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The Great Game: U.S., NATO War In Afghanistan Fifty or more countries in a single war theater

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The U.S. (and Britain) began bombing the Afghan capital of Kabul on October 7, 2001 with Tomahawk cruise missiles launched from warships and submarines and bombs dropped from warplanes and shortly thereafter American special forces began ground operations, a task that has been conducted since by regular Army and Marine units. The bombing and the ground combat operations continue more than eight years later and both will be intensified to record levels in short order.

The combined U.S. and NATO forces would represent a staggering number, in excess of 150,000 soldiers. By way of comparison, as of September of this year there were approximately 120,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and only a small handful of other nations' personnel, those assigned to the NATO Training Mission - Iraq, remaining with them.

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Afghanistan: Historical Precedents and Antecedents

Over the past ten years citizens of the United States and other Western nations, and unfortunately most of the world, have become accustomed to Washington and its military allies in Europe and those appointed as armed outposts on the periphery of the "Euro-Atlantic community" engaging in armed aggression around the world.

Wars against Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq and lower profile military operations and surrogate campaigns in nations as diverse as Colombia, Yemen, the Philippines, Ivory Coast, Somalia, Chad, the Central African Republic, South Ossetia and elsewhere have become an unquestioned prerogative of the U.S. and its NATO partners. So much so that many have

forgotten to consider how comparable actions have been or might be viewed if a non-Western nation attempted them.

Thirty years ago this December 24 the first Soviet troops entered Afghanistan to assist a neighboring nation's government to combat an armed insurgency based in Pakistan and surreptitiously (later quite openly) supported by the United States.

In the waning days of that year, 1979, and in the early ones of the following Soviet troop strength grew to some 50,000 soldiers.

Great Game

It is worth noting in this regard that in 1839 Britain invaded Afghanistan with 21,000 of its own and Indian colonial troops and in 1878 with twice that number to counter Russian influence in the country in what came to be called the Great Game.

On January 23, 1980 U.S. President James Earl (Jimmy) Carter stated in his last State of the Union Address that "The implications of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan could pose the most serious threat to the peace since the Second World War."

When the Soviet Union began withdrawing its forces from the nation - the first half from May 15 to August 16, 1988 and the last from November 15, 1988 to February 15, 1989 - their peak number had been slightly over 100,000.

On December 1 of 2009 U.S. President Barack Obama announced that he was deploying 30,000 new troops to Afghanistan in addition to the 68,000 already there and two days later "Defense Secretary Robert Gates told Congress...that the surge force of 30,000 going to Afghanistan will grow to at least 33,000 when support troops are included." [1]

That is, over 100,000 troops. Along with private military and security contractors whose number is even larger.

Soviet troops were in Afghanistan barely over nine years. American troops are now involved in the ninth year of combat operations in the country and in less than four weeks will be engaged in their tenth calendar year of war there.

On November 25 White House spokesman Robert Gibbs assured the people of his nation that "We are in year nine of our efforts in Afghanistan. We are not going to be there another eight or nine years." [2] The implication is that the U.S. may wage a war in Afghanistan that could last until 2017. For sixteen years.

The longest war in American history prior to the current one was that in Vietnam. U.S. military advisers were present in the country from the late 1950s onward and covert operations were carried on in the early 1960s, but only in the year after the contrived Gulf of Tonkin incident - 1965 - did the Pentagon begin major combat operations in the south and regular bombing raids in the north. The last American combat unit left South Vietnam in 1972, seven years later.

The U.S. (and Britain) began bombing the Afghan capital of Kabul on October 7, 2001 with Tomahawk cruise missiles launched from warships and submarines and bombs dropped from

warplanes and shortly thereafter American special forces began ground operations, a task that has been conducted since by regular Army and Marine units. The bombing and the ground combat operations continue more than eight years later and both will be intensified to record levels in short order.

Since late last summer the U.S. and its NATO allies have launched regular drone missile and attack helicopter assaults inside Pakistan. Had the Soviets attempted to do likewise thirty years ago - when their own borders were threatened - Washington's response might well have triggered a third world war.

The USSR did not deploy troops from any of its fellow Warsaw Pact nations in Afghanistan during the 1980s. In a historical irony that warrants more commentary that it has received - none - every one of those nations now has forces serving under NATO and killing and dying in the Afghan war theater: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and the former German Democratic Republic (subsumed under a united Federal Republic, which has almost 4,500 soldiers stationed there).

They are among troops from close to 50 nations serving or soon to serve under NATO command on the Afghanistan-Pakistan war front, which include the following from the Alliance and several of its partnership programs:

NATO members:

Albania
Belgium
Britain
Bulgaria
Canada
Croatia
The Czech Republic
Denmark
Estonia
France
Germany
Greece
Hungary
Iceland
Italy
Latvia
Lithuania
Luxembourg
The Netherlands
Norway
Poland
Portugal
Romania
Slovakia
Slovenia
Spain

Turkey
The United States (35,000 troops with as many more on the way)

Partnership for Peace/Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC):

Armenia
Austria
Azerbaijan
Bosnia
Finland
Georgia
Ireland
Macedonia
Montenegro
Sweden
Switzerland (withdrawn last year)
Ukraine

Contact Countries:

Australia
Japan (naval forces)
New Zealand
South Korea

Adriatic Charter (overlaps with the Partnership for Peace):

Albania
Bosnia
Croatia
Macedonia
Montenegro

Istanbul Cooperation Initiative:

United Arab Emirates
Trilateral Afghanistan-Pakistan-NATO Military Commission:
Afghanistan
Pakistan

Miscellaneous:

Colombia
Mongolia
Singapore

The above roster includes seven of fifteen former Soviet republics (another development worthy of consideration), with Moldova after this year's "Twitter Revolution" and Kazakhstan, where in September the U.S. ambassador pressured the government for troops, candidates for deployments under Partnership for Peace obligations. (Both had earlier sent troops to Iraq.) Their participation would lead to 60% of former Soviet states having troops

committed to NATO in Afghanistan. With Moldova added, every European nation (excluding microstates like Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco, San Marino and Vatican City) except for Belarus, Cyprus, Malta, Russia and Serbia will have military forces serving under NATO in Afghanistan.

Never in the history of world warfare have military contingents from so many nations - fifty or more - served in one war theater. In a single nation. Troops from five continents, Oceania and the Middle East. [3]

Even the putative coalition of the willing stitched together by the U.S. and Britain after the invasion of Iraq in March of 2003 and until troops were pulled for redeployment to Afghanistan only consisted of forces from thirty one nations: The U.S., Britain, Albania, Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, El Salvador, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Japan, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Thailand and Ukraine. Twenty two of those thirty one contributors were former Soviet bloc (Albania remotely) nations or former Yugoslav republics that had recently (1999) joined NATO or were being prepared for integration into or in other manners with the bloc.

The world's last three major wars - those in and against Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq - have been used as testing and training grounds for the expansion of global NATO.

The consolidation of an international rapid response (strike) force and occupation army under NATO control was further advanced this week with Obama's troop surge speech on the 1st and follow-up efforts by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to recruit more allied troops at the recently concluded meeting of NATO (and allied) foreign ministers.

On December 4 "NATO's top official said...that at least 25 countries will send a total of about 7,000 additional forces to Afghanistan next year 'with more to come,' as U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton sought to bolster allied resolve." [4] In attendance at the NATO meeting in Brussels were also an unspecified number of foreign ministers of non-NATO nations providing troops for the Afghan war, top military commander of all U.S. and NATO forces General Stanley McChrystal and Afghan Foreign Minister Rameez Daudspata. Spanta.

7,000 more NATO troops with "more to come" would, added to some 42,000 non-U.S. soldiers currently serving with NATO and 35,000 U.S. forces doing the same, mean at least 85,000 troops under NATO command even without the 33,000 new U.S. troops headed to Afghanistan. The bloc's largest foreign deployment before this was to Kosovo in 1999 when at its peak the Alliance-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) consisted of 50,000 troops from 39 nations. [5]

The combined U.S. and NATO forces would represent a staggering number, in excess of 150,000 soldiers. By way of comparison, as of September of this year there were approximately 120,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and only a small handful of other nations' personnel, those assigned to the NATO Training Mission - Iraq, remaining with them.

Among NATO member states Italian Defense Minister Ignazio La Russa recently announced

an increase of 1,000 troops, bringing the nation's total to almost 4,500, 50% more than had previously been stationed in Iraq.

Poland will send another 600-700 troops which, added to those already in Afghanistan, will constitute the largest aggregate Polish military deployment abroad in the post-Cold War era and the highest number of troops ever deployed outside Europe in the nation's history.

Britain will provide another 500 troops, with its total rising to close to 10,000.

Bulgarian Defense Minister Nikolay Mladenov said last week that "there is a strong possibility that the country will increase its military contingent in Afghanistan." [6] To indicate the nature of the commitments new NATO member states shoulder when they join the Alliance and what their priority then becomes, three days earlier Mladenov, speaking of budgetary constraints placed on the armed forces because of the current financial crisis, affirmed that "We may cut down some other items of the army budget, but there will always be enough money for missions abroad." [7]

Washington has also pressured Croatia, which became a full member of the bloc this past April, to supply more troops and Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor hastened to pledge that "Croatia, being a NATO member, would fulfill its obligations." [8]

The Czech republic's defense minister, Martin Bartak, spoke after the Obama troop surge speech earlier this week and threatened the Czech parliament by stating "it will have to be explained to allies why the Czech Republic does not want to take part in the reinforcements while Slovakia and Britain, for instance, will reinforce their contingents...." [9]

Slovakia has announced that it will more than double its forces in Afghanistan.

The German parliament has just renewed for another year the deployment of the nation's almost 4,500 troops in Afghanistan, the maximum allowed by the Bundestag, although discussions are being held to increase that number to 7,000 after a conference on Afghanistan in London on January 28. German armed forces in the country are engaged in their nation's first ground combat operations since World War II.

A news report on December 3 said that U.S. ambassador to Turkey James Jeffrey was pressuring Ankara to provide a "specific number" of troops and to be ""more flexible" [10] in how they will be deployed, meaning that Turkey must drop so-called combat caveats and engage in active fighting along with its NATO allies.

After meeting with U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden on December 4, Hungarian Prime Minister Gyorgy Gordon Bajnai vowed to send 200 more soldiers to the South Asian war zone, an increase of 60% as Hungary currently has 360 there.

Regarding NATO partner states, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia Celeste Wallander was in Armenia to secure that nation's first military deployment to Afghanistan, the handiwork of NATO's first Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia Robert Simmons [11], who has also gained a doubling of troops from neighboring Azerbaijan and a pledge of as many as 1,000 Georgian troops by next year.

During a press conference at NATO headquarters on the first day of the Alliance's recent

Afghan war council, December 3, the bloc's chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen expressed gratitude to the United Arab Emirates for dispatching troops to Afghanistan and "hosting...the alliance's International Conference on NATO-UAE Relations and the Way Forward in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative last October." [12]

The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative was launched at the NATO summit in Turkey in 2004 to upgrade military partnerships with members of the Mediterranean Dialogue (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). [13]

A U.S. military news agency published an article on December 3 that discussed the Quadrennial Defense Review currently being deliberated on at the Pentagon.

Deputy Defense Secretary William J. Lynn III, who before assuming that post was Vice President of Government Operations and Strategy for Raytheon, was quoted as boasting that "The Quadrennial Defense Review...will be unlike any other: the first to be driven by current wartime requirements, to balance conventional and nonconventional capabilities, and to embrace a 'whole of government' approach to national security....This is a landmark QDR."

Lynn also said that "Secretary Gates has made clear that the conflicts we're in should be at the very forefront of our agenda. He wants to make sure we're not giving up capabilities needed now for those needed for some unknown future conflict. He wants to make sure the Pentagon is truly on war footing....For the first time in decades, the political and economic stars are aligned for a fundamental overhaul of the way the Pentagon does business." [14]

The more than eight-year war in Afghanistan is not going to end in 2011, Obama's asseverations notwithstanding, nor will it be the last of its kind. It will continue to engulf neighboring Pakistan with the threat of also spilling over into Central Asia and Iran.

The crisis confronting the world is not only the war in South Asia: It is war itself. More particularly, the recklessness of the self-proclaimed sole superpower and the military bloc it heads in arrogating to themselves the exclusive right to threaten nations around the world with military aggression.

If that policy is not brought to an end by the real international community - the more than six-sevenths of humanity outside the greater Euro-Atlantic world (as it deems itself) - Afghanistan will not be this century's last war front but its first and prototypical one. Portents are of even worse to come.

Notes

- 1) New York Daily News, December 4, 2009
- 2) New York Times, November 26, 2009
- 3) Afghan War: NATO Builds History's First Global Army Stop NATO, August 9, 2009
<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/09/01/afghan-war-nato-builds-historys-first-global-army>
- 4) Associated Press, December 4, 2009
- 5) U.S., NATO Poised For Most Massive War In Afghanistan's History

- Stop NATO, September 24, 2009 <http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/09/24/u-s-nato-poised-for-most-massive-war-in-afghanistans-history>
- 6) Sofia News Agency, November 26, 2009
- 7) Standart News, November 23, 2009
- 8) Xinhua News Agency, December 3, 2009
- 9) Czech News Agency, December 2, 2009
- 10) PanArmenian.net, December 3, 2009
- 11) Mr. Simmons' Mission: NATO Bases From Balkans To Chinese Border Stop NATO, March 4, 2009 <http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/08/27/mr-simmons-mission-nato-bases-from-balkans-to-chinese-border>
- 12) Emirates News Agency, December 3, 2009
- 13) NATO In Persian Gulf: From Third World War To Istanbul Stop NATO, February 6, 2009 <http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/08/26/nato-in-persian-gulf-from-third-world-war-to-istanbul>
- 14) American Forces Press Service, December 3, 2009