

NATO: Afghan War Model For Future 21st Century Operations

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As the North Atlantic Treaty Organization unveils its first 21st century strategic doctrine in Lisbon this week, its first ground war and war outside Europe is in its tenth year with no end in sight.

The invasion of and subsequent nine years of combat operations in Afghanistan are logical – inevitable – results of the military alliance’s last Strategic Concept adopted at its fiftieth anniversary summit in Washington, D.C. in 1999. At the time NATO was waging its first full-scale war, the 78-day Operation Allied Force bombing assault against Yugoslavia, and had absorbed the first of what are now twelve members in Eastern Europe: The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland.

Launching an unprovoked war of aggression and operating outside the territory of NATO member states – and outside international law without a United Nations mandate – inaugurated the U.S.-controlled military alliance as a global warfighting organization. The war in Afghanistan beginning in the first year of the new century and millennium represented the further implementation of the 1999 Strategic Concept, itself the first since 1991, the year of the demise of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union.

As NATO described the last Strategic Concept: “At the Washington Summit meeting in April 1999, the NATO Allies approved a strategy to equip the Alliance for the security challenges and opportunities of the 21st century and to guide its future political and military development.” [1]

There are now 140,000 troops (the bulk of them American) from 50 nations serving with NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, more than were assigned to the bloc’s previous out-of-area deployments – 60,000 in Bosnia in 1995 and 50,000 in Kosovo in 1999 – combined.



The Afghan conflict is also the first battleground on which NATO has suffered war dead. 825 of the 2,223 foreign troops killed in Afghanistan since 2001 (1,174 since last year) are from NATO member states other than the U.S. and from NATO partnership allies. Subtracting the dead from non-NATO countries – Australia (21), Georgia (5), Sweden (5), Finland (1), Jordan (1), New Zealand (1) and South Korea (1) – 2,188 of the foreign war dead are from NATO nations and 790 from Alliance states other than the U.S.

A recent report estimates the number of Afghans killed in the war at 100,000. Deaths caused by U.S. drone attacks and NATO helicopter gunship raids in Pakistan are also mounting, approaching the 2,000 mark.

A veritable chorus of recent comments from American, NATO and NATO ally officials has confirmed the war that will be in its eleventh calendar year on January 1 will continue to 2014, beyond 2014 and even for decades longer.

This week NATO's Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan Mark Sedwill said "that the transition process may run into 2015 and beyond, and that after foreign troops step down from combat roles the country could see 'eye-watering levels of violence,'" whatever the last expression was intended to connote.

The use of the word transition instead of exit was a calculated choice. It echoes a comment made by the chief American civilian operative for the war, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, as reported by Pajhwok Afghan News on November 11. (Sedwill and Holbrooke divide up on the "diplomatic" side what General David Petraeus combines on the military one as chief commander of all 152,000 U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan.)

On November 10 Holbrooke "asserted the US had 'no exit strategy' for Afghanistan, and instead a 'transition strategy' would be unveiled in the Portuguese capital" during the NATO summit.

"After 2014, the diplomat continued, the international community was not going to be leaving Afghanistan." [2]

A British newspaper announced on November 15 that General Sir David Julian Richards, Chief of the Defence Staff, claimed "this week's Nato summit will outline plans to keep British troops in Afghanistan for a generation," and "Nato now needs to plan for a 30 or 40 year role to help the Afghan armed forces hold their country against the militants." [3]

If it proves to be accurate, Richards' projection could entail the U.S. and NATO spending half

a century in Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding which, the day before the NATO summit began in Portugal the chief of the Alliance, Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, was interviewed by Britain's Daily Telegraph and again celebrated the war in Afghanistan as a prototype – a template according to the newspaper account – for future global operations envisioned in the new Strategic Concept.

While stating “If conditions are not met fully by the end of 2014, then we will have to continue the combat mission,” Rasmussen asserted:

“Our core function will remain territorial defence of our populations But we must realise that in the modern world we have to go beyond our borders to actually protect and defend our borders.”

In line with the report serving as the foundation of the new Strategic Concept – “NATO 2020: Assured Security: Dynamic Engagement,” prepared by a “group of experts” headed by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright – Rasmussen indicated NATO's priorities not only beyond the bloc's borders but transcending all borders: “The purpose of the new strategic concept is to prepare the alliance to address the new security challenges – missile attacks, cyber attacks, terrorist attacks.” [4]

Leading up to the summit, NATO conducted the Cyber Coalition 2010 exercise from November 16-18. “Military experts from all NATO countries” were invited to take part and the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, Estonia (established in 2008) participated in the cyber warfare exercise. [5]

Earlier in the week Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, spoke in language similar to that of Rasmussen, not echoing NATO's positions but indicating whence they emanate.

His comments included:

“Some...declared the alliance dead at the end of the Cold War, when its job was to block Soviet tanks from rolling into West Germany. NATO demonstrated its value in the years that followed – transforming into a political engine for integrating the former Soviet states of Eastern Europe into the larger community of nations.”

“A key element centers on NATO's commitment to invest roughly \$280 million over 10 years to link its missile defense capabilities with new missile systems being developed by the United States. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the former Danish prime minister who is now NATO's secretary general, says the determination to press ahead with the missile shield is likely to calm skeptical publics that NATO can protect them. It should also provide a better bulwark against Iran.” [6]

U.S. permanent representative (ambassador) to NATO, Ivo Daalder, who while at the Brookings Institution wrote articles advocating the creation of a global NATO [7], said in a recent opinion piece published in the New York Times and the International Herald Tribune that, regarding what will prove to be the most significant issue decided upon at the Lisbon summit in addition to that regarding the Afghan war – extending the American interceptor missile system to all of Europe:

"[T]he United States is on track to provide the lion's share of this capability. Our contribution, called the Phased Adaptive Approach, will exploit advances in sensor and interceptor technologies to swiftly deploy a strong, smart missile defense system. At the core of the system is the SM-3 missile, a proven ship-borne system that will also be deployed on land at sites in Romania (by 2015) and subsequently in Poland (by 2018)...." [8]



Standard Missile-3 launch

Julia Gillard, the new prime minister of Australia - which has the most and has lost the most troops in Afghanistan of any non-NATO nation, 1,550 and 21 respectively - addressed the House of Representatives ahead of flying to the NATO summit in Lisbon, and defended "Australia's likely involvement in the country for another decade."

"In the future when we look back on the years since 2001 no-one will deny that attention turned heavily to [the Iraq war]. While it has taken too long, there is now a strategy to achieve transition [in Afghanistan]."

Transition, not withdrawal.

Earlier in the same day she told Radio National:

"Our eyes shouldn't be on the calendar, they should be on the ground and working out whether the time to transition should be right.

"We shouldn't transition out only to have to transition back in some time later." [9]

From Washington to Brussels to Canberra - the Pentagon, NATO and a rapidly evolving Asian NATO - the strategy like the terminology is identical: Interminable military deployments and combat operations in South and Central Asia as the model for new wars.

With NATO already involved in airlifting Ugandan troops to Somalia, running naval operations in the Horn of Africa, arming and training Georgia and Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus (on November 16 the NATO Parliamentary Assembly referred to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as "occupied territories"), and pledging to "defend" the Baltic states of

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania over which it has flown warplanes on continuous rotations since 2004, there will be no lack of opportunities to apply and expand the Afghanistan-Pakistan template.

Notes

- 1) North Atlantic Treaty Organization
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- 2) Lalit K. Jha, US has no Afghan exit strategy: Holbrooke
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- 3) Tim Shipman, The West will never win war against Al Qaeda, warns armed forces chief as he reveals plans to keep troops in Afghanistan for '30 or 40 years'
Daily Mail, November 15, 2010
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1329560/General-Sir-David-Richards-The-West-win-war-Al-Qaeda.html>
- 4) Nato must continue operations "beyond our borders"
Daily Telegraph, November 18, 2010
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/defence/8144154/Nato-must-continue-operations-beyond-our-borders.html>
- 5) NATO Countries Flex Cyber Defences
Global Herald, November 15, 2010
- 6) Senator John F. Kerry, Critics write obits, but NATO focuses on new threats
Politico, November 17, 2010
<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1110/45288.html>
- 7) West Plots To Supplant United Nations With Global NATO
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<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/08/29/154>
- 8) Ivo Daalder, The Case for a NATO Missile Defense
New York Times/International Herald Tribune, November 15, 2010
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/16/opinion/16iht-eddaalder.html>
- 9) Gillard defends Afghan war role
Australian Broadcasting Company
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