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War without Borders: U.S., NATO Expand Military Role In Southeastern Europe

by Rick Rozoff
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On September 11 a Balkans news source cited the chairman of the South East Europe Center at the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, DC, John Sitolides, as claiming that "Although the United States is not focused on the Balkans as it was in the 1990s, the challenges in this region are still reviewed at a very high level in Washington." [1]

Sitolides founded and was executive director of the Western Policy Center in the U.S.'s capital in 1998 which specialized "in U.S. foreign and security policies in the eastern Mediterranean, Balkan and Black Sea regions," before merging it with the Woodrow Wilson Center and is a "regular speaker on foreign policy at the Pentagon's National Defense University and the National Foreign Affairs Training Center." [2]

In the news story mentioned above he stated "The recent visit to the Balkans of the US Vice

President Joe Biden was a signal that although the region is not the subject of the President's constant attention, the challenges in this region are still reviewed at a very high level." [3]

Biden visited the Balkans this past May and was the highest ranking American official to travel to Kosovo since its unilateral declaration of independence in February of 2008. While in the capital of the breakaway Serbian province he insisted on the "absolutely irreversible" nature of Kosovo's secession - nineteen months afterward still not recognized by 130 of the world's 192 nations - and highlighted that "The success of an independent Kosovo is a priority for our administration." [4]

While still in the U.S. Senate Biden played a major role in fostering the break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and in promoting its former republics' integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Over the past six years most every nation in the Balkans was ordered to provide troops for the war in Iraq as a precondition for future NATO membership and currently every single nation in the peninsula except for Serbia - Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania and Slovenia - has troops serving under NATO command in Afghanistan or, in the case of Montenegro, soon will have.

Many of the above nations also now have U.S. military bases stationed on their soil and most if not all have signed a status of forces agreement (SOFA) to host American and NATO troops.

After NATO's first military operations in its history - Operation Deliberate Force in Bosnia in 1995 and Operation Allied Force against Yugoslavia in 1999 - and its deployment of troops to Macedonia in the beginning of this decade with Operation Essential Harvest in 2000 and Operation Amber Fox the following year, the attention of Alliance members and the bloc collectively shifted to the so-called Broader Middle East and the wars they launched in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Even during that interim, though, Washington and Brussels have exploited the Balkans for training, transit and troops for both the Afghan and Iraqi campaigns. The Pentagon has acquired the permanent use of seven military bases in Bulgaria and Romania since both nations were granted full NATO membership in 2004 and those installations have been linked with the U.S. and NATO base in Incirlik, Turkey for the West's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and for surrogate conflicts in the Black Sea like the Georgian-Russian war in August of 2008.

The Balkans are slated to play an even more prominent role in the West's drives east and south into former Soviet space, including the Caucasus and Central Asia, and into South Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

The area, Southeastern Europe, is now also targeted for the latest extension of American and NATO global interceptor missile plans. [5]

Former Yugoslavia has become a training ground for the Pentagon and NATO to integrate the armed forces of Balkans, former Soviet, Scandinavian, Middle Eastern and African NATO partners involved in the Partnership for Peace, Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative programs.

As of September 13 multinational NATO exercises were occurring simultaneously in the former Yugoslav republics of Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia.

On September 3 NATO launched the two-week Combined Endeavor 2009 exercises to be held in three locations in Bosnia with the participation of sixteen NATO nations and the host country.

Bosnian Army Brigadier-General Dragan Vukovic was quoted as saying "the exercise [is] a great opportunity for the Bosnian Armed Forces to show their preparedness and readiness to become a full member of NATO." [6]

A week later the 18-day Jackal Stone 2009 exercise began in neighboring Croatia which includes 1,500 soldiers from 10 countries - Albania, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Ukraine and the U.S. - and "Croatian Air Force and Air Defence helicopters, US Air Force aircraft, US Army helicopters and a US Navy Destroyer." [7]

A Croatian newspaper announced that "The main objective of the exercise is to foster cooperation among the armed forces of participating countries in...strengthening regional security and stability...." [8]

An article called "Armies of 15 Countries in Serbia" provided details of the four-day MEDCEUR (Medical Central and Eastern Europe Exercise) NATO training in Serbia which ended on September 13 and which included the "participation of soldiers from 15 Central and Eastern European states." [9]

In truth the exercise's ambit reached further than Central and Eastern Europe into the South Caucasus. The participating NATO members and partners were Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Germany, Georgia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Norway, Ukraine and the U.S.

Serbian Defence Minister Dragan Sutanovac, whose subservience to NATO warrants a treason charge, said that "This is the largest military exercise of this type in the world, whose organisation and planning lasted for a year. This is a major promotion for our defence system." [10]

The country's Defense Ministry stated "The participation in the exercise is of exceptional importance when it comes to following the innovations introduced in medical support in line with NATO standards, above all in the areas of support of battle and natural disasters operations" [11]

The exercise is sponsored by the Pentagon's European Command and was held for the first time in Serbia this year.

This was occurring as NATO and most of its members states are completing the severing of Kosovo from Serbia. In the middle of the NATO exercise in Serbia the European Union's EULEX (European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo) mission engineered a customs agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, thus recognizing the border between the two as an international one. That is, further formalizing Kosovo's independence.

Referring to United Nations Resolution 1244 of 1999 which recognizes Kosovo as part of Serbia, on September 12 EU representative to Kosovo Pieter Feith said, "EULEX is not status-neutral. It operates under the UN umbrella, which is status neutral, but that does not make EULEX status-neutral. The reality is that EULEX is supported by 27 EU member states, of which five have not recognized Kosovo, but they are still EU member states."

Serbian news sources wrote of the EU's role in supporting Kosovo separatism that "America is satisfied with EULEX's participation and welcomes this mission because of fulfillment of its mandate that has been approved by Kosovo authorities...." [12]

The preceding day the Russian ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) lodged a complaint against that organization for terminating an operation to protect the rights of Serbian, Roma, Goran and other persecuted Kosovo ethnic communities' rights and said, "Such steps, sanctioned by no one, are unilateral, and they affect the overall activity under the mandate of that mission." [13]

Eight days before the spokesman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, Andrei Nesterenko, "assessed that there is still a considerable potential for conflict in Kosovo and expressed the expectation that the international community will act impartially, preventing new anti-Serb provocations." [14]

Now the Western military bloc that mercilessly bombed Serbia for 78 days in 1999 and has wrested Kosovo from it is holding drills on Serbian territory.

North of former Yugoslavia on the Black Sea, last week Romanian Defense Minister Mihai Stanisoara announced that his nation would scrap Russian MiG 21 Lancers in its air force's inventory - as part of NATO demands for so-called weapons interoperability - and planned to acquire 48-54 fighters jets, most likely U.S. F-16 multirole fighter jets or F-35 fifth generation stealth warplanes. [15]

Also earlier this month the American guided-missile destroyer USS Stout returned from a deployment in the Black Sea where it visited ports in Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia, in the last case near the coast of Abkhazia, about which more shortly.

The destroyer, which also participated in naval exercises with Israel and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean, was on its first deployment as part of the Pentagon's Aegis sea-based interceptor missile system. [16]

Across the Black Sea from Romania, Reuters announced on September 11 that the U.S. plans a \$7.8 billion dollar deal with Turkey to supply it with Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) interceptor missiles. The PAC-3 is a substantially upgraded version of the Patriots that were sent to Israel on the eve of the 1991 war against Iraq and to Turkey ahead of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. The pattern inescapably suggests an imminent replay of the first two attacks in the Persian Gulf, this time against Iran.

In revealing plans to provide advanced theater interceptor missiles to Turkey, the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency said in a release:

"It is vital to the U.S. national interest to assist our North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally in

developing and maintaining a strong and ready self-defense capability that will contribute to an acceptable military balance in the area." [17]

Reuters added this background information:

"Turkey's geostrategic importance for the United States depends partly on Incirlik Air Base, located near Adana in southeast Turkey. KC-135 refueling planes operating out of Incirlik have delivered more than 35 million gallons of fuel to U.S. warplanes on missions in Iraq and Afghanistan...." [18]

A later report added specifics - "the deal will include delivery of nearly 290 Patriot missiles and includes 72 PAC-3 models along with communications gear needed to establish an integrated air-defense system for more than a dozen command posts" - and also quoted from the Defense Security Cooperation Agency statement:

"Turkey will use the PAC-3 missiles to improve its missile defense capability, strengthen its homeland defense, and deter regional threats." [19]

The Turkish Hurriyet newspaper ran a feature on the topic on September 13 which casts the Patriot deployment within a far broader context, stating that "Washington also does not rule out the military option or plans to deploy a missile-defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, which have created serious tension between Russia and the United States in the past. Earlier this month, a top defense lobbyist said the negotiations are continuing over U.S. plans to deploy a missile-defense shield in Turkey, a possibility floated last week by a Polish newspaper."

The article quoted a Turkish Iranian expert, Arif Keskin, as saying "[A]ny American missile could only be placed in Turkey if NATO gives a green light for the program" and warning that "if Turkey agrees to open its soil to the missile shield program, it would worsen its relations with not only Iran, but also Syria and Russia."

The same source quoted another analyst issuing a second alarm: "For Turkey's part, purchasing the Patriot missiles mean engaging in a conflict with Iran." [20]

Turkey is the only NATO member which borders Iran.

The recent trajectory of the American guided-missile destroyer Stout examined earlier, from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Black Sea, indicates Pentagon and NATO designs on the geopolitically vital arc that begins in the Balkans, dips south to the Middle East and proceeds back north to the Caucasus.

A Reuters dispatch titled "In restive Mediterranean, U.S. ship eyes risk of missile war" reported on the USS Higgins destroyer which had docked last week in Israel and included these specifics:

The USS Higgins is "one of 18 American ships deployed globally with Aegis interceptor systems capable of blowing up ballistic missiles above the atmosphere. For Israel, where Higgins docked this week, Aegis is an especially close asset.

"Israel already hosts a U.S. strategic radar, X-band, and its Arrow II missile interceptor, which is partly underwritten by Washington, is inter-operable with Aegis." [21]

The story situated the above within wider geostrategic plans by the U.S. and its allies:

"According to a regional map issued last month by the U.S. Missile Defence Agency, a Mediterranean-based Aegis could cover southern Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian territories and north Egypt in the event of a missile war.

"Raytheon says the 'ashore' SM-3 [Standard Missile-3], due out in 2013, may also be considered by the Pentagon for Europe, where it could play a role with or without a missile defence deployment that former U.S. President George W. Bush had proposed in Poland and the Czech Republic and which has been fiercely opposed by Russia." [22]

Last week it was reported that Turkey, Israel and Azerbaijan "will launch the joint manufacturing of armored combat vehicles," according to an Azerbaijani government source, and that "Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense Industry seeks to build tracked fighting vehicles, self-propelled bridges and armored military trucks on the body of T-54 and T-55 tanks which were decommissioned from the national army's arsenal." [23]

The following day the Vice-Speaker of Azerbaijan's Parliament Ziyafat Asgarov, in speaking of the almost twenty-year-old conflict with Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh, one which could trigger an all-out war at any moment, said that "We would like NATO to demonstrate its resolute position regarding this issue." [24]

A week earlier the nation's Defense Ministry spokesman Eldar Sabiroglu had menacingly reiterated his government's position on Karabakh, one of four "frozen conflicts" in the Soviet Union:

"We are hoping for results while political negotiations continue. Otherwise our army will fulfill its function [to free the land] at a moment when our state finds it necessary.

"No one should doubt that. I am saying this taking into account the equipment of our military units with modern types of weapons and the high level of our troops' combat preparedness." [25]

Shortly thereafter Frank Boland, the head of the Force Planning Department of the NATO Defence Policy and Planning Division, led a delegation of Alliance experts to Georgia to assess the nation's military preparedness after its defeat in the war with Russia a year ago August and "to promote the development of the Georgian Armed Forces," according to the nation's Defense Ministry. [26]

"The goal of the visit is to evaluate the accomplishments of the Planning and Review Process (PARP) and obligations under the Annual National Plan (ANP), undertaken by the Ministry of Defence of Georgia." [27]

Shortly before the NATO delegation arrived, the U.S. client regime of Mikheil Saakashvili seized vessels in the Black Sea headed to Abkhazia. On September 2 Abkhazian President Sergei Bagapsh "ordered the Republican Naval Forces to destroy all Georgian ships violating Abkhazian territorial waters" [28] after Georgia had impounded 23 vessels in neutral waters

so far this year.

The very next day the Pentagon's European Command reported of the recent deployment of Marines to Georgia that "the Marine Corps has committed its finest Marines to help train the 31st Battalion. All have deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, many for multiple tours." [29]

The same day Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko reacted to the U.S.-trained Georgian navy's and coast guard's actions against Abkhazia by warning that "Aside from interrupting international maritime shipping, these actions of the Georgian leadership are an attempt to impose a blockade of the Abkhazian coast, which could lead to the deterioration of the situation in the region and new military conflicts." [30]

The military expansion and aggression begun by the U.S. and NATO in the Balkans fourteen years has not only continued unabated but has widened its area of operations to take in the former Soviet Union, the Broader Middle East from the Atlantic Coast of Africa to the Chinese border, and Northeast Africa.

Unless it is stopped much of the rest of the world confronts the same fate.

- 1) Makfax, September 11, 2009
- 2) Woodrow Wilson Center
- 3) Makfax, September 11, 2009
- 4) BBC News, May 21, 2009
- 5) U.S. Expands Global Missile Shield Into Middle East, Balkans
Stop NATO, September 11, 2009
<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/09/11/u-s-expands-global-missile-shield-into-middle-east-balkans/>
- 6) Xinhua News Agency, September 4, 2009
- 7) Croatian Times, September 11, 2009
- 8) Ibid
- 9) Balkan Insight, September 10, 2009
- 10) Ibid
- 11) Makfax, August 31, 2009
- 12) Beta News Agency/Tanjug News Agency, September 12, 2009
- 13) FoNet, September 11, 2009
- 14) Radio Serbia, September 3, 2009
- 15) The Financiarul, September 9, 2009
- 16) Virginian-Pilot, September 5, 2009
- 17) Reuters, September 11, 2009
- 18) Ibid
- 19) Bloomberg News, September 12, 2009
- 20) Hurriyet, September 13, 2009
- 21) Reuters, September 8, 2009
- 22) Ibid
- 23) Azeri Press Agency, September 9, 2009
- 24) Azertag, September 11, 2009
- 25) Interfax, September 4, 2009
- 26) Trend News Agency, September 9, 2009
- 27) Ministry of Defence, September 9, 2009

- 28) Voice of Russia, September 4, 2009
- 29) Civil Georgia, September 3, 2009
- 30) Russian Information Agency Novosti, September 3, 2009