

Afghanistan: US, NATO Wage World's Largest and Longest War

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On October 7 it will enter its ninth calendar year and with the projected deployment of at least 30,000 more American and thousands of more fellow NATO nations' troops this year it promises to go on indefinitely.

It is the second longest war, both on the air and ground fronts, in United States' history, with only its protracted involvement in Indochina so far exceeding it in length.

The Afghan war is also the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's first armed conflict outside of Europe and its first ground war in the sixty years of its existence. It has been waged with the participation of armed units from all 26 NATO member states and twelve other European and Caucasus nations linked to NATO through the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the Partnership for Peace and the Adriatic Charter with the first-ever invocation of the Alliance's Article 5 mutual military assistance provision.

The twelve European NATO partners who have sent troops in varying numbers to assist Washington and the Alliance include the continent's five former neutral nations: Austria, Finland, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland.

The European NATO and partnership deployments count among their number troops from six former Soviet Republics - with Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine tapped for recent reinforcements and the three Baltic states represented disproportionately to their populations - although Western officials and media refrain from using words like invasion, empire and occupation that were tossed around so profligately in the 1980s.

The conflict marks the first time since the Vietnam War that US, Australian, New Zealand and South Korean troops have fought in the same campaign in the same theater. (Although all four also had troops in Iraq after March of 2003, only American forces were engaged in combat. In Afghanistan, however, over 1,000 Australian troops, including special forces, participate in counterinsurgency operations and ten of their soldiers have been killed.)

In all, 42 nations have military contingents ranging from a handful to thousands of troops serving under NATO in a war nearly as far removed from the North Atlantic as could have been imagined and embroiled in an endless engagement because of a 1949 commitment by the major Western powers to render each other military aid in the event of a conflict in Western Europe or North America.

Over a thousand US, NATO and NATO partner nations' soldiers have been killed in the war, including servicemen from all three Baltic States, Australia and South Korea.

From the beginning of the invasion of and war in Afghanistan in early October of 2001 under the aegis of so-called Operation Enduring Freedom, which commenced with US and British air and missile attacks, the model used seventeen months later in Iraq, the conflict has not been limited to Afghanistan itself but rather has exploited the nation's alleged and highly tenuous connections to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington to situate US and other NATO military forces in several neighboring and nearby nations, including airbases and troop and naval deployments in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and the Indian Ocean (where the Japanese navy has been assisting Operation Enduring Freedom).

The Russian press wire agency Itar-Tass reported last December that 120,000 US and NATO soldiers passed through the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan in 2008.

2009 has brought the Pentagon and NATO the bad news that the government of Kyrgyzstan may close the base to warplanes used for the war in Afghanistan, a base that since 2001 has hosted military personnel from the United States, Australia, Denmark, Norway, New Zealand, Poland, Turkey, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, France and South Korea.

The Pentagon officially defines Operation Enduring Freedom's area of responsibility as encompassing fifteen nations: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Cuba (Guantanamo Bay Naval Base), Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, the Philippines, the Seychelles, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Yemen.

After the invasion of Afghanistan in October of 2001, the US and its NATO allies obtained from the United Nations of ever-obliging Secretary-General Kofi Annan (who in 1995 held the posts of Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations to the former Yugoslavia and special envoy to NATO and was installed as Secretary-General after the US deposed his predecessor Boutros Boutros-Ghali and browbeat the other 14 Security Council members in 1997 to accept him) a resolution authorizing the establishment of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), initially to oversee Afghanistan's occupation, but later to wage a full-blown counterinsurgency campaign inside the country and across the border into Pakistan.

There was and is nothing international about ISAF. It is a NATO operation entirely.

From December of 2001 until August of 2003 command of ISAF was held in six month rotations by major NATO nations. At the end of that period it passed to NATO collectively. Initially its mission was limited to the capital of Kabul, but by 2003 its mandate was extended beyond the capital and by 2006 to all of Afghanistan's provinces.

To deploy combat forces to a nation that was bombed and invaded and to conduct aerial and ground assaults throughout its territory is as good a working definition of the words war and occupation as could be devised.

Afghanistan has become a permanent training ground and firing range for providing the US and its NATO allies and candidate members opportunities to test out new weapons systems, wage 21st Century counterinsurgency operations and integrate so-called niche deployment military units from over 42 nations to achieve weapons and warfighting interoperability.

Polish military officials among others have openly stated that in Afghanistan NATO has provided them with the conditions to modernize their armed forces, which had not been

employed in war zone and combat operations since the beginning of World War II. Coupled with recent statements by Polish and Baltic officials that NATO should renew its focus on “defending” Europe, the Greater Afghan war theater is a laboratory for preparing Eastern European and South Caucasus nations for actions on Russia’s eastern and southern borders.

Last month the US signed an agreement with Poland to train their special forces (comparable to what the Pentagon has already done with Georgia), citing Afghanistan as the immediate locale for its joint implementation.

The comparative size of each NATO nation’s contribution is less important than the fact that several tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of NATO troops have been rotated through Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan over the past seven and a half years and in the process gained experience in serving under the command of major NATO powers.

Earlier this year the US’s Central Command chief David Petraeus began focusing on the Caucasus nations of Georgia and Azerbaijan as military transit routes for the expanding war in Afghanistan and visited the former Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan to also incorporate them into the ever-widening South Asian war vortex.

Late last year General Nikolai Makarov, chief of the General Staff of Russia’s Armed Forces, warned that “American military bases are dotted throughout the world. The U.S. has opened bases in Romania and Bulgaria, and according to our information plans to establish them in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.”

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Much is made in Western official circles and in the obedient media about the pretexts under which the US and NATO attacked and invaded Afghanistan, took over all its strategic Soviet era airbases (as was done most recently with the Shindand airbase in 2005 in Herat Province, near the Iranian border) and installed a compliant puppet government to rule over the nation and its people.

At first as the memory of the attacks of September 11, 2001 were still freshly burned into America’s and the world’s imaginations, the rationale for Operation Enduring Freedom was to hunt down and “bring to justice” - or kill - Osama bin Laden, Mullah Omar and several of their top associates in a lex talionis punishment for the deadly attacks on New York’s financial center and the headquarters of the US Defense Department.

As the years proceeded and not only weren’t bin Laden and Mullah Omar apprehended but their whereabouts couldn’t even be determined, emphasis was shifted to the fight against Taliban for having hosted the above two.

That fallback position was belied by the fact that Washington in the person of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld right after 9/11 asserted that as many as sixty nations, almost a third of the world’s, were harboring terrorists and as such were fair game for missile and other attacks, but conspicuously left off the hit list the only three nations that had recognized, funded and no doubt armed the Taliban: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Nor was the Taliban argument helped by US-installed President Hamid Karzai being quoted regularly on the US’s Voice of Afghanistan (an offshoot of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)

applauding “our Taliban” who “fought shoulder-to-shoulder with us in the jihad against the Soviets.”

The US and NATO tact was then to adopt an ex post facto humanitarian guise to justify their fanning out into Afghanistan’s provinces in 2003 (in addition to the original in Kabul, NATO launched North, South, East and West commands): Establishing so-called Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs).

Invading armies with their bombers, cruise missiles, 15,000 pound Daisy Cutter bombs and long-range artillery are designed to destroy and not construct buildings and the PRTs would be better termed provincial pacification teams, with the model being the Strategic Hamlet Program in South Vietnam in the early 1960s.

More reasons would be devised to explain the West’s continuing and growing presence and intensifying military operations in Afghanistan and its environs.

Four years of Taliban power had at least accomplished one objective; it had curbed opium cultivation.

However, after a few years of NATO occupation Afghanistan became the world’s largest producer and exporter of opium and so last autumn the Alliance announced that it was planning to conduct armed raids against opium and “drug traffickers,” however the West decided to define the second.

The ongoing and endless war in Afghanistan – and now Pakistan – has metamorphosed from a hunt for bin Laden, to a fight against Taliban to a drug war modeled after the US’s murderous Plan Colombia initiated in 1999. There are reports that 300 Colombian troops are slated for deployment to Afghanistan to replicate that model.

Notwithstanding recent talk by US President Barrack Obama about an Afghan exit strategy, it’s not apparent that Washington and its allies ever intend to leave the country and the broader South-Asia/Central Asia/Caspian Sea Basin/South Caucasus circumference whose center Afghanistan is.

Two weeks ago the Russia Novosti website featured this observation: “Central Asian states think the U.S. started the Afghan war to change the regional regimes into local analogues of Georgia’s Saakashvili and Ukraine’s Yushchenko, and that it began with Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Iran, China and Russia think the war could be Washington’s attempt to reduce their influence in Central Asia to zero.”

Less than four months before the invasion of Afghanistan China, Russia and four of the five former Soviet Central Asia republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a mutual security grouping that would later include India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan as observers.

It’s purpose is to provide regional security and to address the issues of trans-border crime, including narcotics smuggling, armed extremism and separatism.

Since its inception it has also increasingly focused on joint development projects in the spheres of energy, transportation, trade and infrastructure.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Central Asia was seen by the SCO’s founding

members and since by its observers as a mechanism for fostering mutually beneficial relations among the nations of Central Asia and Russia, China, Iran, India and even Turkey eventually.

Afghanistan has been hurled into interminable turmoil, with hundreds of thousands of its citizens displaced; almost daily bombing runs, drone missile attacks, middle-of-the-night commando raids, indiscriminate shooting of civilians at checkpoints; mass-scale drought and famine; an explosion of opium cultivation and trafficking; expansion of that destabilization by setting Pakistan aflame with the potential for its fragmentation and dismemberment and heightened tensions with its – fellow nuclear – neighbor India.

This is the current, grave situation seven and a half years after the invasion of Afghanistan.

With the deployment of another 30,000 US troops and thousands more from NATO's ranks (recently Italy, Poland, Georgia, Azerbaijan and other nations have announced increases) Western troop strength will soon approach 100,000.

This is pouring fuel on fire. Taliban has become as amorphous a term as al-Qaeda has been; anyone in Afghanistan, even in the non-Pushtun North and West of the nation, who takes issue with Western warplanes and combat troops dealing out death and destruction in their nation and their villages is now a Talib. An enemy.

The more US and NATO troops that arrive in Afghanistan, the more resentment, resistance and violence will ensue. Inevitably.

The US and NATO have arrogantly spurned offers by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the post-Soviet Collective Security Treaty Organization to assist in bringing a regional – and non-military – resolution of the myriad crises afflicting Afghanistan, its long-suffering people and the region.

NATO is not a nation-building, peacekeeping or humanitarian outfit – it is an aggressive military bloc. When it and its individual member states' military forces leave South and Central Asia then healing, reconstruction and lasting peace can begin.

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