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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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08.09.2021

In wake of Afghan defeat, UK pseudo-lefts help Tory government prepare its contingency plans

The UK must “adjust to the new reality” of the situation in Afghanistan and be “pragmatic and realistic” about relations with the new Taliban government, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab has said.

His remarks were made in Qatar, during an emergency visit to countries bordering Afghanistan as the UK sought to secure “safe passage” for the foreign nationals it abandoned. In Islamabad the following day, he said the UK and Pakistan have a “shared interest” in ensuring Afghanistan’s “stable and peaceful future.”

Raab’s enforced trip came after a bitter parliamentary debate on the rout of the US-led occupation in Afghanistan, during which he admitted the UK was “caught out” by the speed of the Taliban takeover. Demands for Raab’s resignation—he remained on holiday while Kabul fell—are part of heated recriminations engulfing the government, especially its foreign and defence departments, over intelligence/military “failures”. The accusations and counteraccusations continued in the House of Commons yesterday as Parliament returned after its summer recess.



Members of the British armed forces 16 Air Assault Brigade walk to the air terminal after disembarking a RAF Voyager aircraft at Brize Norton, England, as they return from helping in operations to evacuate people from Kabul airport in Afghanistan, Saturday, Aug. 28, 2021. (AP Photo/Alastair Grant, Pool)

There are, however, certain unifying themes. All bands of the official political spectrum agree the US is overwhelmingly responsible for the humiliating defeat, which saw scenes reminiscent of the fall of Saigon almost 50 years ago at the end of the Vietnam war. This time, it was not only US helicopters hurriedly lifting diplomats from the rooftops. Pleas by the UK and other western allies for President Biden to extend the pull-out past the August 31 deadline agreed by Donald Trump were rebuffed, leaving them scrambling to withdrawal their own personnel.

Conservative backbenchers have been the most condemnatory, with Tobias Ellwood, chair of the House of Commons defence committee, complaining the UK “should not be tied to the political thinking of the White House.” But this is a common refrain: from the “liberal” *Guardian* blaming the “military and political disaster” on the “UK’s conditional support for US plans”, to the Tory *Telegraph* cautioning, “Militarily and diplomatically, we cannot rely as heavily as we did on the US...”

As to the shared wailing over the fate of Afghanistan’s women and children, these are crocodile tears. The overwhelming complaint is not only the “chaotic” manner of the withdrawal but that it happened at all. For 20 years, the Tory, Labour and Liberal

parties—along with a pliant media—have supported an occupation built on 170,000 Afghan corpses, the mass impoverishment of its population and rampant corruption. They never intended for it to end.

The sole concern of the UK's ruling elite is the implications for its post-Brexit "Global Britain" strategy. That is why—even as the various factions turn on one another—all hold to the lie that war and occupation was the legitimate response to the still unexplained September 11, 2001 attacks on New York City and Washington D.C., in which 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis, and none were Afghans.

Step forward the war criminal Tony Blair. Outraged by Biden's feint to anti-war sentiment as a reason for withdrawal, the former Labour Prime Minister said the decision to abandon Afghanistan "to the same group from which the carnage of 9/11 arose, and in a manner that seems almost designed to parade our humiliation", was "imbecilic" and would lead "allies and enemies alike" to question "has the West lost its strategic will?"

In reality, the roots of the invasion of Afghanistan lie in the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991. The end of the Cold War was heralded by the US ruling elite as a "unipolar moment" in which it would seek to overcome its global decline and domestic contradictions through the imposition of a "New World Order". Control of the Eurasian land mass was central to the unrestrained pursuit of global domination and global counterrevolution aimed at strengthening the position of US imperialism against China, Russia and the European imperialist powers.

The British bourgeoisie embraced this eruption of US militarism. Its mercenary calculation was that by consolidating its post-war strategy of functioning as a "bridge" between America and Europe, it could shore up its own much-diminished global position. The aim was two-fold: to ensure that US imperialism, freed from the restraints of the Cold War, did not take a unilateralist course that would damage British interests, and to prevent the development of a united European policy that would leave Britain out in the cold.

Blair served as chief propagandist for the invasion of Afghanistan under then US President George W. Bush. Drunk on capitalist triumphalism and the "end of history" thesis promulgated by Francis Fukuyama, Blair told the Labour Party conference in October 2001, "This is a moment to seize. The Kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in

flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us.” His speech, for which he was praised as a “true world leader”, was broadcast live around the world by America’s CNN.

“Humanitarian interventionism” was the political fiction used to legitimise a revival of imperialist colonialism, as the modern equivalent of the “white man’s burden.”

Fresh from its involvement in the invasion of Afghanistan, the Blair government conspired with the Bush administration for war against Iraq based, again, on a mountain of lies. In the face of global anti-war protests, that saw two million demonstrate in London alone on February 15, 2003, Blair boasted that defying mass popular opinion was “the price of leadership”.

Neo-colonial ventures went hand in glove with the destruction of living standards and civil liberties at home. The interests of the financial oligarchy dictated that government eschew even the semblance of democratic accountability so it could pursue its class war agenda unhindered.

Decades of military intervention have followed—from the Balkans, Libya and Syria to Africa—while the conditions of the working class have been decimated by Tory and Labour administrations alike. Those that celebrated death and destruction overseas now enforce “herd immunity” as regards the Covid-19 pandemic, declaring their readiness to “let the bodies pile up in their thousands.” Just as Labour leader Keir Starmer has blocked with the Tories on this fascistic policy, so the party’s foreign secretary, Lisa Nandy, defended the 2001 Afghan invasion as “absolutely right.”

As the WSWS explained, “the humiliating retreat from Afghanistan signals the failure not just of US policy in that one country, but of an entire strategy, world view and programme of global domination and domestic reaction that has persisted for 30 years.

“This debacle, which is intersecting with an escalation of the class struggle in the US and internationally under the impact of growing social inequality and the homicidal, profit-driven policies of the world’s ruling classes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has profoundly revolutionary implications.”

This accounts not only for the handwringing and mudslinging in official political circles but also for the nervous reaction of the so-called “anti-war left” to the Afghan defeat.

Since its founding in 2001, the pseudo-left Stop the War Coalition has worked to systematically demobilise anti-war sentiment behind support for a more “coherent” British foreign policy strategy held out by sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

Its statement on the Afghan “disaster” now appeals for the British government to “take a lead in offering a refugee programme and reparations to rebuild Afghanistan”, and urges “politicians of all parties... to turn to international cooperation as the means of resolving disputes and tackling problems of poverty and underdevelopment.”



Jeremy Corbyn speaking at a Stop the War Coalition rally in London in 2020

Jeremy Corbyn resigned his position as STWC chair as soon as he became Labour leader in 2015, after which he allowed the party’s MPs a free vote to wave through the bombing of Syria that year, and adopted a general election manifesto committed to NATO membership and the retention of Britain’s nuclear weapon capability. Never at any point in his five-year tenure did Corbyn so much as threaten Blair’s membership of the party, let alone suggest he be arraigned for war crimes.

This hasn’t prevented Corbyn remaining as the STWC’s “spiritual” head. Interviewed on his response to the Taliban take-over, Corbyn revealed he had been in telephone contact with Defence Secretary Ben Wallace over “this terrible situation”.

“A lot of MPs” were in the call, he said, which discussed “making sure” people “at risk are brought out safely”, that “the aid problem is dealt with very rapidly” and especially the need for “huge pressure” on the Taliban administration over “human rights, on women’s rights...”

In other words, in line with the STWC’s entreaties, Corbyn was aiding the Tories craft contingency plans to preserve the credibility of British imperialism and justify ongoing efforts to maintain its involvement in the country it helped destroy.

After 20 years in which it claimed to be the leading opponent of “humanitarian” wars of intervention, the STWC, and its figurehead, Corbyn, end up advancing policies barely distinguishable from those of Blair, who has similarly demanded, “a list of incentives, sanctions and actions we can take, including to protect the civilian population so the Taliban understand their actions will have consequences.”

The Afghan defeat has not lessened the danger of war. All talk of devising “new strategies” and “new alliances” in response are code for a renewed, and better equipped and funded, outburst of imperialist violence targeted more directly against China and Russia.

As Corbyn’s actions make clear, the pseudo-left “anti-war” movement is not an alternative to this course. It is politically integral to it. Only the international working class, mobilised on a socialist programme and in opposition to all factions of the bourgeoisie, can defeat the drive to war by overthrowing the capitalist system that is its source.

World Socialist 07.09.2021