

Rising opposition in Europe: U.S. plans for NATO run into a wall

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Part I

NATO held a three-day meeting in Bucharest, Romania, on April 2 to 4, attended by George W. Bush and other heads of state. It was a stormy affair. This alliance of imperialist military powers, long dominated by the U.S., was divided on several proposals being pushed by Washington.

One was the proposed further expansion of NATO eastward to include Ukraine and Georgia, which were once part of the Soviet Union and sit on the border of Russia. Another was the plan to place a U.S. ballistic missile system in the Czech Republic and Poland, the heart of Europe. Another was Washington's recognition of independence for the Serbian province of Kosovo.

The most immediate problem for Bush, however, was resistance to his call for NATO to send thousands more troops to Afghanistan. The problem of finding more youth to be cannon fodder exposed the obvious weakness of this rapidly expanding military alliance. The U.S. is so bogged down and overstretched in Iraq that it is twisting the arms of other NATO members to fill the gap as the Pentagon's situation in Afghanistan deteriorates.

However, there is mass opposition in Europe to increased military spending and especially to bailing out the U.S. in Iraq or Afghanistan by sending troops.

In poll after poll in both Eastern and Western Europe, the overwhelming majority of the people have opposed deeper military involvement. Politicians know that agreeing to send troops to either Iraq or Afghanistan is political suicide.

U.S. imperialism has grand and ominous plans to surround Russia and China with U.S./NATO bases. The plans look great on paper and in war games. But putting troops on the ground is becoming more and more difficult.

Demonstrations against this NATO summit and other NATO meetings and exercises show the deep opposition fermenting among the masses.

In addition, Russia has warned that the eastward expansion of NATO and the stationing of U.S. missiles in the Czech Republic and Poland pose a grave threat to its security and could lead to European-wide instability and even war.

Both the strong Russian opposition and growing resistance at home have led to disagreements and contention among the European imperialists. At the Bucharest meeting,

Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg strongly and openly opposed Bush's demands to include Ukraine and Georgia in NATO.

The ruling classes of these countries are imperialist plunderers in their own right. But they are fearful that these aggressive U.S. military advances may be arousing mass opposition from below. Their continued profits are based on capitalist stability.

The weak and dependent capitalist regimes of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, recently added to NATO, voted with the U.S.

U.S. ruling class for expanding NATO

Bush declared in Bucharest that "NATO is no longer a static alliance focused on defending Europe. ... It is now an expeditionary alliance that is sending its forces across the world. ..." (New York Times, April 5) The U.S. president was not just speaking for his increasingly narrow circle. He carried with him a resolution passed unanimously by the House supporting his demand that Georgia and Ukraine be accepted into NATO.

In Congress and among the presidential candidates and other leading political figures of both capitalist parties, there was no debate or opposition to these dangerous proposals on the future direction of NATO.

Barely reported in the U.S. corporate media was how Bush's demands became a source of contention at the usually sedate and scripted NATO dinner. The political discussion at this state affair lasted two hours past its scheduled time. Finally Laura Bush and the spouses of other political leaders withdrew from the gathering as the sharp exchanges continued.

While the U.S. media was focusing on the Dalai Lama and China's actions in Tibet, there was no coverage of the total lockdown of the entire population of Bucharest by 30,000 police and the outlawing of any political gatherings or protests there.

The unanimity of the U.S. ruling class on NATO's expansion is reflected even in the U.S. progressive political movement. While there is overwhelming opposition to the U.S. occupation of Iraq, there is little discussion of the long-term cost and dangers of NATO expansion.

Washington's hopes had been high before the NATO summit. On the eve of the gathering, Gen. Ray Henault, chairman of the NATO Military Committee, made the following bragging points: "Less than 20 years ago, NATO consisted of 16 members, counted none as partners, and had conducted no operations or exercises outside its member state borders. ... Today, NATO counts 26 members and 38 other countries in four Partnership arrangements. ...

"In a few short years, NATO has conducted eight operations on four continents. NATO has expanded five times since its creation, and further growth looks inevitable. ... It does not seem that the pace of activity will lessen any time soon."

General Henault predicted that the "Bucharest Summit is going to be critical to the future orientation of the Alliance and its Partners, resulting in key political decisions on enlargement, enhancements to our military capabilities, and how we conduct our operations."

But that is not the way the meeting turned out. The differences could barely be papered over at the state dinners or in the final press conference. NATO leaders decided to leave the contentious issue of Ukraine and Georgia to a meeting of their foreign ministers in December 2008. There was no agreement on recognition of Kosovo. Each politician tried to avoid firm or sizable commitments of more troops for Afghanistan.

NATO's rapid growth

NATO as a U.S.-dominated military alliance was, until the collapse of the Soviet Union, a bloc of industrialized, prosperous imperialist countries that had grown wealthy on generations of colonial plunder. It was essentially an imperialist bloc determined to defend capitalist markets against the spread of socialist revolutions in Europe through military might, nuclear blackmail, economic sabotage, espionage and terror.

Now NATO has grown to four times its original number and spread far beyond its stated North Atlantic area. All the new members and "partners" of this military bloc are countries from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union that have become captured ministates, economic colonies of European and U.S. imperialism. Until 1990 they had far more integrated and planned economies flowing from public ownership of the means of production. Basic necessities from food to housing, health care and education were guaranteed and subsidized by the state.

Membership in this imperialist military alliance is not based on equality or democracy. It is based on a narrow, privileged elite who have benefited enormously from the forced privatization of once publicly owned industries. These elite are anxious to stabilize their new capitalism by tying their countries securely to the markets of the West. Membership in NATO and in the European Union is viewed by this narrow grouping as a security barrier against their own workers.

The process of absorbing these economies has been ruthless. In order to join NATO, the governments have up to 10 years to bring their formerly socialist economies into U.S. and Western capitalist "alignment." NATO calls it the Membership Action Plan (MAP). It is a roadmap telling the regimes what increasingly stiff economic and military conditions they must impose in order to be considered for NATO membership.

Those accepted into the MAP must turn their entire country over to U.S. planners to ensure that changes are made to integrate them into Western capitalist markets. The countries must commit to extensive "cooperation" with the U.S. in political, security and economic fields.

They must develop all military facilities requested of them, contribute forces to participate in NATO military actions, and ensure that their military is under the NATO command structure. Political and economic sovereignty are lost. All long-term planning must be done in coordination with the U.S. But most onerous is that they must vastly increase their defense and police spending and fully integrate their intelligence system with NATO. They must sign for huge new loans and commit to purchases of U.S. military equipment that mesh with NATO.

Enormous promises were made to these countries about the long-term prosperity that awaited their total submission. But now they are the first to feel the brunt of the economic crisis sweeping the capitalist markets.

Demonstrations and mass opposition

Throughout Europe, seething opposition to NATO expansion, U.S. ballistic missile deployment and the sending of NATO forces to Afghanistan is seen in both demonstrations and polls.

In the Czech Republic and Poland, polls show up to 70 percent oppose the missile installations in their countries. Mass rallies, demonstrations and petition campaigns are demanding the issue be decided by national referendum. The weak U.S.-backed governments in Prague and Warsaw had hoped for NATO's blessing for the missile-basing project.

Three quarters of Russians are against the entry of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, a study conducted by sociologists of the Levada Center showed. A Harris survey reported on March 28 that Europeans, East and West, oppose the U.S. missile deployment in the Czech Republic and Poland, seeing it as the beginning of more U.S. missiles in Europe. Those polled saw as far-fetched the idea that Iran is a nuclear threat, which Washington gives as a reason for the deployment. Popular understanding across Europe is that Russia would be the target.

In Germany More than 70 percent of people polled came out against the deployment. In Spain the opposition was 61 percent and in France 58 percent. Actual support for the U.S. missiles was very low — 11 to 20 percent.

A 2008 German Marshall Fund poll found that only 30 percent of Europeans supported committing troops for combat operations in Afghanistan.

In Ukraine, a survey published in February showed 70 percent opposed their country joining NATO; only 11 percent actually supported NATO membership.

Another poll confirmed that 70 percent of Montenegrins would vote against joining NATO if given a chance to do so. This popular sentiment is reflected in growing mass movements in the streets.

On the eve of the Bucharest summit, a bloc of socialists and communists in Ukraine called for mass demonstrations. Their leaflet read: "Today average Americans who give a significant part of their family budget for military operations in Iraq do not want to pay for this operation any more and do not want their men to die there. Do Ukrainians want this? NATO—NO!"

A demonstration in Ukraine's capital of Kiev marched on the U.S. Embassy and blocked the city center for hours. Some stayed into the night and erected tents for a longer stay. Mass demonstrations also took place in the Ukrainian cities of Kharkov, Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, Luhansk, Odessa, Zaporizhzhya and Sevastopol.

Three days later, when NATO failed to reach a decision on Ukraine and Georgia joining the MAP program, tens of thousands across Ukraine took to the streets celebrating victory.

In Bucharest, where demonstrators were expected from throughout Romania and across Europe to protest the NATO meeting, 30,000 police, military, snipers and secret police occupied the central city.

They made mass arrests at the legally rented anti-NATO convergence center. All protest permits were denied, making anti-NATO demonstrations illegal. Residents were encouraged to leave the city. Schools and workplaces were closed for the duration of the summit. Bucharest's police chief publicly warned that protests would not be tolerated.

Activists attempting to enter Romania from other European Union countries were denied entry, with no cause given. Hundreds rallied in northern Poland on March 29 against U.S. plans to build a missile-defense base in the region. The demonstrators carried banners reading, "We don't want to be your missile shield" and "Not one step more in the arms race."

Part II Iraq, Afghanistan and NATO

Washington tries to scrounge up troops

On the eve of the NATO summit, Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said an additional 7,500 soldiers and 3,000 military trainers needed to be sent immediately to Afghanistan.

Some 59,000 troops from 39 countries are occupying Afghanistan at the present, including 19,000 U.S. soldiers. Of this number, 47,500 are under NATO command.

As their mission has faltered and Afghan resistance has grown, internal rifts in the NATO alliance are being aired publicly. Disagreements over burden sharing, coordination and strategic direction are plaguing the alliance. Canada threatened to pull out of Afghanistan if other countries did not send substantially more troops. Germany has refused to expand its existing force of 3,200.

The Bush administration had no realistic hope of getting the NATO allies to send large additional numbers. Yet the Pentagon is so over-stretched in Iraq that it cannot provide them itself. Bush's message—"We expect our NATO allies to shoulder the burden necessary to succeed"—was hardly popular or winning.

Under pressure during the meetings, President Nicholas Sarkozy grandly said France would deploy an additional 1,000 troops. The French Parliament immediately cut this number down to 700. Poland agreed to send another 400 troops. Romania, Spain and Britain pledged to boost their numbers by a few hundred each. But the immediate goal of 10,000 additional troops was not even close.

Shrinking coalition in Iraq

Former prime ministers Tony Blair of Britain, John Howard of Australia, Jose Maria Aznar of Spain and Silvio Berlusconi of Italy lost their elected positions due to the enormously unpopular commitment of troops to Iraq and their support of the war. It is now considered political suicide in Western Europe for politicians to increase their troop commitment in Afghanistan or Iraq.

The small, dependent new members of NATO being pressed on every side to send ever more soldiers as cannon fodder to Afghanistan, Iraq and other missions, get confused on the command structures. Romanian President Traian Basescu referred to his country's troops in Iraq as NATO forces at a press conference on April 8. He was publicly corrected with the explanation that NATO does not have a mission in Iraq, where Romanian troops are part of

the “International Coalition.” The mission is the same—securing an imperialist occupation. Only the name is different.

As other imperialist forces—such as Britain, Spain, Italy, Australia and Japan—withdraw from Iraq, the shrinking “International Coalition” is carried by ground forces from poorer countries like El Salvador and Tonga, as well as many once part of or allied to the Soviet Union, like Romania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Albania, Kazakhstan and Mongolia.

The number of non-U.S. troops in Iraq is down from 23,000 in 2003 to less than 10,000 today, and shrinking.

The costs incurred by 20 of the poorer countries are paid by U.S. taxpayers. The cost of more than 160,000 U.S. troops and 100,000 private contractors in Iraq is also paid by the taxes and budget cuts plaguing poor and working people in the U.S.

Seeds of NATO’s defeat

NATO is first and foremost a military alliance. Therein lie the seeds of its defeat. Every battle in both Iraq and Afghanistan confirms that while the U.S./NATO forces may prevail over local resistance forces by the use of overwhelming military power and indiscriminate bombing, they succeed only in increasing the size of the resistance and recruiting more insurgents. Sending more troops only exacerbates the problem.

U.S. imperialism is facing an unsolvable contradiction. The political movement must be on the alert. These contradictions can make the billionaire rulers more desperate and more dangerous. As their world economic position slips, along with the almighty U.S. dollar, they are increasingly attracted to military solutions. But maintaining the weapons, bases and troops sucks up an ever-greater share of resources. Militarism is both a life-sustaining corporate subsidy and an endless drain on the economy as a whole.

With each passing day the cost of endless wars of occupation is becoming clearer and less acceptable to millions of poor and working people in the U.S. and across Europe. Increasing economic hardships, budget cuts and military casualties are undermining this grand military alliance. NATO is crumbling from below, even as it expands numerically and geographically.

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