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Britain's propaganda offensive on behalf of Afghan war

By Chris Marsden

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The speech by Foreign Secretary David Miliband at the NATO headquarters in Brussels makes clear that Britain intends to deepen its collaboration with the United States in Afghanistan.

There is growing public concern that Afghanistan is fast becoming a worse and more intractable debacle than Iraq, fueling opposition to the war and demands for an exit strategy. Despite Miliband's statement that he accepted the public "wanted to know whether and how we can succeed" in Afghanistan, he demonstrated the government's willingness to defy anti-war sentiment and press ahead with the neo-colonial war.

For weeks the government has been faced with demands from the Conservative opposition and top military figures such as Chief of General Staff Richard Dannatt to send an additional 2,000 soldiers to Afghanistan. Britain already has 9,000 troops in Afghanistan, up from 7,800 last year—comprising a tenth of the 90,000-strong US-dominated force.

The calls for additional troops have been made under conditions in which there have been close to 70 deaths of international troops this month, including 20 UK servicemen. Since 2001, 189 UK troops have been killed, a higher death toll than in Iraq. In one week alone there were 150 serious casualties in the Helmand province in southwest Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, the government has signalled its readiness to send at least some additional troops. This week a further 125 soldiers were dispatched to Afghanistan to compensate for

rising injury levels—the first time that casualties have been directly replaced. Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth said that “after the sad and tragic casualty rate that we have suffered in recent weeks, reinforcements are necessary to ensure we can maintain our operational tempo”.

The day of Miliband’s speech, military officials proclaimed that the “first phase of Operation Panther’s Claw” had been successful in inflicting “significant” losses on insurgents in Helmand province. “I am absolutely certain that the operation has been a success”, said Brigadier Tim Radford, commander of Task Force Helmand. But he followed this claim with an immediate warning that insurgents would “melt back” into the local population without additional forces being sent. “If we had more, we could do more”, he said.

Miliband also claimed that the operation in Helmand and other elements of the US-led military “surge” were bearing fruit. The insurgents were being squeezed militarily on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, he claimed.

The foreign secretary continued by insisting it was necessary for the Afghan government to take advantage of this to secure alliances with more “pragmatic” elements in the insurgency. The US puppet government of Hamid Karzai should encourage splits in the opposition Taliban—using bribes, military alliances and offers of positions in local and national government. Acceptable allies were all those who Miliband said “want Islamic rule locally”, rather than being “committed to violent jihad globally.

“The basis for both reintegration and reconciliation is a starker choice: bigger incentives to switch sides and stay out of trouble, alongside tougher action against those who refuse”.

Such a political coalition is being mooted to secure the long-term imperialist control of Afghanistan through a broader network of local clients. Miliband spoke briefly of giving insurgents a chance to go back to “farming the land, or a role for some of them within the legitimate Afghan security forces”. But his appeal was to tribal leaders, warlords and drug smugglers, who could be given positions of power in exchange for cooperation with occupation forces.

He gave full rein to his political cynicism in an accompanying opinion piece for the July 26 Financial Times, in which he stressed that there was no single “Taliban”: “Different groups operate in different areas across the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. Cooperation is opportunistic and tactical....

“Afghans are drawn into the insurgency for different reasons. There are soldiers paid \$10 a day, narco-traffickers who want safe passage for their drugs, and those who fear the Taliban will win and so hedge their bets.... It is a wide but shallow coalition of convenience”.

Miliband’s statements contradict previous efforts to depict the Afghan conflict as a war being waged against a force firmly allied with Al Qaeda, with the ultimate aim of restoring democracy to Afghanistan. He now admits that support for Al Qaeda is minimal. “The southern Afghan insurgency, led by members of the former Taliban government, has the most fighters and is the best organized”, he told the FT. “In the east and in Pakistan there are a variety of other factions, including ones allied to al-Qaeda”. [emphasis added]

As for the remainder, its leaders should now be included in the Afghan government. Following next month's elections, the new government must seek the reintegration of former Taliban, setting up "effective governors and district leaders" that work "with the grain of tribal structures and history". Those assigned to this function must include "conservative Pashtuns.

"People talk about Afghanistan as the 'graveyard of empires'," he concluded. "But the international community, still less Britain, is not trying to create a colony. We are there to help an Afghan government dismantle the insurgency through the twin tracks of military power and political engagement".

There could, in reality, be no clearer expression of a classic imperialist strategy than that outlined by Miliband. Rule through local agents is always the preferred method of Britain's elite, which long ago recognized that military force alone could not secure and hold an imperial possession.

Miliband also issued a barely veiled threat to Pakistan and other neighbouring and regional powers not to challenge Western interests in Afghanistan. "Afghanistan's neighbours must definitively accept its future as a secure country in its own right", he wrote.

The call to "talk to the Taliban" dutifully parrots the foreign policy of President Barack Obama, echoing statements US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made July 15 in a foreign policy speech to the Council of Foreign Relations. She stated, "Today, we and our Afghan allies stand ready to welcome anyone supporting the Taliban, who renounces Al-Qaeda, lays down their arms, and is willing to participate in the free and open society that is enshrined in the Afghan constitution.

"We understand that not all those who fight with the Taliban support Al-Qaeda, or believe in the extremist policies the Taliban pursued when in power," she added.

In March, Obama himself told the New York Times that "there may be some comparable opportunities" to the US strategy of negotiating with Sunni insurgents in Iraq.

The Afghan government is already responding to the latest US demands. Karzai told a crowd in the Taliban stronghold of southern Kandahar on Monday that he would seek to open peace talks with the Taliban if he is re-elected in August elections. His government has already reportedly come to a cease-fire agreement with the Taliban commander controlling the Bala Morghab district of north-western Badghis up to the August 20 elections.

More important still is the role being played by Britain in shaking down the European Union (EU) for more troops and resources. Prior to Miliband's NATO speech, on Friday July 24, Prime Minister Gordon Brown was engaged in telephone discussions with Obama on Afghanistan, after which Downing Street announced it would send the first 125 reinforcements. Brown and Obama also agreed on the importance of "better military and civilian burden-sharing with NATO allies", according to a Downing Street spokesman.

The head of the British armed forces, Jock Stirrup, had earlier complained that Britain was doing "much more than its fair share" of the fighting in Afghanistan compared with other NATO allies. When Miliband addressed NATO, he too insisted that other countries must contribute more to the military offensive. "People in Britain...want to know that all the

members of our alliance are ready to give [Afghanistan] the priority it deserves”, he said. “Burden sharing is a founding principal of NATO, and it needs to be honoured in practice as well as in theory”.

Speaking earlier at the Munich Security Conference, July 2, Miliband was more fulsome in his demands. The European powers must embrace what he described as the “more expeditionary and more comprehensive approach” necessitated by the “post-cold war reality”.

Afghanistan was, he said, “a test for the EU and NATO together.... European and North American interests—political, economic and military—are very closely aligned.... Yet ours is a relationship that has been strained by divisions over Iraq and more recently questions of burden-sharing, leading to talk of a ‘two-tier alliance’. This is the moment for us to renew the alliance”.

At that same meeting, General David Petraeus, the commander-in-chief of US forces in the Middle East and Central Asia, stated that additional troops were required in Afghanistan, and that he would be “remiss if he did not ask individual countries” to examine very closely their own contributions.