

Biden in Munich: The Ugly Face of Imperialism

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Global Research, February 05, 2013

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

“A decade of war is now ending,” President Barack Obama told Americans in his second inaugural address delivered little more than two weeks ago in Washington.

Speaking Saturday at the annual Munich Security Conference, Vice President Joseph Biden set the record straight: not only is this decade-long exercise in US militarism not ended, it is about to erupt in a whole number of new areas across the globe, threatening the lives of countless millions of people.

First held in 1962, the Munich Security Conference—attended by heads of government, foreign ministers, military brass and representatives of the military-industrial complex—was traditionally a forum for airing views on the post-World War II transatlantic relationship between the United States and its Western European allies.

This year’s proceedings, however, took place in a palpably changed atmosphere of unabashed imperialism and neo-colonialism. Both Washington and the powers of “Old Europe” appeared intoxicated with the prospects of using military power to offset economic decline and forcibly lay hold of geo-strategically vital territories, resources and markets.

French President François Hollande was not able to attend the conference, occupied as he was in staging a victory lap in Mali after an offensive by French warplanes and Foreign Legionnaires had conquered the former French colony. He made it clear that France’s troops are not about to leave.

In Munich, Biden’s speech set the bellicose tone for the security conference. Dispensing with rhetoric about the tide of war receding, the American vice president signaled that US imperialism is gearing up for battle in every corner of the planet.

Biden made a significant statement at the outset of his meandering address, linking the sweeping austerity measures that the Obama administration and Congress are preparing to implement with the explosive growth of militarism abroad. Referring to “difficult but critical steps” that the US administration is taking in the wake of “the deepest economic downturn since the Great Depression,” the American vice president declared that the wave of cutbacks at home were necessary to ensure Washington’s ability to meet “our strategic obligations to the rest of the world.” In other words, the immense costs of US militarism will be placed directly on the backs of the American working class.

Biden pointed toward the new focus of US and Western European imperialism—North Africa. There, he claimed, “extremists are seeking to exploit” a set of conditions created by imperialism itself: governmental breakdown, mass poverty and unemployment, and ready access to arms stockpiles left over from the US-NATO war for regime-change in Libya.

Eliminating the supposed threat to “Western interests” posed by these developments, he said, “will take a comprehensive approach—employing the full range of the tools at our disposal—including our militaries.”

Declaring that Washington “applauds and stands with France” in Mali, Biden added, “The fight against AQIM (Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb, with which the US and NATO were directly allied in their war to topple Libya’s Gaddafi) may be far from America’s borders, but it is fundamentally in America’s interests.” A more frank translation of this rhetorical salute would be: France may have gone in first, but Washington and the Pentagon’s AFRICOM are not about to be left behind in the new scramble for Africa and its rich energy and mineral resources.

Biden delivered thinly veiled threats to both Russia and China, warning Moscow that Washington would respect no “sphere of influence” in the former Soviet republics, and declaring that Beijing had better not “engage in anything remotely approaching military competition with the United States.”

While much of the media coverage of the conference centered on Biden’s remark that the US would “be prepared to meet bilaterally with the Iranian leadership,” the vice president deliberately tamped down speculation that this signaled a new and more reasonable approach from Washington. He told the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that the window for diplomacy “will not be opened indefinitely,” the alternative clearly being war.

He cast the Iranian nuclear program as a “threat to the national security of the United States,” and warned that the US “will stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.” Echoing the pretext used to launch the Iraq war a decade ago, Biden insisted that the “burden of proof” is on Tehran to prove the negative: that it is not developing nuclear weapons.

In November 1991, in response to the first Persian Gulf War, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) convened a World Conference of Workers against Imperialist War and Colonialism. In the statement calling for this conference, the ICFI explained that this war marked “the beginning of a new eruption of imperialist barbarism” and that “all the great historical and political tasks that confronted the working class and oppressed masses at the beginning of the 20th century are now posed in their starkest form.”

The statement explained that the “new world order” announced by the elder George Bush on the basis of the collapse of the Soviet Union consisted of “war, colonial enslavement and mass poverty,” which could be countered only by the revolutionary mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

It warned that the first Iraq war signaled “the start of a new division of the world by the imperialists.” It continued: “The colonies of yesterday are again to be subjugated. The conquests and annexations which, according to the opportunist apologists of imperialism, belonged to a bygone era are once again on the order of the day.”

This perspective was advanced in opposition to the claims of bourgeois ideologues that mankind had reached “the end of history,” with the “failure of socialism” and capitalism and the free market proving themselves the pinnacle of human development. It also stood in direct contradiction to the demoralized petty-bourgeois pseudo-lefts who mourned the demise of the Stalinist bureaucracies upon which they had rested and spoke of “midnight in the century.”

Two decades later, the prognosis made by the ICFI has been thoroughly vindicated by great events. Once again, as in the prelude to 1914 and 1939, the rape of small, defenseless countries is bound up with the insoluble crisis of world capitalism and the growing tensions and disputes among the major powers that point toward world war.

Only a united struggle by the world's working class to put an end to capitalism and its outmoded division of the world into nation states can prevent a new world conflagration. The International Committee of the Fourth International is the only movement fighting for this perspective.

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