

Obama's program of war

By [James Cogan](#)

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Within days of taking power, the Obama administration has made clear that it will escalate the war to subjugate the Afghan people, intensify US military strikes on targets inside Pakistan and continue the occupation of Iraq indefinitely. What is being prepared is a brutal escalation of US military violence in Afghanistan and a widening of the conflagration in the region.

Obama left a two-hour meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff yesterday pledging to ensure that the military received the "resources and the support" to wage the wars being conducted by the United States. He told journalists he would soon be announcing "some difficult decisions that we're going to have to make surrounding Iraq and Afghanistan."

The essence of those decisions was indicated on Tuesday in the testimony of Defense Secretary Robert Gates before the Senate and House armed services committees. Obama's appointment of Gates marked the new president's unambiguous repudiation of the campaign rhetoric that appealed to broad antiwar sentiment among the American people. Gates served the Bush administration in the same post for the past two years and directed the escalation of the Iraq war from early 2007 to early 2008.

Gates told the senators: "There is little doubt that our greatest military challenge right now is Afghanistan. As you know, the United States has focused more on Central Asia in recent months. President Obama has made it clear that the Afghanistan theatre should be our top overseas military priority."

The war in Afghanistan, he added, would be "long and difficult." The short-term time frame he placed on the conflict was "five years"?at least until 2014. He said an increase in US casualties was "likely" as operations are stepped-up against the anti-occupation insurgency being waged by loyalists of the former Taliban regime and other Afghan Islamist movements.

Gates stressed that as the new administration escalates military action in Central Asia, it has no intention of withdrawing from Iraq. Warning that resistance could erupt again against US forces in Iraq, he said "there may be hard days ahead for our troops." Even if units designated as "combat" are pulled out roughly according to the 16-month schedule promised by Obama during the election, Gates emphasized that a sizeable force would remain and "we should still expect to be involved in Iraq on some level for many years to come."

He told the Senate committee that Obama will send 30,000 additional American troops to Afghanistan as soon as possible. The first of the four combat brigades requested last year by General David McKiernan, the commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, has already taken up positions in areas to the east of the Afghan capital, Kabul. The 3,500

troops, from the 10th Mountain Division, have begun operations in the provinces of Wardak and Logar.

Analysts are predicting that Obama will order the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade to deploy to Afghanistan by mid-spring. Another Marine brigade will follow by mid-summer. The final additional brigade will arrive before the end of the year.

The intensified fighting will not be confined to Afghanistan. The predominantly ethnic Pashtun Afghan insurgents have safe havens and derive support among the Pashtun population of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). As a result, the US and NATO forces have been unable to prevent the Afghan resistance from launching daily attacks across entire swathes of southern Afghanistan and replenishing both its ranks and weapons. Large-scale US military strikes on the FATA and even more deeply into Pakistan are the logical outcome of Obama's determination to place Afghanistan under US control. It was "impossible," Gates declared, "to disaggregate Afghanistan and Pakistan, given the porous border between them." He left no doubt that the US military would continue to conduct air strikes inside Pakistan, regardless of the opposition of the Pakistani government and Pakistani people, on the pretext that the targets were linked to Al Qaeda.

The primary motive for the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan was not to fight terrorism, but to create a base for the assertion of US influence over the resource-rich former Soviet republics in Central Asia. During last year's presidential election, Obama served as the mouthpiece for factions of the American establishment that had concluded the preoccupation with Iraq had resulted in Central Asia coming too much under the political and economic sway of Russia and China.

The re-emphasis on Afghanistan is intended to reverse this trend. Under the guise of securing supply routes for the increased US military force, intense diplomacy is taking place to establish access rights and military bases in Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Currently, the bulk of US and NATO supplies to Afghanistan move through border passes in the FATA, where they are coming under increasing attack by insurgents. Following a NATO summit on Monday, the Russian government announced that it is prepared to allow its territory and air space to be used to transport US and NATO supplies into Afghanistan.

Gates's testimony also indicated a shift in the relations between the US and the puppet government it has installed in Kabul under President Hamid Karzai. Along with fighting "terrorism," the Bush administration justified the occupation of Afghanistan with constant references to bringing "democracy," "development" and "human rights" to the Afghan people.

Gates dismissed such claims on Obama's behalf, telling senators: "If we set ourselves the objective of establishing some sort of a Central Asia Valhalla over there, we will lose... because nobody in the world has that much time, patience or money, to be honest...."

A brutal real politik will define the Obama administration's policy in Afghanistan. Karzai's government is frequently derided in US foreign policy circles for its endemic corruption and its lack of popular support among the Afghan people. A more important reason for flagging US enthusiasm for its puppet Karzai is the latter's public criticisms of US air strikes that target and kill Afghan civilians. The Obama administration has every intention of escalating

the bloodshed and will brook no interference from its client regime.

The New York Times reported on Wednesday that Obama may support a campaign to remove Karzai in the presidential election scheduled to be held in the country later this year. The alternative to attempts to create a strong central government is the Iraq “surge” model. The commander of US forces in Iraq, General David Petraeus—who now heads the US Central Command—authorized his officers in particular parts of Iraq to bribe insurgent leaders to change sides, in exchange for both money and a degree of local power.

In a similar fashion, sources close to the Obama administration told the Times that it “would work with provincial leaders as an alternative to the central government, and that it would leave economic development and nation-building to European allies, so that American forces could concentrate on the fight against insurgents.”

The result of this policy could be greater tensions between the US and the European powers. During his testimony, Gates demanded that NATO member-states “step up to the plate” and provide more forces and resources for the war in Afghanistan.

Even with 30,000 extra American troops, the occupation force will still be severely undermanned. In the midst of the ongoing occupation of Iraq and an economic meltdown, however, Gates told the Senate that he was “skeptical” the US military could contribute “additional American force levels beyond what General McKiernan has already asked for.”

Under Bush, NATO states, particularly Germany, France, Italy and Turkey, repeatedly rejected US requests that they dramatically increase their involvement in the Afghan conflict. They must now decide how to respond to the Obama White House.

A British Broadcasting Corporation correspondent commented on Tuesday: “If NATO allies falter now, the long-term implications in terms of separating the United States from Europe could be severe... The issue is emerging as a potential troubling one at the 60th anniversary summit [of NATO] to be held in early April.”

Millions of Americans were channelled into voting for Obama and the Democratic Party by the illusion that they would implement a decisive shift away from the militarism and neo-colonial interventions that marked the Bush years. Instead, they face an administration that is just as determined as Bush’s to use brute military force to secure the economic and strategic interests of American imperialism. Countless thousands of Afghan and Pakistani lives, and those of hundreds if not thousands more American troops, are to be sacrificed in the process.

This reality underscores not only the debased character of “democracy” in the United States, but the necessity for a break with the two parties of US imperialism and a fundamental political reorientation of the working class toward a socialist and internationalist program.

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