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On June 22, President Barack Obama delivered a major address on the war in Afghanistan. He announced that by September 2012, the U.S. would withdraw all 33,000 troops that were sent to Afghanistan as part of the November 2009 "surge." Obama claimed this was the beginning of a major drawing down of U.S. forces in Afghanistan: "After this initial reduction, our troops will continue coming home at a steady pace as Afghan security forces move into the lead. Our mission will change from combat to support. By 2014, this process of transition will be complete, and the Afghan people will be responsible for their own security."

Obama claimed this was the beginning of the end of the war in Afghanistan: "[T]onight, we take comfort in knowing that the tide of war is receding.... And even as there will be dark days ahead in Afghanistan, the light of a secure peace can be seen in the distance. These long wars will come to a responsible end."

The mainstream press highlighted Obama's claim that the war in Afghanistan was finally coming to an end. And some opponents of the war saw his speech as a "step in the right direction."

But neither of these assessments holds up to scrutiny. Look at what Obama actually said, and then do the math. When Obama took office in January 2009 there were 32,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. By December 2009—when this number had grown to 68,000—Obama announced an "Afghan surge," to add over 30,000 U.S. soldiers. Now Obama plans to withdraw the 33,000 "surge troops," 10,000 by the end of 2011 and the rest by the Summer of 2012. This means by the end of 2012, there will still be 68,000 troops in Afghanistan—twice as many as the 32,000 when Obama took office. And currently there are also 50,000 NATO troops and approximately 100,000 military contractors in Afghanistan, neither of which Obama mentioned.

Obama's promise that there will be no U.S. ground combat operations after 2014 doesn't mean there won't still be thousands of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, or that they won't be involved in various forms of military attacks—whether training and directing Afghan forces, conducting

"special operations," or launching drone attacks.

Obama gave the U.S. a big loophole when he stated, "We will have to do the hard work of keeping the gains that we have made, while we draw down our forces and transition responsibility for security to the Afghan government." This means the U.S. can decide to slow down or even halt the withdrawal of troops in the name of "keeping gains" and transitioning "responsibility."

A War for Empire

In his speech, Obama claimed, "We stand not for empire, but for self-determination." But empire is precisely what the U.S. "war on terror" is about, and what the U.S. has been pursuing in Afghanistan.

The U.S. imperialists launched their "war on terror" and invaded and occupied Afghanistan in October 2001 in order to violently impose, including through massive terror, U.S. objectives and overall dominance in Central Asia—a key strategic area in the world. This war's objectives never centered simply on avenging the attacks of 9/11, much less "liberating" the people of Afghanistan or elsewhere. It was aimed at defeating Islamic fundamentalist, jihadist forces that were challenging the U.S. agenda, taking down regimes standing in the U.S.'s way, and radically transforming the entire region from North Africa to Central Asia. This was viewed as critical to strengthening U.S. imperialist dominance. All this was part of a broader agenda of creating unchallenged and unchallengeable global hegemony.

The Problem for the Imperialists...

The problem for the imperialists is that they've run into enormous and potentially enormously destabilizing contradictions in this pursuit, which have sparked very sharp debates within their ranks over how to work their way through them. Obama's drawdown in Afghanistan represents his plan for dealing with these contradictions and continuing to fight to strengthen U.S. global predominance—over which there are no differences among the rulers. Obama's moves are not a response to "public opinion," in any fundamental sense, nor about ending the war or retreating from "empire."

Afghanistan, a largely rural country of some 30 million people, is one of the poorest and most oppressed on the planet. The U.S. is the world's richest and most powerful imperialist superpower. Why has the U.S.—with its high-tech military—been unable to conquer

Afghanistan after nearly a decade of war?

These difficulties have grown out of both the unjust, reactionary character of the U.S. war and how it is diametrically against the interests of the Afghan people. U.S. difficulties have also arisen from the complex set of contradictions it is facing across the whole region, now focused very sharply in the current tensions between the U.S. and Pakistan, as well as other major challenges to the U.S. agenda in the region.

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 grew out of a decade of U.S. planning before 9/11 aimed at seizing greater initiative and hegemony in the Middle East and Central Asia. But the history of U.S. domination in Afghanistan goes back several decades. In 1979, the Soviet Union, then an imperialist rival of the U.S., invaded Afghanistan. And throughout the 1980s, the U.S. funneled more than \$3 billion in arms and aid to reactionary Islamic fundamentalists to fight the Soviet occupation. This CIA-led insurgency is where Osama bin Laden got his start.

After the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the jihadist forces nurtured by the U.S., Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia remained and gained strength in both Pakistan and in Afghanistan, where the Taliban took over the country in 1996. The 2001 invasion was aimed, in part, at crushing these forces. Instead, the war and occupation, like previous imperialist actions, have served to fuel Islamic fundamentalism.

The U.S. achieved a quick victory in 2001, largely because the Taliban withdrew to regroup, rather than fight the invaders head on. But by the time Obama took office, they had regained the initiative, in part because of their relationship with elements in the Pakistani army and intelligence services.

So when Obama took office in 2009, the U.S. was facing defeat, and Obama more than tripled the number of U.S.-led combat forces—from 32,000 to 100,000 U.S. troops, plus another 100,000 or so military contractors and 50,000 NATO troops. The U.S. adopted a counterinsurgency strategy that the world was told was aimed at "winning hearts and minds" of the Afghan population by ousting the Taliban from contested areas, and then holding and rebuilding them to provide stability and a better life for the local population.

But the most essential surge was in violence. As an occupying army fighting for reactionary

aims with a fundamentally antagonistic relationship to the Afghan people, the U.S. relies on its technological advantages—including massive firepower and air power. As documented in an article in *Rolling Stone* earlier this year ("King David's War," February 14, 2011), Obama and Gen. David Petraeus, who headed up the "surge," responded to the danger of defeat with escalating violence on many fronts—including increased bombing, night raids, and unleashing all manner of kill squads and U.S.-backed gangs and militias.

A central goal of the U.S. war in Afghanistan is subduing "by any means necessary" a population in which most don't want to be under foreign domination. Thousands of people in Afghanistan have experienced the brutality and murder of the U.S. troops and they distrust if not hate the American occupiers and the Afghani flunkies the U.S. put in the government. Night raids, special operations, covert assassinations, extrajudicial killings, drone strikes, the use of military contractors, massive detentions and torture, and all-around terror are embedded in the nature of this imperialist occupation.

A recent UN report concluded that night raids—a critical element of U.S. war-fighting doctrine in Afghanistan—have resulted in "excessive use of force, ill treatment, death and injury to civilians and damage to property." One Afghan legislator said, "People in the villages are more scared of the Americans than of the Taliban because of these raids." (Night Raids Curbing Taliban, but Afghans Cite Civilian Toll," *NY Times*, 7/8/2011)

Every U.S. bombing of a wedding, every massacre of civilians, only fuels anti-U.S. sentiment. Tragically, in the context of the current situation where the organized opposition to the U.S. and its NATO allies is reactionary Islamic fundamentalists, every escalation in U.S. violence drives people into the arms of the Jihadist forces.

The problem for the rulers of the U.S. is not that the occupation of Afghanistan is unjust and wreaking terror and death on the people of that country. The problem, from their logic and standpoint, is that this isn't working, and in spite of all the terror and killing they are raining down on Afghanistan, the situation threatens to spiral out of their control.

According to the International Crisis Group—an imperialist think tank—the contradictions the U.S. is facing in the region, especially in Pakistan, have grown more grave. The Crisis Group reports that it is highly unlikely the U.S.-installed Karzai regime can take over security in 2014, and perhaps not even hold on to the capital, Kabul. The report states that "Collusion between insurgents and corrupt government officials...has increased" and that the Afghan economy "is

increasingly dominated by a criminal oligarchy of politically connected businessmen." (International Crisis Group, "The Insurgency in Afghanistan's Heartland," June 2011)

This has given rise to the possibility that the U.S. could be mired in a quagmire in Afghanistan and Pakistan from which it cannot emerge with anything close to achieving its objectives.

Such a scenario could lead to the further growth of Islamic fundamentalism across the region, the destabilization of Afghanistan and/or Pakistan, the spread of instability across the entire region, and the global perception that the U.S. is no longer the world's dominant superpower and military guarantor of world order.

The U.S. rulers view this outcome as intolerable.

Adding to U.S. difficulties, the war is taking place in the context of the worst global financial crisis in 80 years, and the enormous costs of the Afghan war, now running at \$100 billion a year. (The full cost of the whole "war on terror" may be as high as \$3.7 trillion. ["US Cost of War at Least \$3.7 Trillion and Counting," Reuters, June 29, 2011])

Incoming Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta recently said the U.S. faces a "blizzard war" of crises and difficult contradictions across the world, not just in Afghanistan. In his June 9, 2011 confirmation hearing Panetta said: "This is a time of historic change....We are no longer in the Cold War. This is more like the 'blizzard war,' a blizzard of challenges that draws speed and intensity from terrorism, from rapidly developing technologies, and the rising number of powers on the world stage....

"Today we are a nation at war, and job one will be to ensure that we remain the strongest military power in the world, to protect that security that is so important to this country. Yet this is also a time for hard choices. It's about ensuring that we are able to prevail in the conflicts in which we are now engaged, but it's also about being able to be strong and disciplined in applying our nation's limited resources to defending America. None of this will be easy."

... And Bringing Forward the Interests of Humanity

When U.S. ruling class figures like Leon Panetta talk about "defending America," the essence of what they are talking about is *defending a world of brutal exploitation*—a world of child labor, enslavement of women, environmental catastrophe and endless unjust war.

And when they say "none of this will be easy," they are talking about serious challenges *they* face in carrying out their agenda.

But that agenda, those challenges, and those interests behind them, are *not* the interests of the people of the world—including the vast majority of people in the United States.

The U.S. occupation of Afghanistan is the occupation of an oppressed country by an oppressive empire. And every time U.S. troops shoot up an Afghan village, this *fuels* the growth and spread of reactionary Islamic fundamentalist jihadist movements. And that is particularly so in the absence of a visible, determined anti-war struggle in this country—where people in Afghanistan and around the world could see that the U.S. ruling class does not speak for at least a significant section of the *people* in this country.

People should not "take comfort" in Obama's *lies* that "the tide of war is receding," The war is *not* "receding" for the millions of people in Afghanistan for whom life has been made a living nightmare.

Exposing this war for what it is—a war for empire—and building a movement of broad and determined political resistance within this country *against* the war is necessary. And such a movement could be part of breaking the world out of the current deadly "alternatives" of imperialism vs. Islamic fundamentalism, and play a vital role in bringing forward a whole other way for the people of the world.