

# A “ceasefire” in Washington’s Afghanistan debacle

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US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed Friday that Washington and the Taliban had reached an agreement to begin a one-week “reduction in violence” in Afghanistan, beginning today as the first step toward the signing of a peace deal at the end of this month in the Qatari capital of Doha.

Such an agreement would ostensibly set the stage for the withdrawal of US troops and the end of what has been the longest war in US history, initiated more than 18 years ago with the illegal October 7, 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. In exchange, the Taliban is to pledge that it will prevent Al Qaeda elements from operating in the country.

Since that day, nearly 2,400 US troops have lost their lives in the Afghanistan war, nearly 10 times that number have been wounded, and many more are suffering Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from being sent into a dirty colonial war. The cost of this “endless war” has reached roughly \$1 trillion. At its height, the Pentagon was squandering some \$110 billion a year, roughly 50 percent more than the total annual US federal budget for public education.

For the Afghan people, the toll has been far greater. By conservative estimates, over 175,000 have been killed outright by the violence, with hundreds of thousands more wounded, while millions have been forced from their homes.

This carnage has continued right up until the announcement of the partial cease-fire Friday. Virtually every day this month has brought reports of the slaughter of civilians in US air strikes. Five civilians, one woman and four children, died under US bombs in Badghis province on February 6. On February 7, Afghanistan’s Independent Human Rights Commission reported three civilians were killed and one wounded in a US strike, all of them university students on their way home from a funeral. On February 8, five civilians died in an airstrike on a vehicle in Farah province. Another eight civilians were killed in a US strike in Nangrahar province on February 14.

Afghanistan’s tragic encounter with US imperialism did not begin in 2001, but dates back more than 40 years to the late 1970s, when the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter and the CIA orchestrated the mujahideen Islamist

insurgency against the Soviet-backed government in Kabul. Their aim, in the words of Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, was to give the Soviet Union “their Vietnam.” Of course, it was the Afghans who were the main victims of this covert intervention, dubbed by the CIA as “Operation Cyclone,” which unleashed a protracted civil war whose victims number over one million.

The war ended with the Taliban, a student-based Islamist movement, gaining control over the vast majority of Afghanistan in 1996. And, while Washington never established formal diplomatic relations with its government, it knew that the Taliban’s leadership were men with whom one “could do business.” The Trump administration’s special envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, who negotiated the current deal, worked in the 1990s for the energy conglomerate Unocal—now part of Chevron—negotiating with the Taliban on a deal for a trans-Afghanistan gas pipeline.

Both before and after September 11, 2001, the Taliban offered to cooperate with Washington in bringing Osama bin Laden to trial. US officials rejected all such overtures, with the CIA doubtless having their own uses for Al Qaeda, which had originated as part of the agency’s mujahideen operation of the 1980s.

The intervention in Afghanistan, planned well in advance of 9/11, was launched not to prosecute a “war on terrorism,” but rather to project US military power into Central and South Asia in pursuit of geo-strategic interests, seizing control of a country bordering on the oil-rich former Soviet republics of the Caspian Basin, as well as China.

The war in pursuit of these aims was a war of aggression, a violation of international law that gave rise to a host of other crimes: massacres, rendition and torture, Guantanamo and CIA “black sites,” as well as the US Patriot Act and a wholesale assault on democratic rights within the US itself.

In the end, this war has proven an unmitigated debacle. If all Washington wanted was a deal with the Taliban to exclude Al Qaeda and similar forces from Afghanistan, it could have gotten that two decades ago without sending a single soldier.

What has the more than \$1 trillion spent by Washington on this war, instead of pressing social needs, bought? The government, described by US officials themselves as a “kleptocracy,” controls little of the country and is despised by the majority of its population. The puppet character of this regime is confirmed by its exclusion from the US-Taliban talks.

The results of the last election, held in September with a record-low turnout of less than 25 percent, were just announced this week amid charges of gross fraud. Opposition candidate Abdullah Abdullah, installed as “CEO” after the last fraudulent election, has refused to accept the legitimacy of President Ashraf Ghani’s reelection and has vowed to set up a parallel government, severely complicating proposed intra-Afghan negotiations on “a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire and the future political roadmap for Afghanistan” that are supposed to follow the signing of the US-Taliban deal.

As for the Afghan security forces, while suffering grievous losses, they have proven incapable of resisting the Taliban without intense US air support and American special forces “advisors.” The number of “insider” attacks, in which Afghan soldiers turn their guns on US and NATO trainers, has continued to mount.

After spending more US dollars (adjusted for inflation) on Afghan reconstruction than were appropriated for the entire Marshall Plan for the recovery of Western Europe after World War II, Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries on the planet, with more than half the population living below the official poverty line, the equivalent of a dollar a day.

Whether the deal announced Friday will culminate in an end to the US military presence in Afghanistan is far from certain. A similar agreement that was to be signed at Camp David last September was called off at the last minute by Trump on the pretext that a Taliban attack had claimed the life of a US soldier.

While Trump no doubt hopes to promote any agreement as a fulfillment of his 2016 campaign pledge to end America’s “endless wars,” he announced a complete withdrawal of US troops from Syria last year with the same aim, only to reverse himself and order US Army units to seize control of the country’s oil fields. Moreover, both Democratic and Republican politicians have called for the US to maintain a “anti-terrorism” force on the ground in Afghanistan.

Whatever the final outcome, a US-Taliban agreement will not signal the dawn of peace, either in Afghanistan or internationally. The country will remain an arena of conflict, both between rival warlords and militias, as well as between the two regional powers vying for dominance in Kabul, Pakistan and India. The US, Russia and China will continue

pursuing their own conflicting interests in the country, exacerbating internal tensions.

Moreover, the impetus for a US withdrawal from Afghanistan is bound up with the strategic doctrine spelled out by the White House and the Pentagon in which the “war on terror” has been replaced by “great power” conflict as the focus of US military operations. The supposed move to end America’s longest war is bound up with the preparation for what would be the world’s most catastrophic military confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia and China.

It is no coincidence that the announcement of the limited deal with the Taliban came on the same day that the first of 20,000 US troops began arriving in Europe for the largest war games on the continent in a quarter century, being staged as a rehearsal for a war of aggression against Russia.

The war in Afghanistan, like that waged in Iraq, was based on lies. The first ones to expose these lies, told by presidents, Democratic and Republican alike, as well as generals, and echoed by a pliant corporate media, were the courageous Army whistleblower Chelsea Manning and WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange. Both are today imprisoned, Assange in London, facing extradition to the US to face espionage charges and a possible life sentence, and Manning in Virginia, being held indefinitely without charges for refusing to testify against him.

Those responsible for the criminal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, have never been held to account. That is the task of the working class in the US and internationally, mobilizing its independent strength in struggle against war and the capitalist system that is its source.

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