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Trump gives military green light to escalate Afghanistan war

By Patrick Martin
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President Donald Trump announced a major escalation of the US war in Afghanistan in a nationally televised speech Monday night, although he gave no details either about the number of additional troops that will be sent or the extent or duration of the military commitment. Trump also made menacing threats against Pakistan in remarks clearly crafted in close coordination with the top military generals who dominate his administration.

While Trump pleaded military necessity as the reason for not disclosing how many troops will be added to the 8,400 already deployed in Afghanistan, or how long they will remain there, his goal was not to keep these facts secret from the Taliban—who will know soon enough, since they have sympathizers throughout the Afghan government and in every district of the country.

Trump is mainly concerned about keeping the extent of the escalation secret from the American people, who, he admitted, 16 years after the 9/11 attacks and the US invasion of Afghanistan, were “weary of war.”

Secretary of Defense James Mattis, a former general in the Marine Corps, has been authorized since June to send up to 4,000 additional US troops to Afghanistan, but the action has been postponed while top officials conducted what was described as a comprehensive review of American strategy in South Asia.

The troops are expected to move quickly into position now, so that they can participate in an ongoing series of bloody battles across Afghanistan, seeking to blunt the traditional summer offensive by Taliban insurgents.

In the past month, five district capitals have fallen to the insurgents, who now control 48 of the 407 districts. The government-controlled districts number barely 100, less than one quarter of the total, while the remainder are contested, in some cases government-run by day and Taliban-run by night.

Aside from a brief reference to the 9/11 attacks, which were the pretext for the initial US invasion and overthrow of the Taliban regime in Kabul, Trump made no attempt to provide an explanation, let alone a justification, for the longest war in US history.

In fact, the sheer length of the war and the thousands of casualties suffered by US forces were one of Trump's arguments for continuing and expanding the conflict. The first conclusion of the administration's review of the war was the necessity of "an honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made, especially the sacrifices of lives." Death justifies more death.

The number of dead and maimed among the Afghan population is many hundreds of thousands, together with millions of refugees. This colossal toll will rise rapidly as the scale and ferocity of US military operations increase.

The war in Afghanistan will take on an even bloodier character under the new policies announced by Trump. "Micromanagement from Washington, DC does not win battles," he declared, announcing that he is lifting all restraints on military operations, giving on-the-ground commanders the green light to use force as they see fit. This means rescinding restrictions established under the Bush and Obama administrations after well-documented atrocities, such as the bombing of Afghan wedding parties and helicopter gunship attacks that wiped out hospitals and entire villages.

Even more reckless and inflammatory is the US shift in policy towards Pakistan, which Trump denounced for "continuing to harbor criminals and terrorists." He complained, "We have been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars, at the same time they are housing the same terrorists that we are fighting. But that will have to change. And that will change immediately."

Trump is not speaking merely about the continuation of the illegal US drone missile strikes against Taliban and other Afghan militias hiding out in Pashtun tribal areas of western Pakistan. He is threatening an openly hostile stance by the United States toward a nuclear-armed country with a population of 190 million people, beginning with a possible cutoff of US financial and military aid.

The US president menaced Pakistan with the specter of Washington further developing its "strategic partnership with India," which he called "a key security and economic partner of the United States." Washington has cultivated military-diplomatic ties with India over the past two decades, seeking to transform India into a front-line state in the US strategy of surrounding and

isolating China. Trump's speech was a warning to Pakistan that the US is prepared to openly side with India against Pakistan in the longstanding conflict between the two nuclear powers in South Asia.

Trump also touched briefly on the material interests that underlie the US intervention in Afghanistan, saying, "As the prime minister of Afghanistan has promised, we are going to participate in economic development to help defray the cost of this war to us."

Behind this vague language is naked imperialist plundering. Trump has recently cited studies showing that Afghanistan possesses at least \$3 trillion in natural resources, more than four times the estimated \$714 billion in US military spending and reconstruction in the country since 2001. As CNBC reported Saturday, "Trump is seeking a military win in Afghanistan, but American efforts there may yet reap financial gains. Afghanistan possesses rare minerals crucial for industrial manufacturing, including copper, gold, uranium and fossil fuels ..."

Trump's announcement of a more aggressive stance in Afghanistan is the first major policy decision by the White House since Trump began a reshuffle of senior White House staff, replacing Chief of Staff Reince Priebus with former Marine General John Kelly, and sacking his chief political strategist Stephen Bannon.

In discussions within the administration going back at least to the spring, Bannon had opposed sending more troops to Afghanistan, clashing with both Defense Secretary Mattis and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, a serving Army general. He has opposed most US military actions in the Middle East as a diversion from the US-China conflict, declaring in an interview last week, "the economic war with China is everything."

The top generals in the Trump administration were also furious over Bannon's statement last week that there were no viable military options for the US in North Korea. Following Bannon's departure, the *New York Times* carried a front-page article Monday reporting that discussions over "preemptive war" against North Korea are "rising in the White House." The newspaper reported that "General McMaster and other administration officials have challenged the long-held view that there is no real military solution to the North Korean problem," and that the administration is seriously considering a first-strike on North Korea, an action that would lead to the deaths of tens of millions of people.

Trump's speech Monday night, announced only 24 hours in advance, was clearly an effort to cement his relations with the Pentagon brass in the wake of the Bannon firing and the political crisis that erupted after Trump's declaration of sympathy for the neo-Nazis who rioted August 11 in Charlottesville, Virginia, leading to death of one anti-Nazi protester.

The speech began with a lengthy declaration by Trump that there was no place for bigotry or racism within the military. The language was taken straight from the declarations of members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who all issued statements after Charlottesville deploring racists and white supremacists and presenting the military as a model of unity across race and gender lines.

Trump's speechwriter combined the disavowal of racial hatred with a paean to the armed services as the model for American society as a whole, using language that would not be out of place in a military dictatorship. In the men and women of the military, Trump said, "our country has produced a special class of heroes whose selflessness, courage and resolve is unmatched in human history."

Throughout the Trump administration, and in the aftermath of the events in Charlottesville, the Democrats have attempted to subordinate and redirect all opposition to Trump behind the military and intelligence agencies, hailing figures like Kelly and Mattis for providing "stability" to the administration. The announcement of a new stage in the bloody war in Afghanistan is the fruit of their efforts.