

One year since the US military's withdrawal from Afghanistan

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Tuesday marked exactly one year since the last detachment of American troops skulked out of Kabul aboard a C-17 military transporter, bringing to an end close to two decades of US imperialism's brutal neocolonial occupation of Afghanistan. The weeks leading up to the unceremonious departure, which resembled the flight from the roof of the US embassy in Saigon in 1975, saw Washington's puppet regime in Kabul disintegrate amid an advance by the Islamist Taliban.

One day after the last American military flight out of Kabul, US President Joe Biden delivered a speech in which he declared, "We've been a nation too long at war. If you're 20 years old today, you've never known an America at peace... It's time to end the forever war."

The "forever war" Biden was referring to consisted of two decades of bloody counterinsurgency warfare and occupation, during which US imperialism and its NATO allies laid waste to an entire society. The imperialist forces left the country in ruins, with a conservative estimate of between 175,000 and 250,000 Afghans killed during the conflict. These deaths included thousands massacred at wedding parties, in their homes, and in hospitals by barbaric drone strikes. Washington's corrupt puppet regime, built up with some \$80 billion in financial aid, proved to have absolutely no popular support as its leading representatives fled the country.

The Afghan withdrawal represented a debacle for US imperialism, which based its policy throughout thirty years of uninterrupted wars, beginning with the first Gulf War in 1990-91, on the conviction that military force could overcome Washington's precipitous economic decline. The establishment of puppet governments in "regime change" operations throughout Central Asia and the Middle East was seen as essential in the consolidation of American imperialist hegemony over the Eurasian landmass, which had been opened up for ruthless capitalist exploitation through the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism in China. These aims of imperialist geostrategy were concealed from the public with bogus propaganda claiming that the US and its allies were waging a struggle for "democracy" and the "rights of women" in Afghanistan.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recognized at the time that far from representing a retreat from large-scale military conflict and an end to "forever wars," as Biden asserted in his 31 August speech, the withdrawal from Afghanistan marked a shift in imperialist strategy to confront much greater foes. As the WSWS wrote in an initial analysis of the implications of the Afghan debacle: "This has not lessened the danger of war in the least. Indeed, Biden used his speech to insist on US imperialism's ability to continue murderous 'over-the-horizon' attacks on Afghanistan or any other country in the world, while shifting its military might toward far more dangerous confrontations

with China and Russia, both nuclear-armed powers."

Less than two weeks later, in an article marking the 20th anniversary of the still unexplained 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C., we stressed: "The debacle of the 'war on terrorism' signals no end to US militarism. Rather, as Biden has made clear, the withdrawal from Afghanistan is aimed at shifting US military power toward confrontation with what the Pentagon describes as 'strategic competitors' or 'great power' rivals, i.e., nuclear-armed China and Russia. In other words, there is a growing threat of a third world war."

Twelve months on, the correctness of this evaluation of US imperialist policy has been proven beyond doubt. Less than six months after the withdrawal from Kabul, the Biden administration and its European and Canadian allies succeeded in provoking the Russian nationalist regime of Vladimir Putin to launch an invasion of Ukraine, triggering a war for which the NATO powers had been preparing for almost a decade. The Ukrainian army, whose backbone consists of neo-Nazi forces trained and equipped by NATO since the fascist-led 2014 coup in Kiev, has received tens of billions of dollars of high-powered weaponry since February. The Biden administration's goal is to recklessly escalate the war with Russia, even at the risk of a global conflagration fought with nuclear weapons, with the aim of seizing control of its substantial deposits of natural resources and critical minerals. To this end, the imperialists intend to subjugate Russia to the status of a semi-colony by carving up its vast territory into statelets under the jackboot of imperialist plunder.

Washington has orchestrated a no less provocative escalation of tensions with China over the question of the status of Taiwan, which Beijing considers a province of China and the US wants to transform into an American military base for war with Beijing. The admission by Washington that it is training Taiwanese military forces and the visit of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to Taipei in early August have shattered Washington's long-standing policy of "strategic ambiguity," which was based on an agreement with the Chinese regime not to explicitly commit to the defense of Taiwan in the event of a military conflict between Beijing and Taipei. Pelosi's visit was accompanied by an unprecedented escalation of tensions, as a US navy aircraft carrier and strike group sailed into the region, and the Chinese navy responded by conducting live fire exercises off the coast of Taiwan.

Washington and its European allies, together with their accomplices in the media, never tire of proclaiming their devotion to the cause of "democracy" in Ukraine, the need to protect "human rights" against "Russian aggression," or the necessity to defend Taiwan against the "authoritarianism" of China. This propaganda onslaught has reached a

deafening crescendo over the past six months, with Western political leaders and media outlets desperately trying to portray the corrupt oligarchic regime in Kiev, backed by American and European intelligence and military forces, as the embodiment of democratic values. In a major speech delivered in Poland in March, Biden committed the US and its allies to “decades” of war with Russia, declaring that the Ukrainian regime was engaged in a “great battle for freedom.” German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, speaking one week after the Russian invasion and just days after the German government tripled its military budget in the largest rearmament program since Hitler, stated, “We must stand up to this attack. Human rights are universal.”

The social and economic calamity facing millions of Afghans after two decades of rapacious plunder by US imperialism and its European allies, among them Germany and Britain, provides the best refutation to such fatuous claims. Fully 40 percent of the Afghan population presently lives on less than \$1 per day, while a staggering 97 percent have fallen below the poverty line. Wide swathes of the population have been mentally traumatized and thousands physically maimed by the reign of terror experienced by impoverished Afghans at the hands of their US and NATO occupiers between 2001 and 2021.

The history of the Afghan population’s disastrous encounter with American imperialism proves that “human rights” and “democracy” concern the imperialist powers only to the extent that they justify the pursuit of their predatory geostrategic and economic ambitions. The US involvement in Afghanistan began over four decades ago in 1979, when the Carter administration facilitated the arming of Islamist fighters against the Soviet-backed regime in order to plunge the country into a civil war and create the USSR’s “own Vietnam.” The arming of these mujahideen created the conditions for the rise of Osama bin Laden and Islamic fundamentalism across the region, with Washington encouraging Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to train and funnel Islamist fighters into Afghanistan. Even after 9/11, these Islamist fighters were used as proxy forces by the imperialist powers to advance their interests, including during the bloody onslaught on Libya and the war in Syria and Iraq. Military planners have openly compared the current conflict with Russia in Ukraine with Afghanistan in the 1980s, demonstrating that the imperialists today are no less indifferent to the horrendous consequences of a years-long war on ordinary Ukrainians and Russians than they were about its devastating impact on the Afghan population.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were seized upon to justify the launching of the Afghanistan war, which had been planned years in advance of 2001. Pro-war propaganda legitimizing the neocolonial occupation as necessary to bring “democracy” to the Afghan people, defend “women’s rights,” and “fight terrorism” was thoroughly exposed over the subsequent two decades. It was the occupying forces who terrorized the population with counterinsurgency warfare, tortured thousands at Bagram Air Base and other “black sites,” and built a puppet regime based on corruption and self-enrichment.

Even after the withdrawal, US imperialism and their allies continued their vendetta against the Afghan people, whom they blamed for the failure of their efforts to establish a sustainable neocolonial regime in Kabul. In an act of brazen theft, the Biden administration announced in February its decision to steal \$7 billion in financial assets belonging to the Afghan Central Bank that were deposited at the Federal Reserve of New York. This action came as the UN warned that up to 23 million Afghans face malnutrition and starvation this year, and up to a million children could die.

The two decades of brutal neocolonial occupation in Afghanistan also produced disastrous social and economic consequences for working people in the US and Europe. The war was used to justify a savage assault on core democratic rights, as intelligence agencies were granted virtually unlimited powers to spy on the population. The brutalization of society, including through the impact on the mental health of thousands of veterans and millions of young people whose entire conscious lives were overshadowed by never-ending wars, has witnessed a surge in gun violence, suicides, drug overdoses, and other social ills. It has helped create the political conditions under which a fascistic figure like Trump could openly plot with broad sections of the Republican Party to overthrow the democratic outcome of a presidential election and establish a personalist dictatorship.

Above all, the ever-more reckless resort to military violence by the ruling elites of North America and Europe expresses the intractable global crisis of capitalism. Decades of uninterrupted wars have exacerbated social inequality as social services and workers’ wages are slashed to cover bloated military budgets. The same indifference shown by ruling circles to human life in the brutal occupation of Afghanistan has found expression in their homicidal policy of mass infection and death during the COVID-19 pandemic. Decades of unending wars have also discredited all institutions of the capitalist state, from the official political parties who supported the wars, to the media who propagandized for them, and the judiciary who allowed war crimes to go unpunished. These processes have revolutionary implications.

The decisive task now is to mobilize an international anti-war movement in the working class in opposition to the headlong rush by the imperialist powers into a third world war fought with nuclear weapons. In this struggle, workers must settle accounts with the war criminals responsible for the destruction of Afghan society and the capitalist profit system from which these barbaric actions arose.



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