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## The continuing US war in Afghanistan

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On December 28, the US-led International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, formally ended its combat operations in Afghanistan. President Barack Obama issued a statement declaring the step “a milestone for our country,” adding, “the longest war in American history is coming to a responsible conclusion.”

Like virtually everything else that comes out of the American president’s mouth, this is a lie. The shabby little ceremony in Kabul Sunday, in which a US commander hauled down one battle flag and ran up another, only confirmed that the murderous 13-year US war in Afghanistan continues.

The flag-changing ceremony was held on the floor of an indoor basketball court at the Western military’s Kabul headquarters. Non-resident staff were told to stay away for fear of the Taliban, which has carried out an unprecedented wave of attacks in the capital while retaking territory abandoned by US and other foreign troops.

Over 18,000 foreign troops will continue to occupy Afghanistan—about 10,600 of them American. While ISAF—created after the US invasion of Afghanistan to lend multinational legitimacy to the country’s occupation—is being wound up and its flag furled, Operation Resolute Support is being launched under a virtually identical green banner (with the letters RS substituted for ISAF).

Approximately 5,000 American troops will be deployed as part of Resolute Support, in what one NATO commander described as a “non-combat mission in a combat environment,” training and advising Afghan security forces. Another 5,500 of the US forces will be deployed as a “non-NATO” contingent that will be engaged in so-called “counterterrorism” operations. While previously, US forces formally operated under a UN resolution and as part of a NATO contingent, these troops will be answerable to no one but the Joint Special Operations Command, which in turn answers to no one but the US president.

Initially, Washington had insisted that these operations would be aimed solely at Al Qaeda, which by US accounts has for years had barely 50 members in Afghanistan. In the run-up to the formal end of the ISAF mission, however, the Obama administration announced that they would also be used to combat the Taliban and other armed groups opposed to the US puppet regime in Kabul.

While drawing down the number of uniformed troops, Washington is keeping over 20,000 military contractors, who will help man some 25 bases scattered around the country. Because of these plans, the Pentagon command has stated that there will be little reduction in the staggering cost of the war, which is estimated to have risen to over \$1 trillion since 2001.

Far from begin concluded, the war is raging. This year has seen a record number of Afghan civilian casualties, topping the 10,000 mark, while Afghan security forces have suffered nearly 5,000 fatalities, more than all the 3,500 foreign soldiers—including over 2,225 Americans—who have lost their lives in the 13 years since the US invasion. US military analysts have described these losses—together with a closely related spike in desertions from the Afghan National Army—as “unsustainable.”

The US military is increasing its air strikes in an attempt to prevent a rout of the Afghan security forces. While on the decline over the last two years, these strikes, which have aroused intense popular hostility in Afghanistan, have sharply risen in the past few months. One of the more recent took place on December 25 in central Logar province. A local official told *Pajhwok Afghan News* that the bombing, while supposedly aimed at alleged “militants,” demolished two homes, killing five civilians and wounding another six.

With US backing, the government of neighboring Pakistan has launched a bloody new offensive in that country’s northwest, near the Afghan border. Washington, meanwhile, has stepped up its drone assassination program against targets in Pakistan. The country has seen more than 50,000 people killed over the last decade in fighting that was provoked by the US invasion of Afghanistan.

Just as Obama’s declaration that the war is over is a lie, so too is his explanation for its causes. He repeated the shop-worn claims that the deaths of thousands of Americans and tens of thousands of Afghans are all justified in the name of “devastating the core Al Qaeda leadership, delivering justice to Osama bin Laden, disrupting terrorist plots and saving countless American lives.”

This is all nonsense. By early 2002, Al Qaeda had been largely driven out of Afghanistan. It and related movements have since developed and evolved in large part with the support of Washington, used as proxy forces in wars for regime-change in Libya and Syria.

On October 9, 2001, two days after the US military began the aerial bombardment that would be followed by the US invasion of Afghanistan, the *World Socialist Web Site* firmly rejected the claims that the war was being waged for “justice and the security of the American people against terrorism.”

The WSWS warned:

“The US government initiated the war in pursuit of far-reaching international interests of the American ruling elite. What is the main purpose of the war? The collapse of the Soviet Union a decade ago created a political vacuum in Central Asia, which is home to the second largest deposit of proven reserves of petroleum and natural gas in the world.

“The Caspian Sea region, to which Afghanistan provides strategic access, harbors approximately 270 billion barrels of oil, some 20 percent of the world’s proven reserves. It also contains 665 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, approximately one-eighth of the planet’s gas reserves.

“These critical resources are located in the world’s most politically unstable region. By attacking Afghanistan, setting up a client regime and moving vast military forces into the region, the US aims to establish a new political framework within which it will exert hegemonic control.”

Whatever the US tactical changes, these geo-strategic aims remain and are at the heart of the continuing war in Afghanistan, just as similar objectives are the driving force in the renewed war in Iraq and Syria.

Today they are much more intimately bound up with the escalation of militarist threats and encirclement of both Russia and China, Washington’s principal rivals in the region.

All of Obama’s rhetoric about an end to war notwithstanding, Washington’s continuing aggression in Afghanistan is part of a growing eruption of American militarism, from Syria and Iraq, to Ukraine and the Baltic states, to the South China Sea. One or another of these military provocations will inevitably erupt into a nuclear third world war unless the international working class mobilizes itself as an independent revolutionary force against imperialist war and its source, capitalism.