

Rumsfeld pushes for permanent US bases in Afghanistan

By Peter Symonds
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Having laid down the law to the newly-installed Iraqi president and prime minister on Monday, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld arrived in Afghanistan on Wednesday to do the same to Afghan President Hamid Karzai. In both cases, Rumsfeld's diktats make a mockery of the Bush administration's claims to be bringing peace, independence and democracy to the region.

In Baghdad, Rumsfeld insisted that the new regime could not purge the ex-Baathist generals, intelligence officials and police that the outgoing US puppet—Ayad Allawi—has carefully installed over previous months. Having hailed the fall of the dictator Hussein as a great triumph of democracy, Washington is now rebuilding his hated security apparatus to carry out the same dirty work—repressing a hostile population. (See “Rumsfeld's mission to Baghdad: keeping Saddam's secret police in power”)

In Kabul, the discussion focussed on the establishment of long-term US bases in the country. While American officials have repeatedly denied any ulterior motives for the US intervention in Afghanistan and declared that the US military presence was temporary, the Pentagon's ambitions for military bases immediately adjacent to the strategic resource-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East have been transparent.

Rumsfeld's visit confirmed that the plans are being put into action. It was left to Karzai to make the running. At a joint press conference, the Afghan president declared he wanted “a sustained economic and political relationship” with the US and “most importantly of all, a strategic security relationship”. While Karzai and Rumsfeld were both coy about the prospect of permanent US bases on Afghan soil, there is no doubt that a sustained strategic relationship will mean just that.

It is also obvious that the idea did not originate in Kabul, but in Washington. US Republican Senator John McCain blurted out the Bush administration's intentions in late February during a visit to Afghanistan. He called for a “long-term strategic partnership... that must endure for many, many years”. When asked by reporters what such a

partnership would mean, McCain specifically referred to the need for “joint military permanent bases”.

Responding to McCain's comments, Karzai's spokesman Jawed Ludin, declared that while Kabul was eager for close strategic ties with the US, no agreement could be reached on a permanent US military presence without the approval of parliament. Parliamentary elections, which have been repeatedly delayed, are now not scheduled until September. Since then, however, Karzai has changed his tune.

It is not difficult to see why. Karzai is completely dependent on the US politically, economically, militarily and even for his own personal security. The Afghan budget handed down on April 4 sums up the relationship. Out of a total budget of \$4.75 billion, some 93 percent is international aid, more than three quarters of which will go to projects directly managed by the donors. In other words, the government has no more control over the Afghan budget than it does over the US and other foreign troops that dominate the country.

The issue of permanent US bases in Afghanistan is a sensitive one. Not only does its overtly colonial character provoke hostility among Afghans but more broadly it exposes Washington's imperialist ambitions within the region. Thus when questioned directly by the press, Rumsfeld was evasive. “We think in terms of what we are doing rather than the question of military bases,” he declared.

In fact, the Pentagon is already proceeding with its plans even without formal approval from the Afghan government. Late last month US Brigadier General Jim Hunt, who is in charge of US air operations in Afghanistan, announced a \$83 million upgrade of facilities at the Bagram base north of Kabul and Kandahar airfield in the country's south, both of which will be equipped with new runways. “We are continuously improving runways, taxiways, navigation aids, airfield lighting, billeting and other facilities to support our demanding mission,” he declared.

An article on the *Asia Times* website in February entitled “US digs in deeper in Afghanistan”, based on sources in

NATO headquarters in Brussels, revealed that construction work was already underway for a major NATO base in the province of Herat. “The new base in Herat is expected to be big enough for about 10,000 troops, will feature a military airbase, and will act as NATO headquarters in the country,” the article explained. NATO is also seeking permission from Pakistan to establish a military logistics hub in the southern city of Karachi.

The construction of a large military base on the border with Iran is designed to intensify the pressure on Tehran, which is being targeted by the Bush administration over its alleged nuclear weapons programs. With the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran confronts a major US military presence on two of its borders. Veteran journalist Seymour Hersh wrote in the *New Yorker* in January that US commando units have already been conducting reconnaissance operations from Afghanistan into Iran to identify potential targets for attacks.

A second article on *Asia Times* last month entitled “US scatters bases to control Eurasia” indicated that the US has plans for as many as nine bases throughout Afghanistan, including in the provinces of Helmand, Herat, Nimrouz, Balkh, Khost and Paktia. “Admittedly, Afghanistan is far from stable, even after four years of US presence,” the article commented. “Still the establishment of a rash of bases would seem to be overkill. Indeed, according to observers, the base expansion could be part of a US global military plan calling for small but flexible bases that make it easy to ferry supplies and can be used in due time as a springboard to assert a presence far beyond Afghanistan.”

The obvious targets are the Middle East, including Iran, and Central Asia where the US is engaged in fierce struggle with its rivals in Europe and Asia for political influence and control over the region’s vast reserves of oil, gas and other minerals. Afghanistan offers not only “a springboard” for military action, but a potential conduit for gas and oil from the landlocked former Soviet republics. As far as the Pentagon is concerned, one of the major gains of the Afghan intervention has been the establishment US military bases in Central Asia—something that a decade and a half ago would have been impossible.

Significantly the final leg of Rumsfeld’s tour was to Kyrgyzstan, where last month’s so-called “tulip revolution” installed a new pro-US regime. Acting Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiyev reassured the US defence secretary that the republic would “comply with all the international agreements we have signed, including with the United States”. At least 800 US military personnel are stationed just outside the capital of Bishkek at the Manas air base, which is used to ferry troops and equipment into Afghanistan and to provide air-to-air refuelling for US warplanes in the

region.

The US military also has a base in neighbouring Uzbekistan at Qarshi Hanabad holding about 1,500 US soldiers and has agreements with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan for the use of their airfields for military operations. Turkmenistan has granted overflight rights to US aircraft. While the US bases in Central Asia are relatively small they form an essential component of the Pentagon’s strategy for an international network of bases, facilities and agreements to enable a rapid military response anywhere in the globe.

Rumsfeld’s preoccupation with military bases demonstrates once again that the US intervention into Afghanistan had nothing to do with the welfare of the Afghan people. While the Pentagon is spending millions of dollars on constructing new bases, Afghanistan remains one of the world’s poorest and most economically backward countries.

A recent BBC article entitled “Cold exposes Afghanistan’s broken promises” by author Ahmed Rashid points out that more than 600 people, many of them children, have died of exposure and hunger due to the extreme conditions of the Afghan winter. It was not so much the lack of relief supplies that caused the deaths but the inability to reach remote areas because of the appalling state of the road and communication system.

“Afghans are still paying with their lives for the failure of the international community to fulfil its many promises to help rebuild the country,” Rashid commented. “Even in Kabul’s premier Indira Gandhi hospital, children in incubators and on respirators live or die depending on whether there are power cuts to the hospital. Heating is non-existent and at times the temperature in the hospital has dropped to minus 10 degrees. Many of the districts have no functioning hospitals and local clinics are devoid of medicines.”

More than three years after Washington installed Karzai in Kabul, Afghanistan ranks 173 out of 178 countries on the UN’s development indices. Every aspect of infrastructure from electricity and water to transport and communications remains in a shambles. Life expectancy for Afghans is still only 44 years. In the wake of the winter deaths, UN agencies are now warning that as the snows melt in spring there will be flooding and more personal tragedies.

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