

Obama's Afghan "surge" sows seeds of new wars

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US imperialism is set on a course to expand and intensify the Afghan War—vastly increasing the number of troops deployed to Afghanistan and extending the war into neighboring Pakistan.

The Obama administration's Afghan troop "surge" and the ensuing ratcheting up of violence will have catastrophic consequences for the Afghani and Pakistani peoples. It adds a new, explosive dynamic to the decades-old geopolitical rivalry between India and Pakistan and will intensify the great power competition for control of oil-rich Central Asia, sowing the seeds for even larger and more destructive wars.

President Barack Obama announced last week the deployment of a further 17,000 US troops to Afghanistan, increasing US troop strength in the impoverished Central Asian state by almost 40 percent. At Washington's urging, the Afghan government has begun arming tribal groups, copying a tactic the Pentagon employed in Iraq.

Since last August, the US has carried out 38 missile strikes inside Pakistan, the two most recent coming within days of a visit to Pakistan by Richard Holbrooke, Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to an article in last Saturday's New York Times the two latest air strikes represented a change in US policy, bringing it even more directly into Pakistan's internal politics. For the first time the US targeted Islamist militia who have not been involved in the Afghan insurgency.

The Times has also revealed that US Special Forces are carrying out covert land operations inside Pakistan and that since last summer 70 US military personnel have been deployed to Pakistan to train Pakistani soldiers and paratroopers in counter-insurgency warfare.

It has become a veritable mantra of the Obama administration and US geo-political think tanks that suppressing Taliban "safe-havens" in Pakistan is pivotal to stamping out the anti-US insurgency in Afghanistan and that this requires that Islamabad "do more."

Under pressure from Washington, the Pakistani military and government have for years been conducting offensive operations in the traditionally autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), strafing villages, "disappearing" alleged opponents of the US occupation of Afghanistan, and imposing colonial-style collective punishments on "uncooperative" tribes. Over the past six months these military operations have been expanded. Earlier this month, the United Nations refugee agency said the fighting has displaced 450,000 people in northwest Pakistan and it fears the total will reach 600,000 in a matter of weeks. Holbrooke himself told PBS television that he had seen "flattened villages" when touring FATA by air. But Washington is adamant that its Pakistani allies must be even more ruthless, even if such action further stokes popular anger against the government and

threatens to divide the military, many of whose recruits are drawn from Pakistan's Pashtun community. The Pashtuns have borne the brunt of the US occupation of Afghanistan and the Pakistani government's drive to assert its authority in FATA.

The New York Times and other liberal supporters of the Obama administration have promoted the Afghan war as the so-called "good war," in contrast with the Iraq war (which the Times nonetheless also enthusiastically supported.) In fact, the two wars are of a piece. Both have been waged with the aim of imposing US hegemony in regions where there are vast reserves of oil and thereby securing US global predominance, under conditions where the US's economic power has been vastly eroded.

The Afghani and Pakistani peoples have already paid a horrific price for Washington's and Wall Street's predatory ambitions. Dating back to the early 1950s, the Pakistani military has served as a tool of US geopolitical strategy and Washington, in turn, has served as the bulwark of a succession of right-wing military dictatorships, including that of George W. Bush's "friend" and "indispensable ally in the war on terror," General Pervez Musharraf.

The current US intervention in Afghanistan is the culmination of three decades of intrigue and subversion, which first saw the US arm Islamic guerrillas, in order to destabilize a pro-Soviet government in Kabul and draw the Soviet Union into a disastrous land war, and later, in the name of fighting "Islamist terrorism," occupy Afghanistan and install a corrupt and violent puppet government.

The intensification of the war in Afghanistan will only further destabilize the entire region. Pakistan deeply resents Washington's forging of a "global, strategic partnership" with India. With the aim of building up India as a counterweight to a rising China, the Bush administration said that it wanted to help India become a "world power," and in way of proof, offered New Delhi a civilian nuclear treaty that effectively ended the embargo on nuclear trade with India, allowing it to focus its indigenous nuclear program on the development of its nuclear arsenal.

Islamabad charges that India, with the US's blessing, has greatly increased its influence in Afghanistan since 2001. Indeed, India has lavished aid on the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai and, according to a recent report in the news magazine *India Today*, Indian strategists view Afghanistan as "a strategic pivot for India... They believe that in case Islamabad cannot be disciplined through diplomatic means, Afghanistan could prove to be a launching pad for action against the Afghan border."

The Indian elite, meanwhile, resents Pakistan's pivotal role in the Afghan war—more than 80 percent of supplies for US forces in Afghanistan are transported through Pakistan—and fear that the Obama administration's focus on the Afghan war is causing it to attach less importance on ties with India than did Bush.

A key reason India took such a bellicose, anti-Pakistan stance following last November's terrorist atrocity in Mumbai—labeling Pakistan the center of world terrorism—was to preempt any move by Washington to become more involved in negotiating an end to the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir. During the presidential election campaign, Obama and several of his aides said the US should take up the Kashmir question, with the suggestion that assisting Islamabad in wrenching concessions from India could be a quid pro quo for Pakistan doing Washington's bidding in the Afghan war.

India's Hindu chauvinist right and sections of its military establishment complain that while the US mounts military strikes in Pakistan and gave Israel carte blanche to pummel Gaza, it demands that India take no action against Kashmiri insurgents in Pakistan, so as not to disrupt the war in Afghanistan. "Let us not forget," former Indian Foreign Minister Jawant Singh told Outlook magazine, "that the Americans are caught in a bind. They have destabilized the region and are trying to retrieve something for themselves."

No less incendiary will be the impact of the increased US intervention on the broader geopolitical equation in Eurasia. Both Russia and China view limiting US influence in Central Asia to be imperative for their long-term military and economic interests.

China fears US encirclement, as Washington seeks to add India to its longstanding Japanese-anchored system of Pacific Rim allies, and Beijing views Central Asia as a big part of the solution to its burgeoning energy needs. For Russia, Central Asia is an historic area of dominance. Moreover, limiting US access to the region's oil and natural gas resources greatly strengthens Russia's attempt to use its own vast energy reserves as a source of geopolitical power.

Russia has been particularly active in respect to Afghanistan. To the shock and dismay of Washington, Kyrgyzstan recently announced that US forces must vacate the Manus Air Base within six months. The announcement came shortly after Moscow announced a substantial aid package to Kyrgyzstan.

Russia has offered to allow some US and NATO supplies to reach Afghanistan by passing through its territory. But its intention is clearly to trade access for US concessions, including over the positioning of US antiballistic missiles in Eastern Europe. And in what is a direct challenge to NATO's extension of its sphere of operations into Central Asia, the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization recently announced it was setting up a rapid deployment force to counter terrorism and other threats to "stability" in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Washington is desperate to secure additional supply lines to Afghanistan, because insurgents in Pakistan have been highly effective in disrupting the main line that passes through the northwest tribal areas of Pakistan, and the "surge" will require a vast increase in shipments of weapons, oil and food.

Iran, for its part, is likely to see the increased US presence in Afghanistan as a threat, but also as a potential opportunity to bargain for a new *modus vivendi* with Washington. (India recently finished building a highway to connect Kabul to the Iranian border, thereby opening the possibility for Iran to serve as an alternate US-NATO supply route.)

The explosive geopolitical tensions that are being stoked by the US drive to extend its reach into Central Asia were starkly revealed in last August's eruption of the Russo-Georgian war.

The development of a global depression will only intensify the great power struggle for markets, resources and geopolitical advantage. Already, governments are turning to beggar-thy-neighbor economic policies.

War will not be averted by appealing to one or another reactionary national bourgeois clique or, for that matter, to the United Nations. It only serves as clearing house for the mercenary deals made between rival capitalist nation states. In the case of Afghanistan, the UN has

given its imprimatur to the US occupation.

The struggle against war requires the mobilization of the international working class as an independent political force in the struggle against capitalism and the outmoded nation-state system in which it is historically rooted.

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