

Within days of Afghan “peace” deal, US bombs Taliban

By Bill Van Auken
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The US military in Afghanistan launched a drone strike Wednesday against Taliban fighters as they were carrying out an attack against Afghan security forces at checkpoint in the southern province of Helmand.

The bombing, coming just days after the February 29 signing in Doha of the so-called “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” between Washington and the Taliban, is one more indication that this deal to end Washington’s nearly two-decade war is already beginning to unravel.

A US military spokesman in Kabul said that the drone strike was the first aerial bombing carried out by US forces in 11 days, since the start of a week-long “reduction in violence” agreed to by the Taliban as a pre-condition for concluding the agreement in Doha. Col. Sonny Leggett, described the attack as a “defensive strike to disrupt the attack” on the security forces of the US-backed Afghan puppet government.

Leggett tweeted: “Taliban leadership promised the int’l community they would reduce violence and not increase attacks. We call on the Taliban to stop needless attacks and uphold their commitments.”

In fact, the Taliban promised no such thing. The reduction of violence—not a full ceasefire—was entered into as part of negotiating process between Washington and the Islamist movement that it has been fighting since it overthrew the Taliban-led government, known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, with the US invasion of October 2001.

These negotiations excluded the US-backed regime in Kabul headed by President Ashraf Ghani and included no commitment by the Taliban to halt military operations against its forces. It pledged only not to attack the US and its allies in the NATO-dominated “coalition.” Any end to attacks on the forces of the Kabul regime would depend on an agreement reached

in the “intra-Afghan” negotiations that are called for in the Doha accord, the Taliban has insisted.

The US military spokesman said that there had been 43 attacks on Afghan government checkpoints on March 3, while the Kabul regime stated that at least 20 of its soldiers and police had been killed. The Afghan National Army (ANA) has been heavily dependent upon US air power in its attempts to defeat the Taliban, which now controls more of the country than at any time since the 2001 invasion. In many areas, ANA ranks have broken in the face of smaller Taliban forces.

The US drone strike came one day after US President Donald Trump held a 35-minute phone call with the Taliban’s deputy chief, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. According to the Taliban’s account of the conversation, Baradar pledged that the group would seek “positive future bilateral relations” once the terms of the Doha agreement were implemented.

These terms include, on Washington’s side, a reduction of the present US occupation force in Afghanistan from 13,000 to 8,600 by July, to be followed nine-and-a-half month’s later, at the end of April 2021, by a pullout of all US and “coalition” forces. In return, the Taliban has pledged to deny the use of Afghan soil to Al Qaeda or any other group that could “threaten the security of the United States and its allies.”

For his part, Trump declared at a press event held after the conversation, “The relationship is very good that I have with the mullah.” In the same appearance, he repeated a theme that he has continuously returned to, declaring in relation to the Afghan war, “It’s a fight that, if we had to, we’d win. But I don’t want to kill millions of people. We would win it fairly quickly, but I don’t want to kill millions of people.” Trump has repeated so many times that he does not want kill

millions that one can only assume that he desperately wants to, if not in Afghanistan, then somewhere else on the planet.

While the Doha agreement calls for “intra-Afghan negotiations” to begin on March 10—next Tuesday—amid rising armed clashes and deep divisions within the Kabul regime itself, this appears extremely unlikely. The stated objectives of these negotiations, a “permanent and stable ceasefire” and “an agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan,” appear nowhere in sight.

The agreement signed between Washington and the Taliban in Doha calls for the release of 5,000 imprisoned Taliban fighters—half of the total held by the US and its puppet regime—along with 1,000 government forces held captive by the Taliban. A side agreement reached between the US and the puppet regime of President Ghani, also reached on February 29, merely calls for “confidence-building measures” such as a prisoner exchange.

President Ghani has stated that he has not agreed to any release of prisoners and that Washington does not have the right to negotiate such a swap. This apparent rebellion by a regime that is entirely dependent upon US money and firepower for its very survival is driven by the fact that Taliban prisoners, who number some 10,000, are one of the few bargaining chips it has left.

The Taliban has in turn insisted that it will not discuss anything with the regime in Kabul—which it justifiably regards as illegitimate—until the release of the prisoners. Until talks are held, it has stated, its attacks on the regime’s forces will continue.

Who will participate in such talks is by no means clear. It was only last month that Ghani was proclaimed the winner of presidential elections held in September of last year amid charges of ballot stuffing and fraud. His principal rival, Abdullah Abdullah, has refused to recognize the results and has attempted create a parallel government, even naming governors of some provinces. For its part, Washington has yet to officially recognize Ghani’s victory, merely “noting” the announcement of the official results, while issuing no statement of congratulations. Most of the world’s governments have followed suit.

In Washington, the deal presided over Secretary of State Pompeo in Doha has come under attack from both Democrats and Republicans.

In an op-ed piece published by the *New York Times*, Susan Rice, the former national security adviser to Barack Obama, wrote that the “fundamental weaknesses” of the Doha accord “will most likely endanger America’s national security and doom prospects for a just and lasting peace.” First and foremost, the US would be “left without any military or counterterrorism capacity in Afghanistan,” leaving it facing the “prospect of a Vietnam-style withdrawal of Americans under fire.” In other words, a nearly 19-year-old war that has claimed the lives of over 175,000 Afghans, killed nearly 2,400 US troops, while wounding tens of thousands more and cost well over \$1 trillion, must continue.

A group of Congressional Republicans, led by Liz Cheney, the party’s third-ranking member in the US House of Representatives, issued a statement warning that the Doha deal would “place the security of the American people into the hands of the Taliban, and undermine our ally, the current government of Afghanistan.”

Under similar pressure, Trump backed off from his vow to pull all US troops from Syria, leaving behind a force of over 500 to “secure the oil” in the country’s northeastern Deir Ezzor province. There is every prospect of his repudiating the Afghanistan agreement once the 2020 elections are over.

Underlying the opposition within both capitalist parties is not a concern over “the security of the American people” or “terrorism,” but rather the strategic interests of US imperialism that underlay the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan in the first place. A continuing presence in the country provides a means of projecting military force into the energy-rich regions of Central Asia, as well as on the borders of Iran and China, as well as in close proximity to Russia.

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