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Obama defends global US interventionism in West Point speech

By Bill Van Auken

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In a commencement speech to newly minted Army officers at the US Military Academy at West Point, New York, President Barack Obama outlined a rationale for continued US interventionism and aggression in every corner of the planet.

The US president's address was riddled with lies and evasions. It reflected the crisis gripping the American ruling establishment after more than a decade of war that has produced bloody debacles in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

While the White House had billed the speech as a major statement on US foreign policy in what remains of Obama's second term, what little there was in terms of new initiatives was far outweighed by hypocritical and at times nonsensical rationales for Washington's actions on the world stage.

Obama's last major speech at West Point was delivered in December 2009, when he announced his "surge" of 30,000 additional US troops into Afghanistan, marking a major escalation of a

deeply unpopular war and its further extension across the border into Pakistan. Justified with the lie that these forces were being deployed to fight “terrorism,” the surge proved incapable of crushing resistance to the US occupation, much less consolidating a viable US-backed regime in Afghanistan.

Yesterday’s commencement address came just one day after Obama put forward his plan for US troop deployments in Afghanistan in the wake of the formal end of the US-NATO war at the close of this year. Nearly 10,000 US troops are to remain in the country in 2015, with roughly half that number remaining in 2016 and an unspecified force, said to number approximately 1,000, staying indefinitely, along with CIA contingents and private military contractors.

While Obama claimed, unconvincingly, that these plans signal that “America’s combat mission will be over,” the rest of his speech made clear that the drawdown in Afghanistan is bound up with a US strategic “pivot” toward increasingly direct confrontations with Russia and China—a turn that poses the real danger of a nuclear third world war. He also made clear that his administration will continue to assert the “right” of US imperialism to militarily intervene wherever and whenever it decides that war will serve its interests.

It had been widely anticipated that Obama would use the speech to unveil a major new escalation of the US intervention in the bloody sectarian war for regime-change in Syria. The *Wall Street Journal* quoted an unnamed administration official Tuesday as stating that the president would announce a new program to deploy US military personnel to train and arm the Islamist-dominated “rebels” fighting Syrian government forces.

Instead, he declared Syria a “critical focus” of a wider plan for intervention across a broad swath of the Middle East, North Africa and Eurasia. He said he had recently ordered his “national security team to develop a plan for a network of partnerships from South Asia to the Sahel,” the crisis-plagued region of north-central Africa, and was proposing a new \$5 billion “Counter-Terrorism Partnerships Fund.”

While in countries such as Yemen, Somalia and Mali, these funds would be used to train and arm repressive forces to carry out counterinsurgency operations in the name of fighting Al Qaeda terrorism, in Syria they would be used to train and arm an insurgency that consists overwhelmingly of Islamists who, in many cases, are affiliated to Al Qaeda. Obama tried to square the circle by claiming that the funds would also be used to “push back” against “extremists” in Syria.

Nothing could more nakedly expose the fraud of the so-called “war on terror,” which, after so many lies and so many crimes carried out under its mantle, is still portrayed in Obama’s speech as the driving force of US foreign policy.

The now utterly rancid character of this “terrorism” pretext for foreign intervention found expression in Obama’s invocation of America as the “indispensable nation” that is called upon to help, whether when “girls are kidnapped in Nigeria, or masked men occupy a building in Ukraine.”

This equation of the Boko Haram terrorists in Nigeria with popular protests in eastern Ukraine has the immediate purpose of justifying the slaughter being carried out by the right-wing nationalist regime in Kiev—dubbed an “anti-terrorist operation”—with Washington’s full collaboration and support.

The reference to “masked men” occupying buildings in Ukraine is also designed to erase from historical memory the fact that the US was backing precisely such men—thugs of the neo-fascist Svoboda and Right Sector groups—when they violently seized government buildings in Kiev as part a Western-orchestrated coup to overthrow the country’s elected president.

Not only did Obama declare the US the “indispensable nation,” he also proclaimed, “I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being.” This cringing loyalty oath appeared aimed in part at fending off criticism from the Republican right.

More fundamentally, it was bound up with Obama’s bellicose assertion of US imperialism’s global dominance and the continued policy of unilateral wars of aggression wherever Washington sees fit.

“America must always lead on the world stage,” the US president told the graduating cadets. “If we don’t, no one else will. The military that you have joined is, and always will be, the backbone of that leadership.” He could not have provided a clearer definition of the word “militarism.”

He continued: “The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it—when our people are threatened; when our livelihood is at stake; or when the security of our allies is in danger.” In other words, it will wage war whenever war is considered to be advantageous to the interests of the American capitalist ruling establishment.

“International opinion matters,” he added. “But America should never ask permission to protect our people, our homeland, our way of life.”

He also stressed that his talk of “counter-terrorism partnerships” and the training of proxy forces to wage war for US interests in the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere is by no means meant to replace “direct action” by the US itself and, in particular, the continuation of massacres and assassinations by means of drone missile strikes.

Obama has already ordered over 400 of these attacks and by conservative estimates their victims number well over 4,000—most of them civilians—including at least four US citizens.

This naked assertion of presidential power to carry out extra-judicial killings anywhere in the world notwithstanding, the speech included mealy-mouthed vows to uphold the “rule of law” and “international norms.”

Five years after he promised that the Guantanamo prison camp would be shut down, Obama said he would “continue to push” for its closure.

“American values and legal traditions don’t permit the indefinite detention of people beyond our borders,” he said. This formulation is crafted to suggest that they do permit such detention “within our borders,” which would take place at a “Guantanamo north” that the Obama administration would set up at some maximum security facility on US territory.

He also referred to his meaningless “restrictions on how America gathers and uses intelligence” put into place, as stated, to counter the (correct) “perception... that we are conducting surveillance against ordinary citizens.”

At the outset of his speech, Obama set up a phony dichotomy between “isolationists” and “interventionists,” claiming that the former believe it is not Washington’s job to intervene across the globe and the latter seek a military solution to every problem. Setting up these straw men, he cast himself as the advocate of a more intelligent interventionism, which is prepared to wage aggressive war but also seeks other means of pursuing US global dominance.

The reality, however, is that there exists no significant section of the American ruling establishment that advocates isolationism. What Obama is really referring to is the challenge posed to his policy by the overwhelming hostility of working people, the great majority of the US population, to wars of aggression launched on the basis of lies to further the interests of a narrow financial aristocracy.