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Afghan War: NATO Builds History's First Global Army

Never before have soldiers from so many states served in the same war theater

By Rick Rozoff

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Stop NATO

Two months before the eighth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the beginning of NATO's first-ever ground war the world is witness to a 21st Century armed conflict without end waged by the largest military coalition in history.

With recent announcements that troops from such diverse nations as Colombia, Mongolia, Armenia, Japan, South Korea, Ukraine and Montenegro are to or may join those of some 45 other countries serving under the command of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), there will soon be military personnel from fifty nations on five continents and in the Middle East serving under a unified command structure.

Never before have soldiers from so many states served in the same war theater, much less the same country.

By way of comparison, there were twenty six (higher, and looser, estimates go as high as 34) national contingents in the so-called coalition of the willing in Iraq as of 2006. In the interim between now and then troops from all contributing nations but the United States and Great Britain have been withdrawn and in most cases redeployed to Afghanistan.

In 1999 NATO's fiftieth anniversary summit in Washington, D.C. welcomed the first expansion of the world's only military bloc in the post-Cold War era, absorbing former Warsaw Pact members the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, in the course of conducting NATO's first war, the relentless 78-day bombardment of Yugoslavia, Operation Allied Force.

Two years later, after the 9/11 attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., NATO activated its Article 5 - "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all" - for the first time in the bloc's history and launched a number of operations from deploying German AWACS to patrol the Atlantic Coast of the U.S. to launching Operation Active Endeavor, a naval surveillance and interdiction program throughout the Mediterranean Sea which continues to this day.

But the main effect, and the main purpose, of invoking NATO's mutual military assistance clause was to rally the then 19 member military bloc for the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the stationing of troops, warplanes and bases throughout South and Central Asia, including in Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Flyover rights were also arranged with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and newly acquired airbases in Bulgaria and Romania have since been used for the transit of troops and weapons to the Afghan war zone.

If the 1999 war against Yugoslavia was NATO's first "out of area" operation - that is, outside of North America and those parts of Europe in the Alliance - the war in Afghanistan marked NATO's transformation into a global warfighting machine. In the years intervening between the October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and now NATO officials and advocates have come to employ such terms as Global, Expeditionary and 21st Century NATO. Afghanistan provided the Alliance the opportunity to add to its previous expansion to Eastern Europe with its attendant military operations in the Balkans into asserting itself as the world's first global military force.

As the U.S. State Department's Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Kurt Volker (later U.S. ambassador to NATO) said in 2006, "In 1994 NATO was an alliance of 16 [countries], without partners, having never conducted a military operation. By 2005, NATO had become an alliance of 26, engaged in eight simultaneous operations on four continents with the help of 20 partners in Eurasia, seven in the Mediterranean, four in the Persian Gulf, and a handful of capable contributors on our periphery." [1]

The updated details of what he was alluding to are these:

From 1999 to this year NATO has added twelve new members - Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia - all in Eastern Europe, nine of them formerly in the Warsaw Pact and three former Soviet and two Yugoslav republics.

All of the new members were prepared for full NATO accession under the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, which first demands weapons interoperability (scrapping contemporary Russian and old Warsaw Pact arms in favor of Western ones), increasing future members'

military spending to 2% of the national budget no matter how hard-hit the nation is since the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the purging of "politically unreliable" personnel from military, defense and security posts, training abroad in NATO military academies, hosting U.S. Alliance military exercises, and instructing the officer corps in a common language - English - for joint overseas operations.

With a dozen PfP graduates now full NATO members who have deployed troops to Afghanistan - Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania were also levied for troops in Iraq - the partnership still includes every former Soviet Republic not already in NATO but Russia - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan - and ten European nations that had never before been part of a military bloc: Austria, Bosnia, Finland, the Republic of Ireland, Macedonia, Malta, Montenegro, Serbia, Sweden and Switzerland.

All of the latter but Malta and Serbia have been tapped for soldiers in Afghanistan. The 28 full NATO members all have troops there also.

Of the former Soviet republics, troops from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova and Ukraine served in Iraq under PfP obligations. At the time of the South Caucasus war last August Georgia had the third largest national contingent in Iraq - 2,000 troops deployed near the Iranian border - which the U.S. rushed home on transport planes for the war with Russia.

NATO also upgraded its Mediterranean Dialogue, whose partners are Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, at the 2004 NATO summit in Istanbul, Turkey with the so-called Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, which also laid the groundwork for military integration of the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The last-named is the only Arab state to date with troops in Afghanistan.

The Afghan war has led to another category of NATO partnership, that of Contact Countries, which so far officially include Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea.

The Alliance also has a Tripartite Commission with Afghanistan and Pakistan for the prosecution of the dangerously expanding war in South Asia, and defense, military and political leaders from both nations are regularly summoned to NATO Headquarters in Belgium for meetings and directives.

Afghan and Pakistani soldiers are trained at NATO bases in Europe.

Though not members of formal partnerships, nations with troops serving under NATO in Afghanistan like Singapore and Mongolia have been pulled into the bloc's global nexus and necessarily adopt military doctrines and structures in line with NATO standards.

Another component of the 2001 decision to activate the Alliance's Article 5 provision was to

deploy NATO forces to the Horn of Africa, primarily to Camp Lemonier in Djibouti, where they have conducted maritime surveillance and boarding operations ever since. Last autumn NATO deployed its first naval task force off the coast of Somalia.

In addition to the five African nations in the Mediterranean Dialogue, NATO has expanded its penetration of the continent over the past eight years: An Alliance naval group has docked in Kenya. NATO has held military maneuvers in South Africa. Even Libya has begun cooperation with NATO in the Mediterranean.

With the launching of the Pentagon's Africa Command (AFRICOM) last year - and AFRICOM is the personal project of retired Marine General James Jones, from 2003-2006 top military commander of NATO and the U.S. European Command where AFRICOM was incubated and now U.S. National Security Adviser - the distinction between Pentagon and NATO operations in Africa will be a largely academic one and all of Africa's 53 nations except for Eritrea, Sudan and Zimbabwe are potential Alliance partners.

The central focus for the operationalization of NATO's worldwide plans is Afghanistan and adjoining nations.

In calendar year nine of the war in that nation and now with its expansion into Pakistan NATO has built upon previous and current joint military deployments in Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Djibouti, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Sudan and off the coast of Somalia and secured a long-term, indeed a permanent, laboratory for molding history's first international rapid deployment, combat and occupation military force; a 650,000 square kilometer firing and weapons testing range; a string of airbases in the center of where Russian, Chinese, Indian and Iranian regional interests converge; a boot camp for breaking in the armed forces of dozens of nations slated for NATO membership.

As such, discussions about the "winnability" of the current war are beside the point.

Although there are currently over 100,000 troops serving under U.S. and NATO command in Afghanistan, many of them so-called niche deployment special forces, mountain and airborne troops and other units ordered by NATO from member and candidate nations, on August 7 the newly-installed Alliance Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen issued an "open call for more troops" which "was perhaps the clearest indication yet that a major escalation ordered this year by new U.S. President Barack Obama is far from over."

In Rasmussen's words, "Honestly speaking, I think we need more troops." [2]

Two days after being sworn in as NATO chief on August 1 Rasmussen "ruled out setting a deadline for the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan, saying the western alliance will stay there 'for as long as it takes.'" [3]

The new secretary general hadn't time to begin to settle into his new post when he and NATO Supreme Allied Commander James Stavridis flew into Kabul on an unscheduled visit two days afterwards "in order to get a comprehensive view of the international effort." [4]

On August 7 British General David Richards, who will become Chief of the General Staff on August 28, stated that "There is absolutely no chance of Nato pulling out" [5] of Afghanistan and that his own nation's role there "might take as long as 30 to 40 years." [6]

Eight days earlier the British ambassador to the U.S., Sir Nigel Sheinwald, anticipated Richards in saying of the British - and by implication NATO - role in South and Central Asia that "This is going to be for decades...." [7]

In late July the Afghan ambassador to the U.S. also revealed that any hopes for an imminent deescalation of the war in his country, not to mention its eventual end, were non-existent by revealing that "NATO countries will provide 8,000 to 10,000 additional troops to allow Afghans to vote securely" [8] in this month's national elections. The official explanation by the U.S. and NATO for their increased deployment of troops to Afghanistan is that it is an ad hoc effort to insure the elections there proceed without interruption, but past elections have occurred and the fighting has increased with the introduction of more and yet more Western soldiers, tanks and other armor, attack helicopters, warplanes and large-scale military offensives.

In fact August is a good month for a NATO summer offensive and concerns over elections are a public relations ploy.

The day before the British envoy to the U.S. acknowledged the decades-long plans of his country, his host country and NATO, British Foreign Minister David Miliband held a joint press conference in Washington with his American counterpart Hillary Clinton at which he stated that despite polls in both Britain and America showing majority opposition to the continuation of the Afghan war "I want to be absolutely clear that we (the UK and the US) went into this together and we will work it through together, because we are stronger together." [9]

That the British and American publics are as anxious for NATO troops to leave Afghanistan as the Afghans themselves means nothing to Western political elites for whom much more is stake than the fate of Afghanistan, about which they couldn't care less.

As a reflection of the urgency the Pentagon and NATO attach to the deteriorating security situation in the nation, an emergency conclave was held on a U.S. airbase near NATO Headquarters in Belgium with American Defense Secretary Robert Gates, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullins, commander of NATO and U.S. forces in Afghanistan General Stanley A. McChrystal, deputy commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan General David Rodriguez, NATO Supreme Allied Commander Admiral James Stavridis and Central Command chief David Petraeus.

Two days later NATO's governing body, the North Atlantic Council, announced plans "to reorganize the alliance's command structure in Afghanistan by setting up a new headquarters" to be named Intermediate Joint Headquarters and commanded by U.S. General Rodriguez.

A news account of the NATO decision said that "It is similar to the model used in Iraq, where overall command of the multinational forces was under a four-star American general, while a three-star general ran daily operations." [10]

Afghanistan is not the only battleground in the South Asian war theater.

From July 20-24 senior leaders of the American and Pakistani armed forces met in Atlanta, Georgia at a counterinsurgency seminar.

The director of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center, Colonel Daniel Roper, said of the proceedings: "This week we presented some lessons learned in counterinsurgency. We used those lessons to stimulate conversation and took our previous experiences in Iraq and applied them to our current status. We exchanged our viewpoints on the challenges in Afghanistan, Pakistan and South Asia at large."

South Asia at large includes not only Afghanistan and Pakistan but India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Another U.S. military official present at the four-day workshop said, "Pakistan is a pivotal country in our current operations. The Pakistan military actually just came out of fighting the insurgency over there to bring their knowledge to us and for us to talk about certain practices we have used both historically and more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan." [11]

In early August commander of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan Stanley McChrystal and Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke spoke with Vietnam War scholar Stanley Karnow in an "effort to apply the lessons of the earlier conflict to the fight against the Taliban.

"Holbrooke confirmed to The Associated Press that the three men discussed similarities between the two wars. [Karnow] says envoy Richard Holbrooke called him and passed the phone to Gen. Stanley McChrystal." [12]

Not only is "South Asia at large" included in the West's Greater Afghan war but so is Central Asia and the Caspian Sea Basin. In both instances nations already involved in providing bases for U.S. and NATO forces (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) and those supplying troops and ancillary services are being pulled deeper into the NATO web.

This past January U.S. Central Command chief David Petraeus visited Kazakhstan which like Mongolia, about which more later, is among only three countries bordering both Russia and China, North Korea being the third. Petraeus pushed for his host country to open up its air bases for transit to Afghanistan and it was later revealed that discussions concerning the recruitment of Kazakh troops for the war front were also held.

Kazakhstan is a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) along with three of its four Central Asian neighbors [Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), Russia and China.

It is also the Caspian nation with the largest oil and natural gas deposits and a key nation in Western plans to dominate the transport of hydrocarbons to Europe and Asia.

The penetration of Kazakhstan, a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace, by the Pentagon and NATO will simultaneously insert a hostile Western military presence on Russia's and China's borders and undermine the very existence of the CSTO and SCO. Part of the purpose of the war in Afghanistan, which was started four months after the founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in June of 2001, is precisely to install U.S. and NATO military forces in Central Asia to sabotage attempts by China and Russia to develop common security, energy, transportation and other projects.

On August 7 American ambassador to Kazakhstan Richard Hoagland met with the nation's defense minister to expand military collaboration.

"During the meeting Kazakh Defense Minister Dzhaksybekov paid special attention to the increased number of actions under the plan of military contacts...[and the] study of advanced experience and organization of the U.S. army, as well as the exchange of experience." The sharing of experience has already included "over 320 Kazakh military men...trained within the program of international military education and training in educational centers of the U.S. armed forces." [13]

Also on August 7 Pentagon chief Robert Gates expressed his gratification that Kyrgyzstan, which earlier this year evicted U.S. and NATO troops from the air base at Manas, had proven susceptible to bribery and allowed the U.S. military to conduct transit again through the same base. The new arrangement "will enable the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan to continue their highly productive military relations created earlier...." [14]

Kyrgyzstan like Kazakhstan is a member of the CSTO and SCO, though it's not certain for how long.

In Kazakhstan's Caspian neighbor to the south, Turkmenistan, the Pentagon has been no less active of late. At the end of July Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns announced plans for what was described as an intergovernmental commission for regular consultations with Turkmenistan which "marks progress in...the contribution to stability in Afghanistan and across the region...." [15]

A news report two weeks earlier revealed that "Turkmenistan is quietly developing into a major transport hub for the northern supply network, which is being used to relay non-lethal supplies to US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. The Pentagon has confirmed a small contingent of US military personnel now operates in Ashgabat to assist refueling operations." [16]

Similar processes are occurring on the western end of the Caspian with Azerbaijan and its neighbors in the South Caucasus. With the massive increase of troops and equipment and the escalation of combat operations in Afghanistan, NATO partners are being drafted into not

only providing more troops but making their airspace and air bases available for the transit of soldiers, weapons and supplies. Plans are underway to employ air bases in Bulgaria and Romania acquired in recent years as forward operating bases for the U.S. and NATO alike to connect with bases in Georgia and Azerbaijan and thence to Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Last month the world's first global strategic airlift base, at the air base in Papa, Hungary - "the biggest NATO project in 40 years" [17] - was put into operation for the war in South Asia and future conflicts in the East. The twelve participating nations are NATO members Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Poland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and the U.S. as well as two Partnership for Peace states, Finland and Sweden.

After the meeting of the Russian and U.S. presidents in Moscow last month, Russia agree to permit the Pentagon up to 4,500 annual military flights over its territory without fees, saving the U.S. up to \$133 million a year in total transit costs.

An analysis by an American writer, Alfred Ross, in Russia Profile several days ago warned of the consequences of Russia's accommodation of American war plans in South Asia:

"Under Obama, the U.S. military presence on Russia's Central Asian flank is proceeding at a ferocious pace. The appointment of Richard Holbrooke, the former NATO Ambassador who orchestrated NATO's attack on Yugoslavia as envoy to the region is indicative of Obama's intentions. No area is more strategically important than the 'Af-Pak' project, which positions U.S. troops within the zone fronting on Iran, China, and Russia's Central Asia.

"For the new American irregular warfare approach, it is the ability to map small terrain, analyze civilian traffic patterns and read local radar systems that will be key to the next round of U.S. operations across Russia's southern flank, from the Crimea to Kyrgyzstan." [18]

To further demonstrate the accuracy of his concerns it was recently announced that Mongolia, which directly abuts Russia as well as China, was sending an initial contingent of 130 troops to serve under NATO in Afghanistan.

A news report of the offer stated that "Mongolia's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has helped cement its alliance with the United States" and that it will facilitate the nation's "third neighbor" policy to "reach out to allies other than China and Russia." [19] Along with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, the South Asian war is being exploited by Washington and Brussels to intrude their military structures into nations neighboring Russia and China, reorganize their armed forces as well as shift their interstate allegiances and further encircle two of the West's main competitors in the region and the world.

South Korea is also discussing sending troops back to Afghanistan. Singapore now has a unit serving with NATO's ISAF and the possible next defense minister of Japan, the Democratic Party's Keiichiro Asao, recently affirmed that his nation would consider sending ground troops to Afghanistan for the first time. [20]

The Afghan war has also allowed the West to consolidate the creation of an Asian NATO, with armed forces from the above-mentioned countries to join those of Australia and New Zealand already there.

With regards to the other end of Eurasia, the former Soviet Union, in mid-July a Moldovan helicopter operating under contract with NATO was shot down in Afghanistan, killing the six Ukrainian crew members on board.

In the South Caucasus, Armenia announced two weeks ago that it planned to send troops to Afghanistan "by the end of the year." An analyst from that country said that "In addition to the Americans wanting Armenia, Armenia also wants to play a greater role, a role in Afghanistan that also builds on the strength of experience of Armenian peacekeepers who've served in Iraq and Kosovo." [21]

Armenia, like all the former Soviet Central Asian nations except for Turkmenistan, is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization with Russia and Belarus, and like the four others is being enticed by the West to shift its loyalties to NATO.

Georgia just announced that it has assigned a battalion of US-trained troops to Afghanistan and neighboring Azerbaijan has recently doubled its troops there.

Regarding the first nation, "Georgia has been involved in NATO operations in the Balkans for nine years, and for five years in Iraq, along with the U.S. and other NATO members.

"Georgia has proven its loyalty to the West by its actions since 1999. More than 10,000 military personnel have participated in peacekeeping operations first in Kosovo, then in Iraq and briefly in Afghanistan during 2005-06." [22]

The same source remarked that "[T]he participation in real combat operations along with the military units of such powerful countries will enrich Georgian soldiers with substantive operational experience."

Combat experience that was put to use a year ago in its five-day war with Russia. Three days ago the deputy chairman of the Georgian parliament's foreign affairs committee, Georgy Kandelaki, told reporters that his government would derive two major benefits from sending additional troops to Afghanistan:

"First of all, our servicemen will gain combat experience because they will be in the middle of combat action, and that is a really invaluable experience.

"Secondly, it will be a heavy argument to support Georgia's NATO aspirations." [23]

Gaining wartime combat experience in the Afghan campaign for action on its border with Russia is not unique to Georgia.

A former commander of Finnish troops in the country, which in the past weeks have been

engaged in active combat operations in the north of Afghanistan, said that "This is a unique situation for us, in that we will get to train part of our wartime forces. That part will get to operate as close to wartime conditions as is possible." [24]

Finland has a 1,300 kilometer border with Russia and is in the process of moving toward full NATO membership despite the opposition of a majority of its citizens. NATO is progressively encroaching on Russia's borders from most every direction and the Afghan war is training the armies that may one day engage in combat much closer to home.

The war in Afghanistan and on the other side of the border in Pakistan has reached its highest pitch of intensity to date with Afghan civilian deaths over 1,000 this year and the U.S. and NATO experiencing their highest death tolls in almost eight years of warfare.

Britain has announced that it is sending 2,000 more troops and additional Predator drones, Chinook and Merlin helicopters and armored vehicles.

Italy, France, Germany, Romania, Turkey, Portugal, Spain, new NATO members Albania and Croatia and Contact Country partners Australia and New Zealand have deployed and have been pressured to provide more troops, including special forces units, warplanes, attack helicopters and armored vehicles for the war.

A war that expanded into a 50-nation military campaign and that has fanned out to include U.S. and NATO military incursions into South and Central Asia and the Caspian Sea region.

A war that serves as a furnace to forge an integrated, battle-hardened international military force that can be employed wherever else in the world Brussels and Washington choose to use it in the future.

The Afghan war, then, is no ordinary war, as abhorrent as all wars are.

It is only going to expand in width and in the amount of blood shed, but already it is distinguished by several developments:

It is the U.S.'s first war in Asia and its longest one anywhere since Vietnam.

It is NATO's first ground war and its first military campaign in Asia.

The German army has engaged in its first combat operations since the defeat of the Third Reich in 1945.

Finnish soldiers have engaged in combat for the first time since World War II and Swedish forces in almost 200 years.

Canada has lost its first troops in combat, 127, since the Korean War.

Australia has registered its first combat deaths since the Vietnam War.

More British soldiers have been killed, 191, than at any time since the Falklands/Malvinas war in 1982.

A nation that borders Pakistan, Iran, China and two Central Asian nations has been thrown into turmoil. The world's seven official nuclear nations are either in the neighborhood - China, Pakistan, India and Russia - or are engaged in hostilities - the U.S., Britain and France.

The only beneficiary of this conflagration is a rapidly emerging Global NATO.

- 1) Washington File, U.S. Department of State, May 4, 2006
- 2) Reuters, August 7, 2009
- 3) Bloomberg News, August 3, 2009
- 4) NATO International, August 5, 2009
- 5) BBC News, August 8, 2009
- 6) The Times, August 7, 2009
- 7) Boston Globe, July 30, 2009
- 8) Zee News (India), July 24, 2009
- 9) Press TV, July 29, 2009
- 10) Associated Press, August 4, 2009
- 11) United States Army, Army News Service, July 30, 2009
- 12) Associated Press, August 6, 2009
- 13) Trend News Agency, August 7, 2009
- 14) Interfax, August 7, 2009
- 15) Trend News Agency, July 24, 2009
- 16) EurasiaNet, July 8, 2009
- 17) Hungary Around The Clock, July 28, 2009
- 18) Russia Profile, July 31, 2009
- 19) Trend News Agency, July 22, 2009
- 20) Stars and Stripes, July 21, 2009
- 21) ArmeniaLiberty, July 23, 2009
- 22) Eurasia Daily Monitor, July 20, 2009
- 23) Russian Information Agency Novosti, August 6, 2009
- 24) Helsingin Sanomat, June 19, 2009