

Afghanistan: North Atlantic Military Bloc's Ten-Year War In South Asia

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In slightly over a month, on October 7, the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan will enter its tenth year.

The conflict represents the longest continuous combat operations in the history of the United States and Afghanistan alike. With the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for the only time in its existence activating its Article 5 mutual military assistance clause in September 2001 and thus entering the Afghan fray, European nations that had not been at war since the Second World War are now engaged in an endless combat mission.

There are 150,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, 120,000 of them under the command of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Military personnel from over a quarter of the 192 members of the United Nations.

They include soldiers from almost every European country, several Asia-Pacific states, and nations in the Americas and the Middle East.

NATO has grown from 19 to 28 members since it took control of ISAF in 2003 and has expanded military partnerships with several nations that have deployed troops to Afghanistan, from Australia to Georgia, Montenegro to South Korea, Armenia to the United Arab Emirates.

In the same interim the North Atlantic military bloc has assumed the role of an international, expeditionary, increasingly more multifaceted and politicized armed intervention force, a status that will be formalized this November at its summit in Portugal when its first 21st century Strategic Concept is adopted.

In the middle of August the death count for U.S. and NATO soldiers in Afghanistan passed the 2,000 mark and has grown almost every day since - 2051 by August 31 - with American fatalities accounting for some 60 percent of the total. The U.S. suffered 19 combat deaths in the four days beginning on August 28.

Troops from at least 26 nations serving under NATO's ISAF have been killed in Afghanistan, a record number of countries to sacrifice soldiers in one nation. 521 foreign troops lost their lives in the Afghan war theater last year, a dramatic increase from the preceding year when 295 were killed. So far this year the number is 478, with 2010 poised to be the deadliest year in the nine-year war for U.S. and NATO forces.

The amount of foreign soldiers killed is matched if not exceeded by the number of Afghan civilians slain by NATO.

On August 15 a NATO vehicle hit a motorcycle in southern Afghanistan, killing five civilians including a woman and her three children.

Two days later NATO troops killed a father and son in a raid in Nangarhar province, triggering a protest that blocked the highway from the capital of the province, Jalalabad, to the capital of the country, Kabul.

On August 21 as many as 1,000 Afghans took to the streets in Baghlan province after NATO raided a house in the Baghlan-i-Jadid district, killing one civilian and abducting two others. "Chanting anti-government and anti-NATO slogans, the protesters warned [they would] hold demonstrations in the future if the killing of civilians is not investigated." [1]

Two days later officials and residents of the same province accused NATO of killing eight civilians during an early morning raid.

On August 25 an Afghan identified as a police trainee and two Spanish soldiers were killed in a shoot-out at a NATO base in Badghis province. Afterwards thousands of Afghans attempted to storm the base in response to what they viewed as the slaying of an Afghan soldier by NATO troops. Four Spanish soldiers were hurt in the melee. One account of the incident reported that NATO forces opened fire on demonstrators, "killing dozens of people and wounding more than 20 other civilians." [2]

Two days later NATO aircraft bombed a remote part of Kunar province, and according to provincial police chief Khalilullah Ziayee, "In the bombardment six children, aged six to 12, were killed. Another child was injured." [3]

The time when NATO could pretend that the International Security Assistance Force was a peacekeeping and reconstruction initiative is long over, the pretext drowned in the blood of Afghan civilians.

Earlier this month the German Bundeswehr announced that it was dropping all charges against Colonel Georg Klein, who ordered a NATO air strike in Kunduz province last September that killed 142 people, by Afghan accounts all civilians. [4] "Investigators found no evidence that Klein had broken any rules." [5]

On August 29 Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg paid an unannounced visit to "a combat zone in Afghanistan" - in Kunduz province - "the first time a senior German politician has met German troops who are facing off day to day against the Taliban." [6]

15 kilometers from the rapid reaction force base he inspected, four German soldiers were killed in a firefight this April. Guttenberg participated in "ceremonies paying tribute to German soldiers who had been killed." [7]

German ground combat operations in the province are the nation's first since the defeat of the Nazi regime in 1945.

Berlin has abandoned post-war limits on the number of troops that can be deployed abroad - moreover to a war zone - and has as many as 4,600 in Afghanistan. 47 Bundeswehr troops have died serving NATO in the country.

On August 23 France lost two troops, a marine officer and soldier, in a firefight 55 kilometers north of the Afghan capital, bringing France's death toll to 47 also. Paris supplies 3,750

troops to NATO's ISAF.

Two days afterward President Nicolas Sarkozy, who reintegrated France into NATO's military command structure last year, stated "France will remain engaged in Afghanistan, with its allies, for as long as necessary...." [8]

On August 21 Britain lost a soldier in Helmand province, its 332nd death, the second largest number after that of the U.S.

The Afghan war is also providing the 12 Eastern European countries brought into NATO in the past 11 years as well as new partners in the Asia-Pacific region their first combat in decades. Along with operations in Iraq starting in 2003, new NATO members are involved in warfighting for the first time since War World II and NATO Contact Countries like Australia, New Zealand and South Korea for the first time since the Vietnam War.

A Polish convoy in Ghazni province came under mortar attack on August 24 and the following day two Polish soldiers were wounded in shelling outside the Four Corners base in the same province.

As Poland's armed forces were fighting their first war since 1939, the U.S. Air Force deployed airmen and planes from the Ramstein Air Base in Germany to Poland's 33rd Air Base near Powidz for seven days of joint training. Operation Screaming Eagle included paratroop and night flying training.

"The training also allowed a chance for members of the Polish air force to receive incentive flights on a C-130J Super Hercules....Polish airmen received the first of five refurbished C-130E Hercules military transport planes in early 2009" [9] from the U.S. for use in Afghanistan and other NATO military missions overseas.

Earlier this year Britain conducted its latest Exercise Flying Rhino war games in the Czech Republic. "The British Army's largest land-air military exercise" occurred in that country where "Forward Air Controllers [prepared] to coordinate aircraft flying over Afghanistan at 1,000mph (1,600km/h) in an airspace littered with 45kg rounds being fired from the ground."

"The fast-paced European deployment saw more than 2,000 UK troops linking up with military personnel from the Czech Republic, Denmark, Lithuania, Slovakia and the United States in an operational environment....[A] unified effort was imperative to the logistics of the exercise with 32 aircraft, 600 vehicles and thousands of servicemen and women being moved into the training area." [10]

In the middle of August the Czech military disclosed it would deploy its first four Pandur armored personnel carriers to Afghanistan. A spokesman for the nation's General Staff said "The Pandurs were specially modified for tens of millions of crowns to serve in allied operations" and, in addition, "14 Iveco light armoured vehicles will be sent to Afghanistan," where a Czech unit has already been using 15 of them. [11]

Despite talk of a drawdown of NATO military forces in Afghanistan, new member states in Eastern Europe are being tasked to increase the deployment of troops and ordnance to the war front.

NATO's war in Afghanistan is being used not only to integrate the armed forces of over 50 nations into a U.S.-controlled globally deployable military force, but also to expand the Pentagon's reach into Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, ever closer to the borders of Russia, Iran and China.

Since 2005 the U.S. has acquired seven new military bases in Romania and Bulgaria, including strategic air bases, and launched the world's first multinational strategic airlift operation at the Papa Air Base in Hungary.

In June the U.S. led 100 personnel from five NATO nations in the first paratroop exercise under the auspices of the Heavy Airlift Wing at the Hungarian base. An American sergeant present at the drills said, "It's...beneficial for the other countries participating if they were to deploy to Afghanistan, because from the training, they would understand how the U.S. military works." [12]

Activated in the summer of 2009, last October the Heavy Airlift Wing flew one of its U.S. C-17 Globemaster IIIs into the Afghan capital with military representatives of 42 countries, all 28 NATO members and 14 other troop contributors.

By this April the operation had "moved 2.1 million pounds of equipment essential to surge operations supporting the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

"The international wing has been part of the operation to move more than 6 million pounds of basic expeditionary airfield resources, or BEAR materiel, to build six forward operating bases...." [13]

On August 23 a Hungarian convoy in northern Afghanistan was hit by a roadside bomb and then fired on from several directions. One Hungarian soldier was killed and three wounded in the attack. One of the injured troops later died, Hungary's first female combat fatality in Afghanistan and undoubtedly ever.

Last week the former Soviet republic of Estonia, with a population of only 1,300,000, announced its largest-ever military vehicle deal, purchasing 80 armored personnel carriers from the Netherlands.

A spokesman from the country's Defense Ministry stated, "The deal doubles the number of armored vehicles in the Estonian defense forces and is the biggest armored vehicle deal ever made (by Estonia)" The transaction followed by five months the biggest arms purchase in the nation's history with the "delivery of a short-range surface-to-air missile system from European defense giant MBDA and Sweden's Saab costing one billion kroons." (Kroon = 0.0814 U.S. dollars.)

"Estonia joined NATO in 2004 and has been upgrading its defense equipment to meet the standards of the 28-nation trans-Atlantic alliance...." [14]

On August 30 the country lost its eighth soldier in Afghanistan.

Again to demonstrate that NATO has no plans to leave South Asia in the imminent future, NATO Training Mission - Afghanistan announced on August 28 that fellow Baltic state Lithuania will deploy military personnel to train the Afghan National Army, partnering with Ukraine, not an official ISAF troop contributor. The former Soviet states signed a two-year commitment to begin in 2011.

A Los Angeles Times feature of August 19 entitled "Romania shows its support for the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan" stated "the U.S. military and political leadership has put a priority on strengthening ties with Romania," which has turned four military bases over to the Pentagon and NATO in recent years and this February announced it would host American land-based Standard Missile-3 anti-ballistic missiles.

While the Netherlands became the first NATO member state to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, since last year Romania has increased its contributions to NATO's Afghan war effort from 962 to over 1,500 troops, "even as Romania's economy is suffering and defense spending is being cut."

"To the Romanians, participation in the Afghan mission is a good way to demonstrate their bona fides as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and as an ally of the United States...." [15]

Earlier this month NATO awarded Romanian troops medals for their role in the Alliance's first ground war. "The event started with a moment of silence in memory of Romanian, US and Afghan troops killed in Afghanistan." [16]

Neighboring Bulgaria, where the U.S. has acquired three new bases including the Bezmer Air Base, sent 200 army rangers to Afghanistan in the same week. At the beginning of August Defense Minister Anyu Angelov "announced that Bulgaria was going to change the functions of the Bulgarian troops in Afghanistan, and that instead of guard units, it was going to send a 700-strong combat regiment by the end of 2012." [17]

Montenegro, the world's youngest nation (and newest member of the United Nations) with a population of only 670,000, lately deployed its second contingent of troops to Afghanistan. The diminutive Adriatic state became independent in 2006 and joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program the same year. The next year NATO signed a pact with Montenegro permitting the bloc's troops to cross the country, and in 2008 granted it an advanced Individual Partnership Action Plan. Last year NATO followed up with a Membership Action Plan, the final step to full membership.

This year Montenegro became the 44th Troop Contributing Nation for NATO's Afghan mission, preceded by Armenia - the first member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization to be assigned that role - and followed by Mongolia, South Korea and Malaysia, to indicate NATO's expanded reach into Asia.

On August 24 Australia - a NATO Contact Country partner along with Japan, New Zealand and South Korea - lost its 41st soldier in Afghanistan. With 1,550 troops in the country, Australia is the largest non-NATO contributor.

On the same day Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, announced that Australian troops will stay in Afghanistan beyond 2014: "We will still be there...beyond the two to four years [scheduled for training Afghan army units], for a period of time." [18]

Last week Singapore deployed a 52-troop Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Task Group to southern Afghanistan, which "will operate out of Multinational Base Tarin Kowt to augment the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF's) surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities in Uruzgan...." [19]

NATO's role in Asia is not limited to 120,000 troops in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It is steadily deepening military partnerships with an expanding array of Asia-Pacific nations.

It is also consolidating its grip on the three former Soviet republics in the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, all of which have troops serving under the Alliance in Afghanistan.

The Ministry of Transport of Caspian Sea nation Azerbaijan announced earlier this month that "NATO is expected to increase shipping to Afghanistan via Georgia and Azerbaijan," in particular that "A part of the equipment [of] the troops withdrawn from Iraq...will be sent to Afghanistan via Turkey, Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea and Turkmenistan." An Azerbaijani government official estimated that "NATO countries transport 1,500 containers to Afghanistan via Azerbaijan every month." [20]

In October NATO will conduct a regional training course on border security in Azerbaijan for Central Asian and other countries. According to a news source in Azerbaijan, currently "training is carried out with the involvement of Iraqi and Afghan border guards...at the State Border Service's base." [21]

The war in Afghanistan provides long-range integrated combat training for global NATO and a foundation for the U.S. to build a far-reaching military network unprecedented in scope.

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Notes

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