

Obama-Karzai talks set stage for post-2014 US troop presence

By Bill Van Auken
12 January 2013

White House discussions held Friday between US President Barack Obama and Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, were aimed at laying the foundations for a continuing US military presence in Afghanistan after the formal withdrawal deadline at the end of 2014.

The talks, held at the close of a three-day trip to Washington that included Karzai's meeting with members of Congress as well as Pentagon and State Department officials, represented the first face-to-face encounter between the US president and the head of the US-backed regime in Kabul since the NATO summit in Chicago in May of last year.

In a press conference held in the White House East Room, Obama claimed that Washington is accelerating its transition of responsibility for counterinsurgency operations across the country to Afghan forces.

"Starting this spring our troops will have a different mission: training, advising and assisting Afghan forces," Mr. Obama said. "It will be a historic moment."

In fact, the announcement represented moving up the date fixed for such a transition by only a couple of months. US and NATO commanders had previously claimed that foreign occupation forces would cede operations to Afghan forces by the summer of 2013.

More fundamentally, the Pentagon has assessed that just one out of some three dozen Afghan army brigades that it and other NATO forces have been training is ready to operate on its own. The US military brass estimates that the Afghan military as a whole will not be able to undertake such operations until 2016. Afghan police forces are even less prepared.

Obama qualified his statement by acknowledging that US forces would not merely "train and advise" Afghan troops, but would "continue to fight alongside them when necessary."

The US president also appeared to distance himself from any proposal for a rapid withdrawal of the 66,000

American soldiers and Marines that are continuing to occupy Afghanistan, saying that he was committed to a "responsible drawdown" and to "protect the gains our troops have made."

Obama claimed that the US military occupation in Afghanistan was begun to fight Al Qaeda and that "everything we have done over the last 10 years has been focused on that aim." A continuing military presence after 2014, he said, would be directed at both "training and assisting" Afghan security forces and carrying out "targeted counterterrorism missions against Al Qaeda and its affiliates."

US military and intelligence officials, however, have acknowledged that Al Qaeda has no significant presence inside Afghanistan, and the major operations carried out by US troops have been directed at suppressing the Taliban and other armed groups opposing the US-led occupation.

This has led to a sharp escalation under the Obama administration of US attacks on Pakistan in an attempt to kill supporters of the Taliban among the largely Pashtun population of the northwestern tribal areas. In an indication of what may be coming with the drawdown of American forces, the tempo of drone missile strikes in these areas has escalated sharply since the beginning of the year, with, as of Thursday, seven attacks taking place over the first 10 days of the new year.

"The strikes are seen as a way to weaken adversaries of the Afghan government before the withdrawal and serve notice that the United States will still be able to launch attacks," the *Washington Post* reported, citing US intelligence officials. The newspaper also reported that the latest strikes "have caused higher-than-usual civilian casualties."

Neither Obama nor Karzai would give any specific answer to questions as to the number of US troops that would remain in Afghanistan after 2014. Obama claimed

that he would be receiving recommendations from the top US commander in the country, Gen. John Allen, “in the coming weeks” and would make a decision afterwards.

US military commanders have recommended that as many as 20,000 US troops be kept in Afghanistan, while the Obama White House has reportedly asked to see options for keeping as few as 3,000 to 9,000.

Karzai feigned indifference to how many American soldiers would be deployed in the country, saying that was entirely up to Washington.

The determination to keep US forces in Afghanistan is bound up not with the “war on terror,” which has been ever more exposed as a hollow pretext as Washington has backed Al Qaeda forces in wars for regime change in Libya and Syria. Rather, US imperialism is seeking to keep a military foothold in a strategically vital region bordering Iran and China as well as the energy-rich former Soviet republics in the Caspian Basin.

A key issue in the negotiation of a status of forces agreement covering a continued US military presence has been Washington’s demand for immunity of American troops from Afghan law, meaning that none of them could be prosecuted for murdering Afghan civilians.

The demand is deeply unpopular in Afghanistan, and Karzai had earlier feigned reluctance to grant such immunity.

At the White House press conference, however, he asserted that Washington had made two concessions by agreeing to turn over US-controlled detention centers and detainees, particularly at the prison at Bagram air base, and to withdraw US forces from Afghan villages.

This, Karzai claimed, represents a return of Afghan “sovereignty” and as a result, he said, “I can go to the Afghan people and argue for immunity for US troops in Afghanistan.”

Failure to reach an agreement on immunity with the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq led to the collapse of the Obama administration’s efforts to maintain a permanent military presence in that country after the withdrawal of most combat forces.

In his remarks at the White House Friday afternoon, Karzai also expressed concern over the “economic transition” that would take place with a downsizing of the US-NATO military operation in Afghanistan, voicing the hope that it would “not have adverse effects.”

The Afghan regime is so dependent upon foreign aid—it covers fully 90 percent of the country’s national budget—that the World Bank has warned that the withdrawal of Western troops and a reduction in such aid

could provoke both an economic and governmental collapse. The aid has gone largely to promote Western military operations and interests and to enrich a small layer of corrupt politicians around the Karzai regime.

The 2014 formal deadline for withdrawal of US-NATO forces coincides with an Afghan presidential election from which Karzai’s participation is constitutionally barred. Installed as Washington’s puppet following the 2001 US invasion, he was reinstated in 2004 and 2009 elections that were widely viewed as corrupt and illegitimate.

While Karzai was in Washington, John Sopko, the congressionally mandated inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, gave a presentation in Washington in which he warned that the US was “at a risk now of wasting billions of dollars” in aid money going to the country.

Sopko pointed out that Washington had appropriated \$90 billion for Afghanistan reconstruction since 2001 and was currently spending some \$28 million a day on aid to the embattled country, more than the US has provided to any country since World War II.

The inspector general pointed to the rampant graft within the Karzai regime, but also said that it had become increasingly difficult for US officials to monitor the spending of aid money because of the deteriorating security situation in the country. Contradicting the rosy portrayals provided by US military commanders, he said, “As the military draws down, we too find that there are fewer places that we can go safely in Afghanistan to monitor projects.”

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