

US defense secretary makes crisis trip to Afghanistan

By Bill Van Auken
25 April 2017

US Defense Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis arrived in Kabul Monday in what amounted to a crisis intervention under conditions of mounting disintegration within Afghanistan’s puppet government and military.

Mattis’s arrival came just two days after an attack by the Taliban on one of the Afghan National Army’s largest bases, in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, that inflicted what Afghan officials are admitting is a death toll that could climb to 200 soldiers.

Even as the US defense secretary was arriving, his Afghan counterpart, Abdullah Habibi, as well as Army Chief of Staff Qadam Sha Shahim, were resigning their posts over the disastrous attack, which was carried out by gunmen wearing Afghan army uniforms, some of them apparently Taliban supporters who had joined the military.

Habibi was trained in the Soviet Union and fought on behalf of the Moscow-backed government against the CIA-funded mujahideen Islamist forces, while Shahim’s background was as a commander in Jamiat-e-Islami, one of the more powerful mujahideen groups.

Three other top commanders along with at least a dozen other officers were also reportedly sacked by the government of President Ashaf Ghani over what was the most punishing attack suffered by the US puppet forces since the US invasion of October 2001 and the toppling of the Taliban government.

At a press conference in Kabul, Mattis denounced the attack and described the Taliban as a “barbaric enemy” that had to be defeated. This, from the head of a military that has carried out countless massacres in Afghanistan, its occupation having left hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded, while turning millions into refugees.

The “barbaric” character of the US military operation was spelled out barely a week and a half before Mattis’s arrival in Kabul with the dropping on Afghanistan’s eastern Nangarhar Province of the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB), the most destructive weapon used anywhere since the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Mattis’s unannounced trip to Afghanistan comes less than a week and a half after President Donald Trump’s national security adviser, Gen. H.R. McMaster, made his own visit to Kabul. The stepped-up attention to Washington’s longest-ever war appears to be bound up with plans for another escalation of the US troop deployment there.

Currently close to 9,000 US soldiers are deployed in Afghanistan, including both those described as trainers and advisers of the Afghan National Army and Special Operations units that are involved in search and destroy missions both unilaterally and alongside Afghan puppet forces.

US commanders have reportedly asked for an additional 3,000 to 5,000 US troops to be sent into the fighting to reverse what they have described as a “stalemate”—in reality a steady loss of territory by the US-backed regime to insurgent forces.

Last Friday’s attack came amid a deepening crisis of the Afghan security forces, which are reportedly suffering a 33 percent annual attrition rate due to casualties, desertions and declining re-enlistments.

A report released at the beginning of this year by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction made clear that, despite the Pentagon pouring some \$70 billion into arming and training the Afghan National Army, the force is steadily losing ground to insurgent groups, while suffering record casualties. The report found that casualty rates soared

by 35 percent last year, with the Afghan army suffering 6,700 deaths, three times the number inflicted on US forces during nearly 16 years of the American occupation.

“The numbers of the Afghan security forces are decreasing, while both casualties and the number of districts under insurgent control or influence are increasing,” the report stated.

It also pointed to wholesale corruption in which “ghost soldiers” are kept on the rosters so that senior officers can pocket their pay, leaving many units grossly undermanned. It added that “soldiers at outposts don’t always get ammunition, food, and water they need” because higher-ups divert and sell supplies.

Among the most significant elements in Mattis’s press conference in Kabul Monday was the intervention by the top US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, who was asked about allegations made by US military officials, speaking not for attribution, that Russia was supplying the Taliban with support, including arms. Nicholson responded that he was “not refuting” such reports, an oblique statement that was headlined by the US corporate media as a direct charge of Russian intervention.

Mattis sounded a similar note, declaring: “We’re going to have to confront Russia where what they’re doing is contrary to international law or denying the sovereignty of other countries. For example, any weapons being funneled here from a foreign country would be a violation of international law unless they’re coming through the government of Afghanistan for the Afghan forces, and so that would have to be dealt with as a violation of international law.”

Again, for the Pentagon chief to indict Russia for “denying the sovereignty of other countries” or having “funneled” weapons to non-government forces is indeed rich, given the US history in Afghanistan itself during the CIA-orchestrated war of the 1980s, as well as the subsequent invasion of Iraq and the US regime change operations in Libya and Syria.

Russia has denied providing any military aid to the Taliban, and the real source of Washington’s ire appears to be Moscow’s attempt to mediate a peace settlement between the insurgent forces and the Kabul government. On April 14, the day after the US military dropped the massive bomb on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, Russia hosted a conference to that end in

Moscow that was attended by all the countries of the region, including Pakistan, India and China, but boycotted by the US. There is every reason to believe that the use of the MOAB was directed at Russia as much as it was at ISIS.

Launched nearly 16 years ago in the name of fighting terrorism and avenging the attacks of September 11, 2001, the war in Afghanistan had as its strategic aim to further US hegemony over the region of Central Asia, which boasts the second largest proven reserves of oil and gas in the world, in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Just as the war, waged at an estimated cost of \$800 billion, has failed to secure the US-backed puppet regime in Kabul, it has also done nothing to further US imperialism’s broader aims. Russia continues to dominate energy exploitation in the region, while China is steadily increasing its own role, with the building of pipelines directing these vital resources to the east, rather than the west.

Under these conditions, an escalation of the US intervention in Afghanistan will be carried out as part of a broader buildup toward military confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia and China, from eastern Europe, to Syria, the South China Sea, the Korean peninsula and beyond.

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