

Obama announces escalation of war in Afghanistan, Pakistan

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President Barack Obama on Friday announced a major escalation of the US war in Afghanistan and its further extension into Pakistan.

His statement was presented as the outcome of a review of US strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan involving the State Department, the Pentagon and US intelligence agencies, all of whose top officials were on the platform behind Obama when he gave his remarks.

The policy Obama announced represents a massive increase in military violence not only in Afghanistan, but also in Pakistan. Significantly, Obama devoted the first half of his remarks to Pakistan, signaling that a major conclusion of his administration's strategic review is to expand the war more aggressively beyond the borders of Afghanistan.

This will mean the deaths of untold thousands Afghans and Pakistanis, the expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars, and the deaths of thousands of US youth, sent to kill or be killed in a wider war in South and Central Asia.

Obama acknowledged that the US military and security position in Afghanistan is dire. "The situation is increasingly perilous," he said. "It's been more than seven years since the Taliban was removed from power, yet war rages on, and insurgents control parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Attacks against our troops, our NATO allies and the Afghan government have risen steadily. And, most painfully, 2008 was the deadliest year of the war for American forces."

He continued: "Afghanistan has an elected government, but it is undermined by corruption and has difficulty delivering basic services to the people. The economy is undercut by a booming narcotics trade that encourages criminality and funds insurgency."

Obama outlined plans for Afghanistan and Pakistan that echoed the Bush administration's military "surge" in Iraq. Bush used a combination of bribes and military violence to buy a temporary peace with various militia leaders, while directing US reinforcements to slaughter Iraqis who continued to oppose the US colonial-style occupation.

Obama explained, "In Iraq, we had success in reaching out to former adversaries and targeting Al Qaeda in Iraq. We must pursue a similar process in Afghanistan."

On top of the 17,000 additional US troops Obama has already deployed to Afghanistan, he announced plans to send 4,000 more, ostensibly to train Afghan recruits. The aim, he said, was to raise the trained strength of the Afghan army to 134,000 and the police to 82,000.

He called Pakistan, Afghanistan's larger southern neighbor and a US ally, a "safe haven" for Al Qaeda operatives and Taliban fighters, claiming that the Pakistani territories bordering Afghanistan constituted "the most dangerous place in the world" for the American people.

He implied that Pakistan had failed to undertake the large-scale military effort to destroy these forces demanded by Washington, and that the US would no longer tolerate the situation: "After years of mixed results, we will not and cannot provide a blank check. Pakistan must demonstrate its commitment to rooting out Al Qaeda and the violent extremists within its borders. We will insist that action be taken, one way or another, when we have intelligence about high-level terrorist targets."

Along with the "stick" of military threats, Obama offered a "carrot" to the Pakistani regime, calling for the US Congress to authorize \$1.5 billion per year for the next five years to build roads and social infrastructure in the country. He described these funds as a "down payment on our own future," while insisting that "Pakistan's government must be a stronger partner in destroying these safe havens."

The essential continuity between the policies of Obama and Bush was visually symbolized by the individuals who flanked Obama on the platform as he made his statement. On one side was Robert Gates, chosen by Obama to stay on as defense secretary after serving as Bush's Pentagon chief and overseeing the military surge in Iraq, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, against whom Obama ran in the 2008 Democratic primaries. At the time, Obama appealed to popular anti-war sentiment against Clinton, criticizing her for her 2002 Senate vote giving the Bush administration authorization to invade Iraq.

Obama also noted the presence of, and thanked several other holdovers from the Bush administration, including Gen. David Petraeus, Bush's commander in Iraq in 2007-2008, who, since fall 2008, has directed the US Central Command and Gen. Karl Eikenberry, former corps commander in Afghanistan who has been named by Obama as US ambassador to Kabul.

Obama stressed that the planned reduction of US troops in Iraq would make it possible to expand the US military effort in Afghanistan and Pakistan. (Obama has made a point of linking the two countries in all of his statements on the war, in part to condition US public opinion for an extension of military action to Pakistan). In fact, well before the 2008 election, a policy of drawing down US troop levels in Iraq in order to escalate the war in Central Asia had become the consensus policy of the US military and political establishment, and had been embraced by Bush. In any event, Obama has made clear that he intends to keep tens of thousands of US troops in Iraq for at least several years.

Obama's Republican opponent in the 2008 election, Senator John McCain, warmly praised Obama's announcement on Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The justifications Obama gave for his policy were recycled wholesale from those of the Bush administration. While he did not use the phrase "war on terror," Obama based his escalation of the US war in Central Asia on the same pretexts employed by Bush, citing the 9/11 attacks and claiming that the expansion of US military violence and its extension into Pakistan were necessary to protect the American people against a new terrorist attack by Al Qaeda and other "extremists" based in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Obama said the US "did not choose to fight" in Afghanistan and that its goal was not "to

control that country or dictate its future.” He asserted that the role of the region’s terrorists in the September 11, 2001 attacks meant that they were a “common enemy” of the US, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Obama went so far as to assert that the “greatest threat” to the future of Pakistan is Al Qaeda and its “extremist allies.”

Each and every one of these claims is a lie. Far from being a reluctant and altruistic participant in the political life of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the American ruling elite has pursued an aggressive and ruthless policy in these unfortunate countries for over 30 years, in the pursuit of its own imperialist interests.

In 1979, the Carter administration worked to provoke a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, aiming to trap the USSR in a bloody, Vietnam-like quagmire. That this was official US policy was revealed by Defense Secretary Gates—who was on the National Security Council staff, then director of the CIA’s Strategic Evaluation Center at the time—in his 1996 book *From the Shadows*. Through Pakistan, the US aggressively armed the anti-Soviet resistance, which was led by a class of local warlords who funded their activities largely through the cultivation and sale of opium. This led to an explosion of Afghanistan’s narcotics industry.

Far from being a “common enemy” of the US and Pakistani ruling elites, the Taliban were among their main proxies in Afghanistan after the 1992 collapse of the Soviet-backed Afghan regime.

As the US now adopts an increasingly harsh line towards Pakistan, the press is breaking its silence on this topic. The New York Times recently wrote: “The ISI [Pakistani military intelligence] helped create and nurture the Taliban movement in the 1990s to bring stability to a nation that had been devastated by years of civil war between rival warlords, and one Pakistani official explained that Islamabad needed to use groups like the Taliban as ‘proxy forces to preserve our interests.’”

The Times decided not to mention that the US backed these efforts at the time, aiming to use the Taliban to unify and pacify Afghanistan. Had the Taliban succeeded in this attempt, Washington and the US energy firm Unocal hoped to run oil and natural gas pipelines from Central Asia through Afghanistan to Pakistan, India, and Indian Ocean ports.

The real motive behind the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was the drive for US hegemony in oil- and natural gas-rich Central Asia, through which it would gain strategic advantage over its global competitors.

Afghanistan and Pakistan stand at a nexus of pipeline and trade routes between the Middle East, Russia, China and the Indian subcontinent, and US domination of the countries would give it decisive influence over developments in trade and strategic relations between many of Eurasia’s largest and fastest-growing economies. In particular, it would cement the US’ ability to mount a blockade of oil supplies for China and India in the Indian Ocean.

Fundamental US aims have not changed since Washington’s 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent extension of fighting into Pakistan. The US ruling class’ drive to assert dominance over its rivals will, in fact, only increase as the world plunges into the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression.

The hundreds of thousands of people killed and the millions wounded and displaced by the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan give the lie to Obama’s claim that terrorists are the

most dangerous enemy of the Pakistani and Afghan people. In fact, the greatest threat to the Central Asian masses is the militarist clique in Washington that remains in power, unaffected by the transition from Bush to Obama. As for the American people, Obama and his handlers view its anti-war sentiments and democratic instincts with nothing but contempt.

With the escalation of US military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Obama is heading towards broader, far more devastating wars that will ultimately involve major world powers.

The implications of this expanded war policy are incalculable. Pakistan, which is being destabilized by US policy, is a nuclear-armed country of 130 million people. A March 26 report by the Wall Street Journal noted that US drones were now targeting “Pakistani Taliban” leader Baitullah Mehsud, who is not involved in attacks on US and NATO forces across the border in Afghanistan, but is considered by the Pakistani regime to be a major threat, and that Washington is considering widening its missile attacks to include the Pakistani province of Baluchistan. Such attacks risk plunging Pakistan into civil war, and ultimately a full-scale US invasion.

The decision to send more US troops to Afghanistan will not only inflame the war in that country, but destabilize the broader region and intensify tensions with other countries, in the first instance, Russia. With the US’ main supply lines to Afghanistan running through regions of Pakistan that are being turned into war zones, Washington will increasingly consider alternate supply routes, notably through the Caucasus and former Soviet republics in Central Asia. Last August, US competition with Russia for influence in the Caucasus saw the US encourage Georgia to attack Russian monitors in South Ossetia.

China will also see mounting US military intervention in Pakistan as a hostile policy. Pakistan is an important trading partner and strategic ally of China against India. Escalating the war will also fuel tensions between Washington and European countries which are under increasing US pressure to contribute more troops to NATO operations in Afghanistan, and whose populations overwhelmingly oppose these deployments.

Obama’s announcement of wider war in Central Asia underscores the cynical and fraudulent character of his presidential campaign and the fundamental agreement, whatever their tactical differences, between the Democratic and Republican parties in support of the predatory aims of US imperialism around the world. Having presented himself as the agent of “change,” Obama is now presiding over an expansion of imperialist aggression that will have incalculable consequences.

Friday’s announcement is the clearest demonstration of a basic political fact: War cannot be opposed through the Democratic Party or appeals to Congress, but only through the independent political mobilization of the American and international working class.

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