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Taliban attack on Afghan city deepens crisis of US puppet regime in Kabul

The battle between the Taliban and Afghan government forces for control of the city of Ghazni, located some 150 kilometres southeast of the Afghan capital, underscores the deepening crisis confronting the US-backed puppet regime in Kabul. After 1,000 Taliban fighters stormed the strategically important centre on 10 August, it took government forces five days to restore their control over the city, following a series of US air strikes.

At least 100 Afghan security forces were reportedly killed in the fighting, along with a further 30 civilians. Hundreds more were injured or forced to flee their homes. The Afghan government claimed that there were 400 Taliban deaths.

Coming almost a year to the day after US President Donald Trump bombastically unveiled his new strategy for Afghanistan, including the deployment of thousands more troops and the boast that he was untying the hands of the American military, the battle for Ghazni testifies to US imperialism's disastrous position in Afghanistan. After almost 17 years of bloody colonial warfare, which has claimed the lives of untold thousands of civilians and driven millions more from their homes, Washington is struggling to maintain in power a corrupt government that is despised by the vast majority of the impoverished Afghan population. Although some 15,000 US troops remain in the country, Afghan government control in many regions is non-existent.

The loss of Ghazni would have essentially cut the government in Kabul off from Afghanistan's southern provinces. But even with the Taliban's retreat, Kabul's control over the area remains tenuous. Reports indicate that many of the Taliban fighters retreated

to well-established positions in the countryside near Ghazni. While the Afghan government claims that the Taliban controls only 14 percent of Afghan territory, an estimate by the BBC earlier this year suggested that the radical Islamist group is contesting government control of 70 percent of the country.

As if to underline the besieged character of the regime in Kabul, Taliban fighters launched a series of attacks on Afghan army bases in the northern province of Baghlan and overran a military base in the northwestern province of Fariab on Tuesday and Wednesday. The attacks claimed the lives of around 100 Afghan security forces.

The security situation in the capital is also dangerous. On Wednesday, a suicide bomber attacked an education centre in a Shia district of western Kabul, killing at least 25 and injuring 35 more. The attack came just three weeks after an Islamic State suicide bomber killed 23 at Kabul's international airport. Since January, 16 attacks claiming the lives of at least 240 civilians have occurred in the capital.

According to figures released by the United Nations in July, more than 1,600 civilians lost their lives in fighting across the country between January and June this year. 160,000 were forced to flee their homes due to clashes between government forces and the Taliban.

The Afghan government has stepped up its denunciations of Pakistan for its alleged support for the expansion of Taliban violence. Emboldened by Trump's decision in January to cut off all military aid to Islamabad as part of Washington's efforts to cement its strategic partnership with India, Pakistan's nuclear arch-rival in the region, Kabul accused Pakistan of being behind a string of deadly attacks in the capital.

Following the fighting in Ghazni, Afghan government officials claimed that of the 400 Taliban fighters allegedly killed, 70 came from Pakistan. They cited social media reports alleging that large numbers of body bags have arrived in Pakistan and that funerals were being held to mourn the victims.

Islamabad rebuffed the charges, declaring that there was no evidence to back them up. Pakistani intelligence has long maintained ties to the Taliban so as to retain a degree of influence in the affairs of its war-torn neighbour. The Pakistani ruling elite has also grown increasingly concerned at Washington's moves to sideline Islamabad in Afghan affairs in favour of India.

Observers anticipate a spike of violence in the coming weeks ahead of parliamentary elections planned for October. Six months later, in April 2019, presidential elections will be held.

Under these conditions, there are fears within the American military and political elite that the tottering Afghan regime could be torn apart or collapse entirely. Following the last presidential election in 2014, armed conflict nearly broke out between competing factions led by the current president, Ashraf Ghani, and Abdullah Abdullah, who abandoned his opposition to the election result only after months of behind-the-scenes wrangling culminated in a power-sharing agreement that saw Abdullah appointed to the new post of Afghan chief executive.

This time around, Ghani's main challenger could be Atta Mohammad Nur, the governor of the western Balkh province and a warlord who is building a coalition for a presidential bid. He is relying on opposition to Ghani's rule among ethnic Tajik politicians who allege that the president has failed to abide by the national unity government agreement.

In a bid to help stabilise the situation somewhat, US imperialism has ditched its opposition to talks with the Taliban. According to a report late last month in the *New York Times*, American officials have met with Taliban representatives on several occasions since mid-July in the Qatari capital of Doha, where the Islamists maintain a political office. The US delegation to the talks, which excluded Afghan government representatives, was reportedly headed by Assistant Secretary of State for Asian Affairs Alice Wells. As late as February, Trump was insisting that peace talks involving the Taliban would take place only with the Afghan government, not directly with US representatives.

Washington's decision to meet with the Taliban is being driven above all by broader geopolitical considerations. In mid-July, the Russian government announced that it would invite Taliban representatives to Moscow to participate in Russian-led peace talks on Afghanistan that would also involve the Afghan government and Chinese representatives. The move appears to have emerged from a June meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the security alliance led by China and Russia. At that meeting, Chinese President Xi Jinping presented a peace plan for Afghanistan that called for the establishment of an SCO Afghanistan Contact Group to lead a peace process.

Xi spoke of the need for a "foundation for shared peace and security" by combating the "three evil forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism." He went on to appeal for enhanced cooperation with Afghanistan on "defence security, law enforcement security, and information security."

Afghanistan, which currently has observer status at the SCO, was represented at the meeting by Ghani and Abdullah.

In another meeting reported by the *Diplomat* magazine, Russian, Chinese, Pakistani, and Iranian intelligence officials gathered to discuss ways to deal with the security situation in Afghanistan. All four countries are targets of US imperialist aggression.

Significantly, the Moscow talks on Afghanistan, which Russia says will go ahead before the end of the summer, will not include the United States.

Washington has no intention of allowing its regional competitors to challenge its influence over Kabul by means of a peace deal that excludes the United States. To this end, it has decided not only to sit down with the Taliban, but also to collaborate with the Afghan branch of ISIS, whose fighters were recently rescued from a Taliban attack in northern Afghanistan by Afghan government helicopters.

The Bush administration, with the full support of the American ruling elite, launched the Afghanistan war in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks for definite geopolitical reasons. The attacks served as a welcome pretext for US imperialism to establish a foothold in Central Asia, putting its military forces within striking distance of Russia and on China's western border. Control over Central Asia was seen as critical for Washington's determination to consolidate its hegemony over the Eurasian landmass, and in particular over the Middle East, the world's most important oil-exporting region.

Geopolitical rivalries have only intensified in the intervening years. With the global capitalist crisis having deepened markedly since 2001, as shown by the rapid escalation of tensions between the major powers, Washington is all the more determined to enforce its economic and geopolitical interests against its rivals in Afghanistan and beyond.

For this reason, the current efforts by various parties to bring about a peace agreement notwithstanding, the growing interconnection between the Afghan conflict and broader geopolitical and strategic rivalries is increasing the danger of the eruption of a region-wide war that would quickly draw in the major powers.