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Noam Chomsky and Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers

# The U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement is 'part of a global program of world militarization'

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Hakim: We are speaking from the highlands of Bamiyan in central Afghanistan, and we wanted to start off by thanking you sincerely for the guidance and wisdom that you have consistently given through your teaching and speeches in many places. We want to start off with a question from Faiz.

Faiz: In an article by Ahmed Rashid in the New York Times recently, he said that "after 10 years, it should be clear that the war in this region cannot be won purely by military force... Pakistanis desperately need a new narrative... but where is the leadership to tell this story as it should be told? The military gets away with its antiquated thinking because nobody is offering an alternative, and without an alternative, nothing will improve for a long time." Do you think there is any leadership in the world today that can propose an alternative non-military solution for Afghanistan, and if not, where or from whom would this leadership for an alternative non-military solution come from?

Noam Chomsky: I think it is well understood among the military leadership and also the political leadership in the United States and its allies, that they cannot achieve a military solution of the kind that they want. This is putting aside the question of whether that goal was ever justified; now, put that aside. Just in their terms, they know perfectly well they cannot achieve a military solution.

Is there an alternative political force that could work towards some sort of political settlement? Well, you know, that actually the major force that would be effective in bringing about that aim is popular opinion. The public is already very strongly opposed to the war and has been for a long time, but that has not translated itself into an active, committed, dedicated popular movement that is seeking to change policy. And that's what has to be done here.

My own feeling is that the most important consequence of the very significant peace efforts that are underway inside Afghanistan might well be to stimulate popular movements in the West through just people to people contact, which would help impose pressures on the United States, and particularly Britain, to end the military phase of this conflict and move towards what ought to be done: peaceful settlement and honest, realistic economic development.

Abdulai: Dr. Ramazon Bashardost told the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers once that the people of Afghanistan have no choice because all available options in Afghanistan are bad. So, Afghans have no choice but to choose the least bad of the bad options. In this situation, some Afghans, and in particular many in Kabul, feel that the least bad option is to have the U.S. coalition forces remain in Afghanistan. Do you think that the continued presence of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan is the least bad option? If not, what are the possible truly good options for ordinary Afghans?

Noam Chomsky: I agree that there don't appear to be any good options, and that we therefore regrettably have to try to seek the least bad of the bad options. Now, that judgment has to be made by Afghans. You're on the scene. You're the people who live with the consequences. You are the people who have the right and responsibility to make these delicate and unfortunate choices. I have my own opinion, but it doesn't carry any weight. What matters are your opinions.

My opinion is that as long as the military forces are there, now, they will probably increase the tensions and undermine the possibilities for a longer term settlement. I think that's been the record of the past 10 years largely, and that's the record in other places as well—in Iraq, for example. So, my feeling is that a phased withdrawal of the kind that's actually contemplated may well be the least bad of the bad options, but combined with other efforts. It's not enough to just withdraw troops. There have to be alternatives put in place. One of them, for example, which has repeatedly been recommended, is regional cooperation among the regional powers. That would of course include Pakistan, Iran, India, the countries to the north, all of which, together with Afghan representatives among them, might be able to hammer out a development program that would be meaningful and cooperate in implementing it, shifting the focus of activities from killing to reconstructing and building. But the core of issues are going to have to be settled

internal to Afghanistan.

Mohammad Hussein: It has been announced that the foreign forces would leave Afghanistan by 2014, and transfer responsibility for security to Afghans. However, what we have before us appears to be a very deceitful, corrupt situation of the U.S. government signing a Strategic Partnership agreement with the Afghan government to place permanent joint military bases in Afghanistan beyond 2024. It feels as if, to the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers, that the withdrawal by 2014 is therefore inconsequential in light of the larger long term plans to keep forces in Afghanistan. Could you comment on this?

Noam Chomsky: I'm quite sure that those expectations are correct. There is very little doubt that the U.S. government intends to maintain effective military control over Afghanistan by one means or another, either through a client state with military bases, and support for what they'll call Afghan troops. That's the pattern elsewhere as well. So, for example, after bombing Serbia in 1999, the United States maintains a huge military base in Kosovo, which was the goal of the bombing. In Iraq, they're still building military bases even though there is rhetoric about leaving the country. And I presume they will do the same in Afghanistan too, which is regarded by the U.S. as of strategic significance in the long term, within the plans of maintaining control of essentially the energy resources and other resources of the region, including western and Central Asia. So this is a piece of ongoing plans which in fact go back to the Second World War.

Right now, the United States is militarily engaged in one form or another in almost a hundred countries, including bases, special forces operations, support for domestic military and security forces. This is a global program of world militarization, essentially tracing back to headquarters in Washington, and Afghanistan is a part of it. It will be up to Afghans to see if, first of all, if they want this; secondly, if they can act in ways which will exclude it. That's pretty much what's happening in Iraq. As late as early 2008, the United States was officially insisting that it maintain military bases and be able to carry out combat operations in Iraq, and that the Iraqi government must privilege U.S. investors for the oil and energy system. Well, Iraqi resistance has compelled the United States to withdraw somewhat from that, substantially, in fact. But the efforts will still continue. These are ongoing conflicts based on long standing principles. Any real success in moving towards demilitarization and reconstruction of relations will have to require primarily the commitment of Afghans, but, as well, the cooperative efforts of popular groups of the Western powers to pressure their own governments.

Faiz: After three decades of war and being at the raw end of regional and global military interference in Afghanistan, the people are feeling lost and without hope. People are even losing hope and not confident that the United Nations, whose charter is to remove the scourge of war from all generations, would be able to offer an alternative solution. We have talked with peace groups about the possibility of a blue ribbon or blue scarf team of individuals, perhaps including Nobel Laureates, who could speak out and make a statement about the dire humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, and perhaps throw open a debate to the world about alternatives for ordinary Afghans who are losing all hope. Do you think that there is any possibility of the United Nations stepping in to offer a different narrative in these dire straits? And is there any possibility of an independent peacemaking blue ribbon team of peace builders who can offer a way out?

Noam Chomsky: One has to bear in mind that the United Nations cannot act independently. It can only act as far as the great powers will permit—that means primarily the United States, also Britain, and France, essentially, the Permanent Members of the Security Council—which limit what the United Nations can do. It can act within the constraints that they impose, and the United States is by far the most influential.

So, just to give one indication of that, take a look at the record of vetoes at the Security Council. In the early days of the United Nations, beginning in the late 1940s, U.S. power was so overwhelming in the world that the United Nations was basically an instrument of the United States. As other industrial powers recovered from the war and

decolonization began, the United Nations became somewhat more representative of the people of the world. It became less controlled by the United States and the U.S. began vetoing resolutions. The first U.S. veto was in 1965, and since then, the United States is far in the lead vetoing Security Council resolutions, which blocks action. Now, Britain is second, and no one else is even close. And that continues now. There will probably be another U.S. veto next week. That's in general the case. If the United States refuses to allow something to happen, the United Nations can't do anything. Other great powers have also some influence, but less. So, the real question is, will the United States and Britain agree to permit actions of the kind that are outlined in the question. And I think that can come about, but again, we're back to where we were before.

Abdulai: On behalf of the Afghan youth in Bamiyan, as well as those listening in from Kabul, we thank you for your time with us. We wish you well, and the best of health.

Noam Chomsky: Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to talk to you briefly. It's a real privilege, and I greatly admire the wonderful work that you're doing.

*Post-scriptum :*

*Editor's note:*

*This is a transcript of a conversation between members of the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers and Noam Chomsky, which took place on September 21, 2011. Each question was asked in Dari and translated by Hakim.*