

Afghan War: Petraeus Expands U.S. Military Presence Throughout Eurasia

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On July 4 General David Petraeus assumed command of 142,000 U.S. and NATO troops in a ceremony in the Afghan capital of Kabul. He succeeded the disgraced and soon to be retired General Stanley McChrystal as chief of all foreign troops in Afghanistan, those serving under U.S. Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A)/Operation Enduring Freedom and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

He now commands military units from 46 official troop contributing nations and others from several additional countries not officially designated as such but with forces in or that will soon be deployed to Afghanistan, such as Egypt, Jordan and Colombia. Neither the Carthaginian commander Hannibal during the Second Punic War nor Napoleon Bonaparte in the wars that bore his name commanded troops speaking as many diverse tongues.

That Petraeus took charge of soldiers from fifty nations occupying a conquered country on his own country's Independence Day has gone without commentary, either ironic or indignant. In 1775 American colonists began an eight-year war against foreign troops - those of Britain and some 30,000 German auxiliaries, the latter a quarter of all forces serving under English command in North America. Currently the three nations providing the most troops for the nearly nine-year-old and increasingly deadly war in Afghanistan are the U.S. (almost 100,000), Britain (9,500) and Germany (4,500).

Petraeus's remarks on the occasion of accepting his new dual command contained the standard U.S. and NATO characterization of their war in Afghanistan as aimed exclusively against armed extremists, in particular those portrayed as fighters from other countries. A representative quote states "al-Qaeda and its network of extremist allies will not be allowed to once again establish sanctuaries in Afghanistan." Two hundred and thirty-five years ago the government of King George III may well have spoken in a similar vein concerning the likes of Johann de Kalb, Thaddeus Kosciuszko, Casimir Pulaski, Friedrich Von Steuben and the Marquis de Lafayette illegally entering British territories along the Atlantic Seaboard and waging warfare against the Crown's troops.

Petraeus arrived in Kabul on July 2, direct from Belgium where he had addressed NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the 28 member states' permanent representatives in the North Atlantic Council and representatives of 46 ISAF contributors at NATO Headquarters in Brussels and Admiral James Stavridis, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Egon Ramms, Commander Joint Force Command Brunssum, and other senior military staff at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe near Mons. (Two days later at NATO headquarters in Kabul he had two flags bestowed on him, "one for the U.S. and the other for NATO.") [1]

NATO chief Rasmussen was in Lisbon, Portugal the day Petraeus left Belgium for Afghanistan, in part to prepare for the November summit of the world's only military bloc there in November, where NATO will adopt its new, 21st century, Strategic Concept and endorse plans for an integrated interceptor missile grid to cover almost the entire European continent in conjunction with, and under the control of, the U.S.

In reference to General Petraeus taking up his new duties, Rasmussen stated at a press conference with Portuguese Foreign Minister Luis Amado that "It has been a change of command but it will not be a change of strategy."

A week after Stanley McChrystal's resignation as head of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan [2], an ephemeral scandal that disappeared as quickly, which is to say instantaneously, as it developed, the U.S. Senate voted as it customarily does in matters of foreign policy - unanimously - and in a 99-0 vote confirmed Petraeus as the new commander of the world's longest and largest-scale war.

He told Senate members on June 30 that "My sense is that the tough fighting will continue; indeed, it may get more intense in the next few months."

A few days earlier he said of President Barack Obama's proposed date for beginning the withdrawal of American and NATO troops from Afghanistan that the meaning of that pledge by the president, Petraeus' commander-in-chief, was "one of urgency - not that July 2011 is when we race for the exits, reach for the light switch and flip it off." Last December Petraeus asserted that there was no plan for a "rush to the exits" and that there "could be tens of thousands of American troops in Afghanistan for several years." [3]

In May he spoke at an Armed Forces Day dinner in Louisville, Kentucky - on a day that Afghan President Hamid Karzai was visiting the same state - and insisted that "the US must continue to send troops to Afghanistan...." [4]

To indicate how thoroughly the Pentagon and NATO are inextricably enmeshed in not only the Afghan campaign but in a far broader and deeper partnership, a few days before Petraeus, speaking of his then-role as chief of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), said that he has striven to "operationalize" U.S.-NATO military integration at CENTCOM "where up to 60 representatives of coalition partner countries serve. In addition, officers from the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia act as representatives of CentCom, increasing further the need to share sensitive information." [5]

Afghanistan falls within CENTCOM's area of responsibility and the war in that country is a mechanism for extending the Pentagon's military contacts, deployments, acquisition of bases and general warfighting interoperability with scores of nations both within and outside CENTCOM's formal ambit.

In April, three months before taking up his Afghan war post, Petraeus was in Poland - covered by U.S. European Command (EUCOM) - to meet with the nation's Chief of the General Staff, General Franciszek Gągor, discuss the war that has now cost the lives of nineteen Polish soldiers, and disclose that "in a few months a 800-1,000 strong U.S. battalion would reinforce Poland's ISAF forces in the Afghan province of Ghazni.

"Petraeus said that the U.S. troops would be placed under the Polish commander who is responsible for the province." [6]

He also met with Polish Defense Minister Bogdan Klich and President Lech Kaczynski as well as delivering a lecture at the National Defence Academy. Kaczynski, who would perish in an airplane crash three days later, presented Petraeus with the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland and the Iraq Star. [7]

Other new NATO members in Eastern Europe are equally involved, with the Pentagon employing seven new military bases in Bulgaria and Romania to train Stryker brigades and airborne troops for the war in Afghanistan. [8]

As commander of CENTCOM and superior to General McChrystal in Afghanistan, Petraeus methodically laid the groundwork for expanding the scope of the greater Afghan war throughout his command's broad geographical reach, the heart of what has been deemed the broader Middle East – from Egypt in the West to Kazakhstan in the East, taking in Iraq and the rest of the Persian Gulf region, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen, and all of Central and much of South Asia.

On January 2 of this year he traveled to Yemen and met with President Ali Abdullah Saleh after the Christmas Day airline bomb scare outside Detroit, though Petraeus had also been in Yemen the preceding summer. Pentagon assistance to the Yemeni government, administered under what is described as a counter-terrorism program, had grown from \$4.6 million in fiscal 2006 to \$67 million in fiscal 2009.

While in Iraq the day before his departure for Yemen in January, Petraeus stated, "We have, it's well known, about \$70 million in security assistance last year. That will more than double this coming year." [9]

At the time leading U.S. officials and those of its NATO allies strained to link their counterinsurgency wars – overt and otherwise – in the Horn of Africa and Gulf of Aden regions as extensions of the Global War on Terror from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Yemen and Somalia. Then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown even affirmed that "The weakness of al Qaeda in Pakistan has forced them out of Pakistan and into Yemen and Somalia." [10]

In May the New York Times revealed that last September Petraeus had authorized covert special forces operations under a directive called the Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Force Execute Order.

A United Press International feature last month indicated part of the order's designs:

"The recent disclosure that the U.S. military is expanding its covert operations in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Horn of Africa is widely seen as a dangerous precedent, with Iran as one of the main targets....Officials stressed that the directive...permits operations that could pave the way toward possible military attacks against Iran if the confrontation over Tehran's nuclear program worsens." [11]

This March the U.S. Defense Department's website featured an article entitled "Centcom Looks Beyond Iraq, Afghanistan, Petraeus Says" in which, in addition to discussing counterinsurgency operations in Pakistan and Yemen, "Petraeus told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the United States must remain vigilant in overseeing broader security challenges throughout the region.

“Petraeus called Iran the ‘primary state-level threat’ in the Middle East. He told the panel that Iran undermines security throughout the region in its efforts to gain nuclear weapons, which threatens a broader arms race, and uses its paramilitary force to influence Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, Afghanistan and the Gulf region.” [12]

Two months before he announced the U.S. was maintaining several Aegis class warships in the Persian Gulf, ships equipped with advanced missile radar and Standard Missile-3 interceptor missiles. “The U.S. positioned eight Patriot missile batteries in the Middle East and Aegis ballistic missile cruisers in the Persian Gulf, Gen. David Petraeus, the U.S. Central Command leader, told the Institute for the Study of War on Jan. 22.” [13]

The Patriot Advanced Capability-3 theater missile interceptors are to be deployed to Iran’s Persian Gulf neighbor states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

In early March Petraeus was in what is now crisis-stricken Kyrgyzstan, less than a month before President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was overthrown in a bloody uprising [14]. He had arrived in Kyrgyzstan on March 10, one day after “the U.S. embassy said [a] \$5.5 million anti-terrorist center would be built in Batken in southern Kyrgyzstan - where Russian and Kyrgyz officials had earlier said Moscow might consider building a similar military facility.” [15] It would appear that Petraeus and the Pentagon once more beat Russia to the punch.

He met with Bakiyev (who would be forced into exile early the next month) “to discuss bilateral cooperation and the situation in Afghanistan.” [16] The U.S. has used an air base at the Manas International Airport near the nation’s capital since 2001 for moving troops in and out of Afghanistan, recently at a rate of 55,000 a month.

A political analyst based in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, Aleksandr Knyazev, was quoted by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty during Petraeus’ visit on the repercussions of the Pentagon constructing a counterinsurgency/special forces base in the country: “Such a demonstrative act by the Kyrgyz side to agree...to (build a U.S.-funded counterterrorism center) is like throwing down a challenge to Russia and China.”

The feature from which the above comment is borrowed added:

“The Kyrgyz plan to set up a U.S.-funded training center in Batken might upset Russia, as the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization announced its intention last year to build a military base in southern Kyrgyzstan.

“Kyrgyzstan had been under pressure by Russia and China to close the U.S. air base. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a regional security treaty dominated by Russia and China, has called on the United States to close its military bases in Central Asia.

“According to the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek, Washington has committed \$5.5 million toward the completion of the counterterrorism center.” [17]

Petraeus also visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in early April and immediately after his return Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev met with President Barack Obama in Washington. Nazarbayev announced that he had granted the Pentagon the right to fly troops and military equipment over his nation for the expanding war in Afghanistan. According to Michael McFaul, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and Senior Director of Russian and Eurasian Affairs at the National Security Council, “the

agreement will allow troops to fly directly from the United States over the North Pole to the region.” [18]

In early June a report titled “Pentagon Looks to Plant New Facilities in Central Asia” disclosed that the U.S. is “preparing to embark on a mini-building boom in Central Asia” and “the US military wants to be involved in strategic construction projects in all five Central Asian states, including Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.” [19]

In what was described as the major component of the project, the aforementioned training center in Kyrgyzstan, the report also stated, “The facility was originally intended to be built in Batken. But now it appears that it will be situated in Osh.” [20]

Three days after the above excerpts appeared online the city of Osh erupted into violence, a deadly conflict between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks which cost hundreds of lives and led to hundreds of thousands of Uzbeks being displaced.

An account of an announcement reported to have been posted on the U.S. government’s Federal Business Opportunities website in the middle of this May included this quote: “We anticipate two different projects in Kyrgyzstan. Both are estimated to be in the \$5 million to \$10 million dollar range.”

The posting “added that up to \$5 million each was earmarked for Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It also listed two separate proposals for Tajikistan, one valued at up to \$5 million, the other worth up to \$10 million.” [21]

The U.S. military was evicted from the Uzbek air base at Karshi-Khanabad in November of 2005 and neither troops nor planes have returned since. But this April General Petraeus visited Uzbekistan, met with President Islam Karimov, and “the sides exchanged opinions on the issues of further development of Uzbek-US cooperation and other areas of mutual interest.” [22] American troops and pilots may soon join their German NATO allies operating from the air base at Termez near the Uzbek-Afghan border.

On June 25 Western news agencies reported that Ken Gross, the American ambassador to Tajikistan, where a French-dominated NATO operation has been run since early 2002 at the Dushanbe Airport but where to date no U.S. forces have been stationed, revealed that the Pentagon is to “build a facility for training local troops” to be opened next year. The American envoy said that “The plan [includes] almost \$10 million to build this national training centre for the Tajik armed forces.” [23]

An Agence France-Presse report added that “The United States has in past years built training facilities, financed military programs and established airbases in a handful of strategic ex-Soviet republics in Central Asia....These include Georgia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus as well as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia.” [24]

Petraeus’s visits to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in April followed up on trips to the same three Central Asian nations last August, to Tajikistan in October and to Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan in January of last year.

What his visits have focused on and in large part accomplished is to secure transit rights and, as has been seen above, a military foothold in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia. Starting in earnest with his tour of Central Asia in January of 2009, Petraeus has

solidified what is known as a Northern Distribution Network for the Afghan war, a three-prong project that takes in a majority of the fifteen nations that formerly constituted the Soviet Union and that circumvents Pakistan, hitherto the main land route for U.S. and NATO supplies into Afghanistan but one which is more endangered by attacks with each passing day.

The first route starts in Latvia on the Baltic Sea and proceeds overland through Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Last month “NATO marked a new first in its Afghan campaign...as officials announced that the alliance had sent supplies by rail to its troops via Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for the first time....”

“The first trial shipment of the NATO train departed Riga, Latvia on May 14 and arrived in Afghanistan on June 9....” [25]

The second starts at the Georgian Black Sea port cities of Poti and Batumi and moves south and east to Azerbaijan, then across the Caspian Sea to Kazakhstan, from there to Uzbekistan and then to Afghanistan. A third option bypasses Uzbekistan by going, as the first does, from Latvia through Russia to Kazakhstan, but then from the last country through Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan.

As commander of Central Command Petraeus oversaw a proxy war on the Arabian Peninsula [26] in Yemen and in conjunction with NATO engineered the military buildup against Iran in the Persian Gulf. [27]

He also to varying degrees pulled the Central Asian nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan deeper into the Afghan war nexus. Even nations outside of Central Command’s area of operations – Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Latvia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and now Russia – are part of the network. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine have troop contingents serving under NATO in Afghanistan, with Moldova likely to provide troops soon. Of the fifteen former Soviet republics, then, only Belarus would remain completely aloof from the war.

While speaking outside NATO headquarters in Kabul on July 4, General Petraeus stated “We are in this to win.” Only four days before, the deadliest month of the war for NATO forces ended and with it the lives of over a hundred foreign soldiers.

Petraeus’s 150,000 U.S. and NATO troops are not going to turn the tide in America’s longest, and NATO’s first ground, war. Nor will the conflict be shortened by pulling more nations, with almost a third of the world’s already embroiled, into the Afghan vortex.

Notes

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- 20) Ibid
- 21) Ibid
- 22) UzReport, April 7, 2010
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