

America's Endless Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq

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The 10th anniversary of Washington's invasion, occupation and seemingly endless war in Afghanistan was observed Oct. 7, but despite President Barack Obama's pledge to terminate the U.S. "combat mission" by the end of 2014, American military involvement will continue many years longer.

The Afghan war is expanding even further, not only with increasing drone attacks in neighboring Pakistani territory but because of U.S. threats to take far greater unilateral military action within Pakistan unless the Islamabad government roots out "extremists" and cracks down harder on cross-border fighters.

Washington's tone was so threatening that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had to assure the Pakistani press Oct. 21 that the U.S. did not plan a ground offensive against Pakistan. The next day, Afghan President Hamid Karzai shocked Washington by declaring "God forbid, If ever there is a war between Pakistan and America, Afghanistan will side with Pakistan.... If Pakistan is attacked and if the people of Pakistan needs Afghanistan's help, Afghanistan will be there with you."

At the same time, Washington has just suffered a spectacular setback in Iraq, where the Obama Administration has been applying extraordinary pressure on the Baghdad government for over a year to permit many thousands of U.S. troops to remain indefinitely after all American forces are supposed to withdraw at the end of this year.

President Obama received the Iraqi government's rejection from Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki Oct. 21, and promptly issued a public statement intended to completely conceal the fact that a long-sought U.S. goal has just been obliterated, causing considerable disruption to U.S. plans. Obama made a virtue of necessity by stressing that "Today, I can report that, as promised, the rest of our troops in Iraq will come home by the end of the year."

This article will first discuss the situation in Afghanistan after 10 years, then take up the Iraq question and what the U.S. may do to compensate for a humiliating and disruptive rebuff.

The United States is well aware it will never win a decisive victory in Afghanistan. At this point, the Obama Administration is anxious to convert the military stalemate into a form of permanent truce, if only the Taliban were willing to accept what amounts to a power sharing deal that would allow Washington to claim the semblance of success after a decade of war.

In addition President Obama seeks to retain a large post-"withdrawal" military presence throughout the country mainly for these reasons:

- To protect its client regime in Kabul led by Karzai, as well as Washington's other political and commercial interests in the country, and to maintain a menacing military presence on Iran's eastern border, especially if U.S. troops cannot now remain in Iraq.
- To retain territory in Central Asia for U.S. and NATO military forces positioned close to what Washington perceives to be its two main (though never publicly identified) enemies — China and Russia — at a time when the American government is increasing its political pressure on both countries. Obama is intent upon transforming NATO from a regional into a global adjunct to Washington's quest for retaining and extending world hegemony. NATO's recent victory in Libya is a big advance for U.S. ambitions in Africa, even if the bulk of commercial spoils go to France and England. A permanent NATO presence in Central Asia is a logical next step. In essence, Washington's geopolitical focus is expanding from the Middle East to Central Asia and Africa in the quest for resources, military expansion and unassailable hegemony, especially from the political and economic challenge of rising nations of the global south, led China.

There has been an element of public deception about withdrawing U.S. "combat troops" from Iraq and Afghanistan dating from the first Obama election campaign in 2007-8. Combat troops belong to combat brigades. In a variant of bait-and-switch trickery, the White House reported that all combat brigades departed Iraq in August 2010. Technically this is true, because those that did not depart were simply renamed "advise and assist brigades." According to a 2009 Army field manual such brigades are entirely capable, "if necessary," of shifting from "security force assistance" back to combat duties.

In Afghanistan, after the theoretical pullout date, it is probable that many "advise and assist brigades" will remain along with a large complement of elite Joint Special Operations Forces strike teams (SEALs, Green Berets, etc.) and other officially "non-combat" units — from the CIA, drone operators, fighter pilots, government security employees plus "contractor security" personnel, including mercenaries. Thousands of other "non-combat" American soldiers will remain to train the Afghan army.

According to an Oct. 8 Associated Press dispatch, "Senior U.S. officials have spoken of keeping a mix of 10,000 such [special operations-type] forces in Afghanistan, and drawing down to between 20,000 and 30,000 conventional forces to provide logistics and support. But at this point, the figures are as fuzzy as the future strategy." Estimates of how long the Pentagon will remain in Afghanistan range from 2017 to 2024 to "indefinitely."

Obama marked the 10th anniversary with a public statement alleging that "Thanks to the extraordinary service of these [military] Americans, our citizens are safer and our nation is more secure"— the most recent of the continuous praise of war-fighters and the conduct of these wars of choice from the White House since the 2001 bombing, invasion and occupation.

Just two days earlier a surprising Pew Social Trend poll of post-9/11 veterans was made public casting doubt about such a characterization. Half the vets said the Afghanistan war wasn't worth fighting in terms of benefits and costs to the U.S. Only 44% thought the Iraq war was worth fighting. One-third opined that both wars were not worth waging. Opposition to the wars has been higher among the U.S. civilian population. But it's unusual in a non-conscript army for its veterans to emerge with such views about the wars they volunteered to fight.

The U.S. and its NATO allies issued an unusually optimistic assessment of the Afghan war on Oct. 15, but it immediately drew widespread skepticism. According to the New York Times the next day, "Despite a sharp increase in assassinations and a continuing flood of civilian casualties, NATO officials said that they had reversed the momentum of the Taliban insurgency as enemy attacks were falling for the first time in years.... [This verdict] runs counter to dimmer appraisals from some Afghan officials and other international agencies, including the United Nations. With the United States preparing to withdraw 10,000 troops by the end of this year and 23,000 more by next October, it raises questions about whether NATO's claims of success can be sustained."

Less than two weeks earlier German Gen. Harald Kujat, who planned his country's military support mission in Afghanistan, declared that "the mission fulfilled the political aim of showing solidarity with the United States. But if you measure progress against the goal of stabilizing a country and a region, then the mission has failed."

According to Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Adm. Mike Mullen, the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is a critically important "long term commitment" and "we're going to be there longer than 2014." He made the disclosure to the Senate Armed Services Committee Sept. 22, a week before he retired. In a statement Oct. 3, the Pentagon's new NATO commander in Afghanistan, Marine Gen. John Allen, declared: "The plan is to win. The plan is to be successful. And so, while some folks might hear that we're departing in 2014... we're actually going to be here for a long time."

Lt. Gen. John Mulholland, departing head of U.S. Army Special Operations Command, told the AP Oct. 8: "We're moving toward an increased special operations role..., whether it's counterterrorism-centric, or counterterrorism blended with counterinsurgency." White House National Security Advisor Tom Donilon said in mid-September that by 2014 "the U.S. remaining force will be basically an enduring presence force focused on counterterrorism." Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta strongly supports President Obama's call for an "enduring presence" in Afghanistan beyond 2014.

Former U.S. Afghan commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who was fired last year for his unflattering remarks about Obama Administration officials, said in a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations Oct. 6 that after a decade of fighting in Afghanistan the U.S. was only "50% of the way" toward attaining its goals. "We didn't know enough and we still don't know enough," he said. "Most of us — me included — had a very superficial understanding of the situation and history, and we had a frighteningly simplistic view of recent history, the last 50 years."

Washington evidently had no idea that one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world — a society of 30 million people where the literacy rate is 28% and life expectancy is just 44 years — would fiercely fight to retain national sovereignty. The Bush Administration, which launched the Afghan war a few weeks after 9/11, evidently ignored the fact that the people of Afghanistan ousted every occupying army from that of Alexander the Great and Genghis Kahn to the British Empire and the USSR.

The U.S. spends on average in excess of \$2 billion a week in Afghanistan, not to mention the combined spending of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, but the critical needs of the Afghan people in terms of health, education, welfare and social services after a full decade of military involvement by the world's richest countries remain essentially

untended.

For example, 220,000 Afghan children under five — one in five — die every year due to pneumonia, poor nutrition, diarrhea and other preventable diseases, according to the State of the World's Children report released by the UN Children's Fund. UNICEF also reports the maternal mortality rate with about 1,600 deaths per every 100,000 live births. Save the Children says this amounts to over 18,000 women a year. It is also reported by the UN that 70% of school-age girls do not attend school for various reasons — conservative parents, lack of security, or fear for their lives. All told, about 92% of the Afghan population does not have access to proper sanitation.

Even after a decade of U.S. combat, the overwhelming majority of the Afghan people still have no clear idea why Washington launched the war. According to the UK's Daily Mail Sept. 9, a new survey by the International Council on Security and Development showed that 92% of 1,000 Afghan men polled had never even heard of the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon — the U.S. pretext for the invasion — and did not know why foreign troops were in the country. (Only men were queried in the poll because many more of them are literate, 43.1% compared to 12.6% of women.)

In another survey, conducted by Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation and released Oct. 18, 56% of Afghans view U.S./NATO troops as an occupying force, not allies as Washington prefers. The survey results show that "there appears to be an increasing amount of anxiety and fear rather than hope."

Perhaps the most positive news about Afghanistan — and it is a thunderously mixed "blessing" — is that the agricultural economy boomed last year. But, reports the Oct. 11 Business Insider, it's because "rising opium prices have upped the ante in Afghanistan, and farmers have responded by posting a 61% increase in opium production." Afghan farmers produce 90% of the world's opium, the main ingredient in heroin. Half-hearted U.S.-NATO eradication efforts failed because insufficient attention was devoted to providing economic and agricultural substitutes for the cultivation of opium.

Another outcome of foreign intervention and U.S. training is the boundless brutality and corruption of the Afghan police toward civilians and especially Taliban "suspects." Writing in Antiwar.com John Glaser reported:

"Detainees in Afghan prisons are hung from the ceilings by their wrists, severely beaten with cables and wooden sticks, have their toenails torn off, are treated with electric shock, and even have their genitals twisted until they lose consciousness, according to a study released Oct. 10 by the United Nations. The study, which covered 47 facilities sites in 22 provinces, found 'a compelling pattern and practice of systematic torture and ill-treatment' during interrogation by U.S.-supported Afghan authorities. Both U.S. and NATO military trainers and counterparts have been working closely with these authorities, consistently supervising the detention facilities and funding their operations."

In mid-September Human Rights Watch documented that U.S.-supported anti-Taliban militias are responsible for many human rights abuses that are overlooked by their American overseers. At around the same time the American Open Society Foundations revealed that the Obama Administration has tripled the number of nighttime military raids

on civilian homes, which terrorize many families. The report noted that “An estimated 12 to 20 raids now occur per night, resulting in thousands of detentions per year, many of whom are non-combatants.” The U.S. military admits that half the arrests are “mistakes.”

Meanwhile, it was reported in October that in the first nine months this year U.S.-NATO drones conducted nearly 23,000 surveillance missions in the Afghanistan sky. With nearly 85 flights a day, the Obama Administration has almost doubled the daily amount in the last two years. Hundreds of civilians, including nearly 170 children, have been killed in the Afghan-Pakistan border areas from drone attacks. Miniature killer/surveillance drones — small enough to be carried in backpacks— are soon expected to be distributed to U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

So far the Afghanistan war has taken the lives of some 1,730 American troops and about a thousand from NATO. There are no reliable figures on the number Afghan civilians killed since the beginning of the war. The UN’s Assistance Mission to Afghanistan did not start to count such casualties until 2007. According to the Voice of America Oct. 7, “Each year, the civilian death toll has risen, from more than 1,500 dead in 2007 to more than 2,700 in 2010. And in the first half of this year, the UN office reported there were 2,400 civilians killed in war-related incidents.”

At minimum the war has cost American taxpayers about a half-trillion dollars since 2001. The U.S. will continue to spend billions in the country for many years to come and the final cost — including interest on war debts that will be carried for scores more years — will mount to multi-trillions that future generations will have to pay. At present there are 94,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan plus about 37,000 NATO troops. Another 45,000 well paid “contractors” perform military duties, and many are outright mercenaries.

Washington is presently organizing, arming, training and financing hundreds of thousands of Afghan troops and police forces, and is expected to continue paying some \$5 billion a year for this purpose at least until 2025.

The U.S. government has articulated various different objectives for its engagement in Afghanistan over the years. Crushing al-Qaeda and defeating the Taliban have been most often mentioned, but as an Oct. 7 article from the Council on Foreign Relations points out: “The main U.S. goals in Afghanistan remain uncertain. They have meandered from marginalizing the Taliban to state-building, to counterinsurgency, to counterterrorism, to — most recently — reconciliation and negotiation with the Taliban. But the peace talks remain nascent and riddled with setbacks. Karzai suspended the talks after the assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the government’s chief negotiator, which the Afghan officials blamed on the Pakistan-based Haqqani network. The group denies it.”

There is another incentive for the U.S. to continue fighting in Afghanistan — to eventually convey the impression of victory, an absolute domestic political necessity.

The most compelling reason for the Afghan war is geopolitical, as noted above — finally obtaining a secure military foothold for the U.S. and its NATO accessory in the Central Asian backyards of China and Russia . In addition, a presence in Afghanistan places the U.S. in close military proximity to two volatile nuclear powers backed by the U.S. but not completely under its control by any means (Pakistan, India). Also, this fortuitous geography is flanking the extraordinary oil and natural gas wealth of the Caspian Basin and energy-endowed former Soviet Muslim republics such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

In Iraq, the Obama Administration's justification for retaining troops after the end of this year was ostensibly to train the Iraqi military and police forces, but there were other reasons:

- Washington seeks to remain in Iraq to keep an eye on Baghdad because it fears a mutually beneficial alliance may develop between Iraq and neighboring Iran, two Shi'ite societies in an occasionally hostile Sunni Muslim world, weakening American hegemony in the strategically important oil-rich Persian Gulf region and ultimately throughout the Middle East/North Africa.
- The U.S. also seeks to safeguard lucrative economic investments in Iraq, and the huge future profits expected by American corporations, especially in the denationalized petroleum sector. Further, Pentagon and CIA forces were stationed — until now, it seems — in close proximity to Iran's western border, a strategic position to invade or bring about regime change.

Under other conditions, the U.S. may simply have insisted on retaining its troops regardless of Iraqi misgivings, but the Status of Forces compact governing this matter can only be changed legally by mutual agreement between Washington and Baghdad. The concord was arranged in December 2008 between Prime Minister Maliki and President George W. Bush — not Obama, who now takes credit for ending the Iraq war despite attempting to extend the mission of a large number of U.S. troops.

At first Washington wanted to retain more than 30,000 troops plus a huge diplomatic and contractor presence in Iraq after "complete" withdrawal. Maliki — pushed by many of the country's political factions, including some influenced by Iran's opposition to long-term U.S. occupation — held out for a much smaller number.

Early in October Baghdad decided that 3,000 to 5,000 U.S. troops in a training-only capacity was the most that could be accommodated. In addition, the Iraqis in effect declared a degree of independence from Washington by insisting that remaining American soldiers must be kept on military bases and not be granted legal immunity when in the larger society. Washington, which has troops stationed in countries throughout the world, routinely insists upon legal exemption for its foreign legions as a matter of imperial hubris, and would not compromise.

The White House has indicated that an arrangement may yet be worked out to permit some American trainers and experts to remain, perhaps as civilians or contractors. Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, a staunch opponent of the U.S. occupation, has suggested Iraq should employ trainers for its armed forces from other countries, but this is impractical for a country using American arms and planes.

Regardless, the White House is increasing the number of State Department employees in Iraq from 8,000 to an almost unbelievable 16,000, mostly stationed at the elephantine new embassy in Baghdad's Green Zone quasi-military enclave, in new American consulates in other cities, and in top "advisory" positions in many of the of the regime's ministries, particularly the oil ministry. Half the State Department personnel, 8,000 people, will handle "security" duties, joined by some 5,000 new private "security contractors."

Thus, at minimum the U.S. will possess 13,000 of its own armed "security" forces, and there's still a possibility Baghdad and Washington will work out an arrangement for adding a limited number of "non-combat" military trainers, openly or by other means.

In his Oct. 21 remarks, Obama sought to transform the total withdrawal he sought to avoid into a simulacrum of triumph for the troops and himself: "The last American soldier will cross the border out of Iraq with their heads held high, proud of their success, and knowing that the American people stand united in our support for our troops.... That is how America's military efforts in Iraq will end."

Heads held high, proud of success — for an unjust, illegal war based on lies that is said to have cost over a million Iraqi lives and created four million refugees! It has been estimated that the final U.S. costs of the Iraq war will be over \$5 trillion when the debt and interest are finally paid off decades from now.

If President Obama is reelected— even should the Iraq war actually end — he will be coordinating U.S. involvement in wars and occupations in Afghanistan, Libya, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and now Uganda (where American 100 combat troops have just been inserted). Add to this various expanding drone campaigns, and such adventures as Washington's support for Israel against the Palestinians and for the Egyptian military regime against popular aspirations for full democracy, followed by the backing of dictatorial regimes in a half-dozen countries, and continual threats against Iran.

Washington's \$1.4 trillion annual military and national security expenditures are a major factor behind America's monumental national debt and the cutbacks in social services for the people, but aside from White House rhetoric about reducing redundant Pentagon expenditures, overall war/security budgets are expected to increase over the next several years.

The Bush and Obama Administrations have manipulated reality to convince American public opinion that the Iraq and Afghan wars are ending in U.S. successes. Washington fears the resurrection of the "Vietnam Syndrome" that resulted after the April 1975 U.S. defeat in Indochina. The "syndrome" led to a 15-year disinclination by the American people to support aggressive, large-scale U.S. wars against small, poor countries in the developing third world until the January 1991 Gulf War, part one of the two-part Iraq war that continued in March 2003.

According to an article in the Oct. 9 New York Times titled "The Other War Haunting Obama," author, journalist and Harvard emeritus professor Marvin Kalb wrote: " Ten years after the start of the war in Afghanistan, an odd specter haunts the Obama White House — the specter of Vietnam, a war lost decades before. Like Banquo's ghost, it hovers over the White House still, an unwelcome memory of where America went wrong, a warning of what may yet go wrong."

This fear of losing another war to a much smaller adversary — and perhaps suffering the one-term fate of President Lyndon Johnson who presided over the Vietnam debacle — evidently was a factor behind President Obama's decision to vastly expand the size of the U.S. military commitment to Afghanistan and why the White House is now planning a long-term troop presence beyond the original pullout date.

Today's combat directly touches the lives of only a small minority Americans — militarily members and families — and much of the majority remains uninformed or misinformed about many of the causes and effects of the Iraq/Afghan adventures. Obama may thus eventually be able to convey the illusion of military success, which will help pave the way for future imperial violence unless the people of the United States wise up and act en masse to

prevent future aggressive wars.

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