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NATO commits to Afghan war through 2020, prepares Eurasian-wide escalation

By Thomas Gaist
17 June 2016

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military intervention in Afghanistan, which officially began as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in August 2003, and ended in December 2014, will continue at least through 2020, NATO officials confirmed Wednesday.

The continued NATO occupation of Afghanistan will be divided into three subsections, commanded by US-, German- and Italian-led contingents.

Together with the 10,000 American troops remaining in country, NATO will maintain six bases as part of a “hub and spoke” military network, centered on the militarized government compound in Kabul and the massive US base at Bagram airfield, which was established following the 2001 US-led invasion.

The NATO mission in Afghanistan is only part of a package of “enhancements” announced this week. In the lead-up to the July 8 Warsaw summit, NATO is preparing to ratify a laundry list of military preparations directed toward encircling Russia. On Wednesday, the US-European imperialist alliance announced new deployments and military aid to Romania, Ukraine, the Black Sea and the Aegean.

NATO will also intensify its involvement in the European Union’s militarized refugee-policing operations in the Mediterranean, “Operation Sophia,” including a “new platform for a NATO role in the central Mediterranean,” NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg said Thursday.

In a sweeping commitment, NATO has agreed in general terms to “join the US war on ISIS,” Washington’s latest catchall neocolonial project, which, though originally centered on the Iraq-Syria war launched in 2014, has expanded to encompass growing areas of Africa and Central and South Asia.

NATO advisers are already preparing to join the American intervention in Iraq, and NATO intelligence cadres have been sent to the US Central Command and US Special Operations Command in Tampa, Florida.

In Eastern Europe, NATO is preparing openly for total war against Russia.

The Warsaw summit is expected to approve a permanent “rotational” presence of thousands of Western combat troops in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, along with the progressive buildup of massive stores of warehoused military hardware, and the maintenance of a 40,000-strong rapid response spearhead force against Russia.

The NATO “enhancements” are being announced in an aggressively provocative fashion. Every day brings more heated war rhetoric against Moscow. NATO leaders speak of war with Russia as an imminent reality.

General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg warned Thursday that Russia is massing forces all along NATO’s lines.

“We are observing massive militarisation at NATO borders: in the Arctic, in the Baltic, from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea,” Stoltenberg said in an interview with Germany’s *Bild*.

“Russia is trying to build up a zone of influence through military means,” he said. “We are registering aggressive, unannounced, large-scale maneuvers on the Russian side. Therefore we must act,” Stoltenberg added, calling for “a clear signal of strength.”

“NATO must be ready in the future to deploy forces in Libya, as it did in Afghanistan and the Balkans,” Stoltenberg said.

NATO’s commitment to five more years of war in Afghanistan is the latest in a flurry of signals that American imperialism is preparing a new outburst of militarist violence against Afghanistan, Pakistan, and throughout Central Asia.

Spurred on by pressure from the Pentagon and the worsening crisis of the US-backed puppet government in Kabul, President Barack Obama is preparing to cancel further reductions of the US troop level in Afghanistan and authorize various expansions of the war.

Last week, Obama green-lighted new offensive operations against the Taliban insurgency. The US Air Force announced Thursday that it is intensifying bombing raids over Afghanistan, acting under expanded rules of engagement aimed at “shaping the battlespace,” the US Air Force chief of staff told media Wednesday.

The new US Afghanistan Commander, General John Nicholson, is expected to receive still broader authority to launch preemptive strikes against the Islamist militias.

Decades of imperialist war, invasion and occupation by Washington and its European accomplices have already transformed Afghanistan into a killing field. From 1978 onward, US-backed militias and American and European troops have ravaged the strategic Central Asian nation, producing a body count that continues to grow by the year. The years 2014 and 2015 each set new records for civilian deaths in Afghanistan, with at least 3,500 civilians killed and 7,500 injured last year.

Bolstered by NATO, Washington will plow ahead all the more boldly, unleashing new waves of chaos and violence in a Central Asian political tinderbox already menaced by the close prospect of a regional war involving nuclear-armed states.

The American and European soldiers sent to Afghanistan are being deployed into a cauldron of national tensions. The political order of Asia is being violently restructured under the impact of the Obama administration's anti-China "Pivot to Asia," which has massed American forces along China's coasts, and inflamed conflicts between Beijing and a handful of its neighbors, including Japan, India, Vietnam and the Philippines.

The longstanding and interlocking conflicts between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Pakistan and India, have been thrown into overdrive by the US-India alliance, and were further damaged by the May 21 assassination of Pakistani-backed Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour.

Washington's war drive against China, and the recruitment of India on its behalf, have trashed the US-Pakistani alliance, forcing Islamabad to align more closely with Beijing. On Thursday, Pakistan announced that it would join the Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

"A full SCO membership will help Pakistan strengthen its role in regional and global politics, economies and infrastructure by promoting regional connectivity through the One Belt One Road and Eurasian Economic Union projects," Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman Nafees Zakaria said.

The souring of relations between Washington and Islamabad has encouraged Kabul's ambitions to pursue historic conflicts with Pakistan. In an apparent effort to contest the imperialist-drawn 1893 Afghanistan-Pakistan border, known as the Durand line, Afghan troops opened fire on Pakistani forces and construction crews in the Torkham border area on Sunday.

After an attempted truce, Pakistani units began firing artillery over the crossing on Wednesday. The situation remains tense and both sides are reportedly massing forces in the area.

The upending of the regional order by the US pivot is setting the stage for ferocious struggles over control of Central Asia's vast natural resources and key commercial throughways.

In “Eurasian Integration: Caught Between Russia and China,” the European Council on Foreign Affairs, a strategy network that includes a swathe of Europe’s political and business elite, outlines a plan to shape the Eurasian economy in the interests of sections of the European bourgeoisie, primarily through interventions targeted against Russia and China.

“Europe should carve out its own role in Central Asia, deepening its relationship with key nations such as Kazakhstan. These countries need the EU’s market, and look to Europe to protect them from Russian – and to a lesser extent Chinese – control. Europe should ensure that no single country controls all energy routes through Eurasia, and back China’s projects in order to reduce Russia’s control over the region,” the Council wrote.

“The EU should play the role of an external balancer to China and Russia’s competition for power in Kazakhstan and Central Asia,” they wrote. “This will require strengthening cooperation in the field of energy trade and energy security between Central Asia and Europe.”

The European Council emphasizes the centrality of the Caucasus for Eurasian strategy, highlighting the centrality of Azerbaijan.

“Azerbaijan is a crucial partner, since it provides the only means to bypass Iran and Russia, via the Caspian Sea,” the Council notes. “Azerbaijan is at the centre of three major integration initiatives – the European Union, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the recently established One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative championed by China.”

The Council’s analysis underscores the strategic significance of moves to integrate Azerbaijan’s neighbor, Georgia, into NATO, a major item on the agenda for Warsaw. NATO will “strengthen our package of support for Georgia” at the Warsaw conference, Stoltenberg said, building on the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center and Noble Partner war exercises held in May, which included 650 American and 200 British soldiers. While Georgia is not formally a member of NATO, Tbilisi already maintains a full infantry company within NATO’s Response Force and has deployed nearly 900 Georgian troops in support of the NATO Afghan mission.

Pointing to the titanic contradictions brewing within the Eurasian mega-continent, the European Council notes that Eurasian integration is increasingly creating a pro-Chinese constituency with the less privileged sections of European capital in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Council warns: “China’s engagement in Central and Eastern Europe threatens to turn the region into a strong advocate for China within the EU.”

For the European elites, this can only offer another compelling reason for the maintenance of NATO military garrisons, on China’s doorstep, in Afghanistan.

For all its internal divisions, the imperialist bourgeoisie is united by its determination to prevent the formation of Chinese- and Russian-led economic blocs. This is necessary to insure that the vast resources and labor armies of the post-Stalinist countries, closed off from Western capital for the better part of the 20th century by the Russian and Chinese revolutions, are thrown open for exploitation by the ruling cliques in Washington, London, Paris and Berlin.

