

A balance sheet of the Afghanistan war

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Not with a bang, but a whimper: that seemed to be the operating principle for the Obama administration in announcing that the last of the “surge” force sent to Afghanistan in late 2009 has now been pulled out of the war-torn country. A total of 33,000 US troops have left Afghanistan, while 68,000 remain, mainly deployed in the southern and eastern districts.

The Pentagon revealed the pullout in a brief press release from US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta during a visit to New Zealand, perhaps the most distant spot on the globe from both the United States and Afghanistan. There was no public acknowledgement of the fact from either President Obama or Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Panetta declared, “As we reflect on this moment, it is an opportunity to recognize that the surge accomplished its objectives of reversing Taliban momentum on the battlefield and dramatically increased the size and capability of the Afghan national security forces.”

The most striking “capability” demonstrated by Afghan forces, however, is the willingness to turn against their American-NATO overlords. “Green-on-blue” attacks, in which uniformed Afghan army soldiers and police have opened fire on US and NATO troops, have killed at least 51 and wounded a much larger number.

Last week the US military was compelled to shut down most direct collaboration with Afghan national security forces because of the increasing number of “insider” attacks on American and NATO soldiers by Afghan soldiers and police. This fact alone makes Panetta’s claim of success laughable.

Moreover, while the Obama administration claims to have significantly “degraded” the military capabilities of the Taliban and other insurgent groups, an incident September 14 suggests otherwise. A group of insurgents staged a daring frontal assault on a heavily fortified British base in Helmand province, breaking through the perimeter and destroying numerous aircraft on the ground.

In an apparent effort to temper the ludicrously optimistic tone of his remarks, Panetta told a news conference in Auckland, “There’s no question there will continue to be difficult days ahead in this campaign,” but added, “I think we are on track.”

Panetta was answered by an acid editorial in the *Washington Post*, the principal daily newspaper in the US capital, headlined, “Off track in Afghanistan.” The *Post*, a virulent supporter of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, and of new wars in Syria and Iran, warned: “US strategy in Afghanistan ... may be more imperiled than at any other time in Mr. Obama’s presidency.”

The newspaper commented that the political impact of the “green-on-blue” killings was “being compared by senior US officials and members of Congress to the Vietnam War’s Tet Offensive, because of the devastating effect on troop morale and the already weak domestic support for the war.”

Vietnam and Afghanistan are the two longest wars waged by American imperialism, with the two capitalist parties that alternate power in Washington sharing responsibility for each bloodbath. Vietnam began under the Democrats and was escalated under the Republicans before ending in an historic debacle. Afghanistan began under the Republican George W. Bush and has been escalated under his Democratic successor.

There are of course many differences between the two war-torn countries, in terms of historical context, geographic terrain and social structure. They share one major similarity: the genocidal impact of American intervention on the population of the occupied country. More than two million Vietnamese died as a result of the US aggression, much of that from aerial bombardment.

In Afghanistan, the US role has been more complex and indirect, but no less catastrophic. Millions have been killed, wounded or displaced in more than 30 years of warfare and imperialist intrigue, from the initial efforts at subversion of a pro-Soviet government—engineered by the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter to provoke a Soviet invasion and a “Russian Vietnam”—to the organization of what would become Al Qaeda under the auspices of the CIA, to the coming to power of the Taliban with the support of both Pakistan and the United States, to the present counterinsurgency war.

The withdrawal of the “surge” troops marks not an end, but another phase in the ongoing agony of the Afghan people. There still remain 68,000 US troops, along with significant NATO forces, as well as the corrupt stooge regime of Karzai in Kabul, and various venal warlords in other regional centers.

The political rationale for the US invasion of Afghanistan has been exploded by subsequent events. The Bush administration, with bipartisan support, claimed that its overthrow of the Taliban regime was a necessary first step in a global “war on terror” being conducted in response to the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. Eleven years later, Al Qaeda, still the supposed target of the war in Afghanistan, is a principal ally of US imperialism in its effort to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria and pave the way for a direct US assault on Iran. Yet the war in Afghanistan grinds on.

The political initiative to put an end to this slaughter will not come from any section of the US ruling elite, still less from the middle-class pseudo-left groups that claim to oppose imperialist wars waged by Republicans, while hailing those waged by Democrats. It falls to the American working class, in alliance with the international working class, to build a mass movement against imperialist war, demanding the withdrawal of all US and NATO troops from Afghanistan, the provision of tens of billions of dollars in aid to rebuild the shattered country, and the prosecution for war crimes of those who have given and are giving the orders to continue this bloodbath.

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