politicians, warlords and their cronies through the embezzlement of US aid.

At a press conference last month, US President Joe Biden defended his decision to order all but a handful of US troops out of Afghanistan by the end of this month and strenuously denied that there existed any similarity between the debacle in Afghanistan and the one in Vietnam in 1975. “They’re not remotely comparable in terms of capability,” he said. “There’s going to be no circumstance when you’re going to see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States from Afghanistan.”

With both Washington and London telling their citizens over the weekend to get the first flight out of Afghanistan, and gun battles breaking out in the streets of Kabul, Biden’s assurances ring increasingly hollow.

In Vietnam, it took more than two years from the withdrawal of US troops for North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front forces to take Saigon. In Afghanistan, the US intelligence agencies’ “worst case scenario” of Kabul falling within three months of US troops pulling out of Afghanistan is beginning to look overly optimistic.

A debacle on this scale calls into question the survival of not just the regime in Kabul, but the one in Washington as well. The collapse in Afghanistan is part of the implosion of an entire policy pursued by US imperialism over the course of more than three decades.

In the wake of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the American ruling class concluded that nothing stood in the way of its employing US imperialism’s overwhelming military power to reverse the protracted erosion of Washington’s global economic position and impose US hegemony over strategically vital areas of the globe. From the first Persian Gulf War and the US interventions in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Washington has been at war ever since.

The US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, launched on the pretext of retaliation for the September 11 attacks, had been prepared well before the collapse of the Twin Towers. The war’s strategic objective was not the destruction of Al Qaeda, a Frankenstein’s monster created by the CIA-orchestrated war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Rather it was waged to project US military power into Central and South Asia by seizing control of a country bordering not only the oil-rich former Soviet republics of the Caspian basin, but also China and Iran.

Under the slogan of the “war on terror” or what George W. Bush described as “the wars of the 21st century,” Washington claimed the right to invade any country it perceived as a threat to its global interests. Within less than two years of the Afghanistan invasion, the US military was sent into a war in Iraq based on lies about nonexistent “weapons of mass destruction.” Regime change wars, launched under the hypocritical banner of “human rights,” were waged in both

Libya, the country with the largest oil reserves in Africa, and Syria.

While killing and maiming millions, turning tens of millions more into refugees and decimating entire societies, these wars have failed to further Washington’s hegemonic aims, while producing debacles similar to the one now unfolding in Afghanistan.

Far from deterring the growth of American militarism, the debacles produced by the “war on terrorism” have only paved the way to the shift of US global strategy to “great power conflict,” in the first instance, confrontation with nuclear-armed China and Russia. The withdrawal from Afghanistan was carried out not to end America’s longest war, but rather to shift the Pentagon’s resources to the South China Sea, Eastern Europe and the Baltic.

Underlying the eruption of American militarism and the growing threat of a third world war is the insoluble crisis of US and world capitalism, which finds its sharpest expression in the policy of “herd immunity” and social murder pursued by the ruling classes in the United States and internationally in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The relentless pursuit of profits at the expense of human life has laid bare the irreconcilable contradiction between capitalism and the needs of masses of working people the world over, while provoking mounting class struggle.

This struggle of the working class in the United States and internationally is the objective foundation for a movement against the drive to war by US and world imperialism. The most urgent need is that of a revolutionary leadership that can arm this movement with a socialist and internationalist perspective. That requires building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in every country.



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