

A war of colonial conquest in Afghanistan

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The largest military operation since the Obama administration took office is now underway in the southern Afghan province of Helmand. Some 4,000 marines, along with hundreds of British troops, are attempting to impose control over an ethnic Pashtun population that has opposed the US-led occupation ever since the 2001 invasion overthrew the Taliban government and installed a puppet regime.

At the same time, the Pakistani government, primarily because of financial and political coercion by Washington, has ordered its military into a brutal offensive against the Pashtun people of northwest Pakistan. Their crime is that they share a common history, language and culture with the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and provide support to the Taliban insurgency over the ill-defined border between the two countries.

The human cost has already been staggering. In a savage act of collective punishment, the Pakistani military has forced at least 2.5 million people from their homes in tribal agencies such as Bajaur and Mohmand and from the Swat Valley district of North West Frontier Province. The US is complementing the assault with almost daily airstrikes on the homes of alleged Pakistani insurgent leaders, particularly in the agencies of South and North Waziristan. This week alone, American missiles have slaughtered at least 80 men, women and children.

After nearly eight years of fighting in Central Asia, Obama has escalated the conflict to a new and bloodier level—the “AfPak War” being waged on both sides of the border. It has no end in sight. David Kilcullen, the former advisor to General David Petraeus, who helped plan both the Iraq and Afghanistan troop surges, told the British *Independent* this week what is being openly discussed in the White House and on Downing Street:

“We are looking at 10 years at least in Afghanistan, and that is the best case scenario and at least half of that will be pretty major combat. This is the

commitment that is needed, and this is what the people in America and Britain should be told, and they should be told that there will be a cost involved.”

The truth is that the governments of the US, Britain and the other countries taking part in the war are telling their people as little as possible. They are being assisted by a corrupt media establishment that allows itself to be censored and provides only the most sanitised reports.

British journalists who have been “embedded” with NATO forces in Afghanistan told the *Guardian* last month that the coverage of the war was “lamentable”, “outrageous” and “indefensible”. Thomas Harding of the *Telegraph* admitted: “We have constantly been told that everything is fluffy and good and we, and the public, have been lied to.” (See: “A lack of cover”)

Typical of the official lies was the statement of US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, quoted in the *USA Today*, that American troops were in Helmand to “create a new atmosphere where the people reject the Taliban and their culture of fear and intimidation”.

In point of fact, as the *New York Times* acknowledged last week, the Taliban is gaining support due to hatred for the US and NATO occupiers and their puppet government in Kabul. On July 3, correspondent Carlotta Gall noted that “the mood of the Afghan people has tipped into a popular revolt in some parts of southern Afghanistan” and that people had “taken up arms against the foreign troops to protect their homes or in anger at losing relatives in airstrikes”.

To suppress the resistance, the Marine Corps is imposing a regime of “fear and intimidation” on the 250,000 inhabitants of the Helmand River Valley. The tactics being directed by General McChrystal are modelled on the counter-insurgency methods he applied in the rebellious areas of Iraq. The main towns have already been placed under military rule. The movement of the population to markets, shops and

hospitals will be controlled and monitored by curfews, checkpoints and constant searches and street interrogations. Local leaders will be pressured into identifying insurgents, who will then be targeted for assassination or capture by special forces' death squads—whom the media dutifully call “combat reconnaissance patrols”.

It is remarkable that even as the Obama administration has escalated the war, it has virtually dropped the original pretext that was used to justify it.

What ever happened to Osama bin Laden? He is rarely if ever mentioned and Al Qaeda is increasingly relegated into the background in the official propaganda and media accounts.

This is no small matter. The ostensible legal basis on which American troops are in Afghanistan is the “Authorization for Use of Military Force”, the joint resolution passed by the US Congress on September 18, 2001—one week after 9/11. The resolution authorised military force for the purpose of capturing or destroying the Al Qaeda leadership, beginning with bin Laden, so as to prevent further terrorist attacks.

Nearly eight years later, there is barely the pretence that American troops are in Afghanistan to hunt down Al Qaeda. Instead, the war is declared to be against the “Taliban”—a label indiscriminately applied to any Afghan who resists the US-led occupation. At no time, however, was there an accusation that the Taliban had a role in 9/11. The Bush administration's justification for targeting the Islamist government in Kabul was that it rejected an ultimatum to turn over the Al Qaeda leadership to the United States.

The dropping of the original pretext for the invasion poses the question: with what purported legal justification has the US government and its allies continued and escalated the war? The truth is they have none. Nothing remains but the reality of an imperialist war of plunder and domination.

The US-led occupation of Afghanistan and the terrible violence engulfing Pakistan is the culmination of 30 years of American imperialist intrigue in Central Asia to establish strategic and economic dominance over the resource-rich region.

From 1979, US governments funded and supplied an Islamist insurgency to overthrow an Afghan government backed by the Soviet Union. In the 1990s,

the Clinton White House encouraged its Pakistani ally to help install the Taliban in Kabul in the belief it would be favourable to the aspirations of US companies to win control of major oil and gas projects in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states, and build pipelines through Afghanistan. When civil war and instability prevented the realisation of those plans, the presence of Al Qaeda was exploited, at least by 2000, to begin preparations for a direct US conquest of the country.

The September 11 attacks provided the pretext to set the plan into operation. As well as potential access to the resources in neighbouring countries, the occupation of Afghanistan provides the US and its NATO allies with a strategic forward base to project force against rival claimants for regional influence such as Russia, China, India and Iran.

The AfPak War is not a war against terrorism, or for democracy, or to help the long-suffering Afghan people. It is an indefinite, colonial war whose central aim is to turn Afghanistan into a US client state and ensure that Pakistan remains firmly under Washington's geo-political influence.

The working class must demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and foreign troops, the end of imperialist military operations in Central Asia and the right of the Afghan and Pakistani people to determine their own future.

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