

Southeast Asia: U.S. Completing Asian NATO To Confront China

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Since the North Atlantic Treaty Organization adopted its first Strategic Concept for the 21st century a year ago this month in Portugal, and in the process all but formalized the bloc as a global military intervention force, discussion has been rife concerning a collective partnership with the 54-nation African Union, a “mini-NATO” in the Persian Gulf and another in the Arctic Ocean and the Baltic Sea, the culmination of the transformation of the Mediterranean into a NATO sea and the effective “NATOization” of the ten-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). [1-5]

The U.S.-dominated military alliance, whose current American ambassador, Ivo Daalder, for years has advocated becoming a full-fledged global NATO (in one instance in an article with that precise title), expanded from 16 to 28 full members in the decade beginning in 1999 and has over forty partners in four continents outside the Euro-Atlantic zone under the auspices of programs like the Partnership for Peace in Europe and Asia, the Mediterranean Dialogue in Africa and the Middle East, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in the Persian Gulf, the Contact Country format in the Asia-Pacific region (Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea), Annual National Programs with Georgia and Ukraine, the Afghanistan-Pakistan-International Security Assistance Force Tripartite Commission, the NATO-Russia Council, the NATO Training Mission-Iraq and NATO-Training Mission - Afghanistan (with a Libyan version to follow), a bilateral agreement with the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia where NATO has airlifted thousands of Ugandan and Burundian troops for the war there and other arrangements.

Formal partnerships with the African Union and ASEAN would gain the world’s only military bloc fifty new cohorts in Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Mauritania and Morocco – the last not an African Union member – are already members of the Mediterranean Dialogue) and ten in Southeast Asia: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

In addition, in September U.S. permanent representative to NATO Daalder told Indian journalists visiting the Alliance’s headquarters in Brussels:

“I think it is important to have a dialogue (with India) and deepen that dialogue.

“It is through dialogue, through understanding each other’s perceptions and perhaps by working on misperceptions that may exist, that we can strengthen the relations between India and NATO.”

He also bluntly suggested that India, a founding member of the 120-nation Non-Aligned

Movement, should abandon its policy of neutrality and collaborate with the U.S. and NATO in the development of an international interceptor missile system.

In articles written in the last decade, including the aforementioned "Global NATO," [6] Daalder and fellow Brookings Institution and Council on Foreign Relations officials argued for partnerships between the bloc and nations around the world under Daalder's concept of an Alliance of Democratic States and other mechanisms. The countries mentioned by name include Australia, Botswana, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, India, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa and South Korea. [7]

Immediately ahead of the NATO summit in Lisbon, Daalder was quoted stating:

"We're launching Nato 3.0.

"It is no longer just about Europe - it's not a global alliance but it is a global actor. We need to look for opportunities to work with countries we haven't worked with before, like India, China and Brazil."

The month before, in October of last year, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said in a video post on his blog, "We should reach out to new and important partners, including China and India."

With NATO as the prime mover and in charge, that is. He added: "We should encourage consultations between interested allies and partners on security issues of common concern, with NATO as a hub for those discussions."

In September of this year he told the Xinhua News Agency: "I would very much like to see a strengthened dialogue between China and NATO."

China and India were among 47 nations represented at a meeting at NATO headquarters on September 14 to discuss naval operations in the Gulf of Aden and in the broader Indian Ocean where NATO runs Operation Ocean Shield. Other non-NATO nations present were Australia, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sweden and the United Arab Emirates. At the time the last two were supplying warplanes for NATO's Operation Unified Protector assault against Libya.

If the architects of an international NATO realize their ambitions fully, more than 140 of the world's 194 nations will be members or partners of the North Atlantic Alliance. Their troops, military hardware and air and other bases will be available to the U.S.-dominated bloc for actions nearly everywhere in the world, as warplanes from NATO partner Israel have recently been training in Romania, Greece and a NATO air base in Sardinia for strikes against Iran.

With every nation on the European continent and every European island nation except for Cyprus now either a NATO member or partner and with the Alliance now firmly ensconced in Africa, the Middle East and the Indian Ocean, the U.S. and its Western allies are concentrating their firepower on East Asia.

The war in Afghanistan is in its eleventh year and it has provided NATO the opportunity to integrate the militaries of over fifteen Asian-Pacific countries (including the Middle East and the South Caucasus in that category) through supplying troops and other military personnel to NATO's International Security Assistance Force: Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain,

Georgia, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Tonga, Turkey and United Arab Emirates. All but Bahrain and Japan are what the bloc refers to as Troop Contributing Nations, of which Kazakhstan is to be the 49th, with its parliament at least temporarily blocking the formalization of that status.

Before his death late last year U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke was recruiting Bangladesh to become the 50th official supplier of troops for NATO's Afghan war. [8]

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta recently concluded an eight-day trip to Asia, his first as Pentagon chief, where he visited Indonesia, Japan and South Korea.

On the first leg of his journey he met with the defense ministers of the ten members of ASEAN. Indonesia holds the organization's chairmanship this year. Next year it will be transferred to Cambodia, where at the same time Panetta was in East Asia his subordinate, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia Robert Scher, visited for two days to solidify military relations with the host nation where U.S. Army Pacific has led multinational Angkor Sentinel military exercises for the past two years.

Xinhua quoted the Pentagon official as saying:

"It's a fruitful visit. I participated in a series of productive meetings with the Cambodian Ministry of Defense and Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) to discuss the growing U.S.-Cambodia bilateral defense relationship..."

He was additionally cited stating he "had discussions about Cambodia's objectives as it approaches to take over the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2012.

"The U.S. Department of Defense is committed to continuing to work with the RCAF to develop a professional force that will contribute to regional and international peace and stability" and "the United States' overall commitment is to enhance its engagement in the Asia-Pacific region in the future."

While in Indonesia, Panetta indulged in the affectation of identifying himself as "a son of the U.S. Pacific coast," having been raised in California, as his commander-in-chief, Hawaii-born President Barack Obama, has touted himself as America's first Pacific head of state.

He met with Indonesian Defense Minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro, according to the Stars and Stripes newspaper, "to discuss growing bilateral military relations and broader issues facing Southeast Asia...[c]hief among those issues [being] China's growing assertiveness in an area it considers its own backyard."

In his own words, "I've made it very clear that the United States remains a Pacific power, that we will continue to strengthen our presence in this part of the world and that we will remain a force...in this region."

Later in Japan, the Pentagon chief told American troops at the Yokota Air Base near Tokyo: "We are not anticipating any cutbacks in this region. If anything we are going to strengthen our presence in the Pacific." Two weeks earlier Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had spoken in a similar vein: "Probably the greatest opportunities in the years ahead will be found in the Asia Pacific region, which is why we have renewed America's leadership and pre-eminent role there."

In July of 2010 Clinton attended the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi and entered the fray in the disputes between ASEAN member states and China over the Spratly and Paracel islands in the South China Sea, in essence pledging the U.S. as guarantor for ASEAN against China. Panetta's meeting with his ten ASEAN counterparts last month provided an overt military component to the commitment.

While in Japan the defense secretary celebrated a half century of American-Japanese military collaboration enshrined in the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan of 1960, adding, "And it will be for the next 50 years as well."

Panetta also told assembled U.S. and Japanese troops: "I just had the opportunity to be in Indonesia and meet with the (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) defense ministers. And I conveyed the same message to them: the United States will continue to work with all of them to improve our cooperation, to improve our assistance, and to make sure that we strengthen security for all nations in the Pacific region."

Southeast Asia has a population of approximately 600 million, two-thirds that of the Western Hemisphere and almost three-quarters that of Europe. It contains one of the world's most vital shipping lanes, the Strait of Malacca. The strait runs for 600 miles between Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore to the east and the Indonesian island of Sumatra to the west. According to the United Nations International Maritime Organization, at least 50,000 ships pass through the waterway annually, transporting 30 percent of the goods traded in the world, including oil from the Persian Gulf to major East Asian nations like China, Japan and South Korea. As many as 20 million barrels of oil a day pass through the Strait of Malacca, an amount that will only increase with the further advance of the Asian Century. [9]

Since the end of the Cold War the U.S. and its Western allies have expanded NATO throughout Europe and combined that effort with the creation of an Asian NATO that in part consists of the revival and expansion of other Cold War military alliances based on NATO: The Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS).

But what is being built currently is far more extensive than all the latter three combined and is, moreover, not complementary to but in collusion with NATO, the Afghan war serving the purpose of unifying East and West under American and NATO control as the Korean War and Vietnam War did for the creation and consolidation of SEATO and ANZUS.

In May of 2010 the Atlantic Council of the United States, the main NATO lobbying group in the Western Hemisphere and indeed in the world, posted an article by Max Boot, the Jeane J. Kirkpatrick Senior Fellow in National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and frequent lecturer at the Army War College and the Command and General Staff College, titled "Building an East Asian NATO."

It contained this excerpt:

"A common complaint heard among American officials and policy analysts is that in East Asia - one of the most important and conflict-prone areas of the planet - there is no security architecture comparable to NATO. The U.S. has ties to many key countries, notably Japan, South Korea, Singapore, the Philippines, Australia, Thailand, and Taiwan. But they do not have strong ties to one another, and there is no joint military planning of the kind that NATO undertakes..." [10]

In recent months the topic of a NATO-ASEAN military partnership has been given increased attention.

In August U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell gave an interview to The Australian in which he said:

“One of the most important challenges for US foreign policy is to effect a transition from the immediate and vexing challenges of the Middle East to the long-term and deeply consequential issues in Asia.”

“There is an undeniable assertive quality to Chinese foreign policy and we’re seeing that play out in the South China Sea and elsewhere.

“What has been effective in the past year or so is the number of countries in the Asia-Pacific (that) have been prepared to say to China that greater transparency (from China in military matters) is in the interests of the Asia-Pacific region.

“I think what you see is an across-the-board effort (by the US) to articulate India as playing a greater role in Asia, and also revitalising relations with ASEAN – both ASEAN as an institution, and with its key members, such as Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore, and revitalising what used to be a very important relationship with The Philippines.” [11]

His comments paralleled those of defense chief Panetta and other Pentagon officials in affirming that with the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the beginning of a drawdown in Afghanistan, the Pentagon is focusing on East Asia, with NATO to take a greater role in policing the Greater/Broader/New Middle East and Africa in order to free up the American military to shift to the east.

In July an article appeared in the Jakarta Post with the title “Sketching out a future ASEAN-NATO partnership” by Evan A. Laksmana, identified as a researcher for the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta, presumably an affiliate of the think tank of the same name in Washington, D.C. Indonesia, recall, currently chairs ASEAN.

The author’s comments included:

“As the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enters its seventh decade and as ASEAN consolidates its regional community building ahead of and beyond 2015, the bodies have much to learn from each other.

“For NATO, ASEAN will be increasingly critical for the future of Asian stability and order and would be an ideal candidate for a strategic counterpart to tackle common regional and global security challenges – especially when ASEAN consolidates its regional community building, allowing it to share NATO’s role as a community of like-minded nations...

“Southeast Asia’s geopolitical, geo-strategic, and geo-economic value also suggests that NATO’s future missions beyond its traditional area of operations might increasingly depend on ASEAN.”

Further, he recommended:

“Any future ASEAN-NATO partnership could at least be placed within five major policy areas: peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, defense reform and counterterrorism.”

“These five areas of engagement could be further executed in four levels of cooperation: strategic, institutional, operational and people-to-people.

“Strategically, NATO can engage ASEAN in discussions and dialogue regarding the five security issues using two tracks.

“In track one, the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (consisting of all ASEAN countries plus Australia, the US, China, South Korea, Japan, India, Russia and New Zealand) as well as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) provide critical dialogue venues.

“In track two, two groupings are crucial: the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), a network of nine major think tanks in Southeast Asia, and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), a network of nearly all major Asia Pacific think tanks.

“Institutionally, NATO could explore future cooperation or collaboration with either the ASEAN Secretariat, the network of ASEAN Peacekeeping Centers, the ASEAN Center for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief or even the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation.

“Other forms of diplomatic defense activities such as port visits or officer exchanges that are more practical and ‘neutral’ might also help alleviate some of the sensitivities of regional countries regarding NATO’s visibility.”

The writer ended his piece with these comments:

“This would slowly and gradually raise the public profile and awareness of NATO’s potential contribution to regional stability.

“This is at least the writer’s impression from discussions with various NATO officials on a recent trip.

“NATO should at least start thinking of engaging ASEAN early to avoid any surprises when a new, region-wide crisis in Asia comes knocking. For ASEAN, if we are serious about boosting our regional security community building, would it hurt to learn from a multi-national organization that has had the longest practical experience in the endeavor?” [12]

Three days later an article appeared in the Pakistani press called “NATO knocks at the door of ASEAN” by Dr. Jassim Taqui, which issued these warnings:

“Having failed in Iraq and Afghanistan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has decided to change direction towards Southeast Asia. In this regard, NATO shows a keen interest to establish a partnership with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).”

Although “the United States continued to influence ASEAN since 1997,” now “Washington is combining with India to influence the region in a bid to neutralize the rising cooperation between ASEAN and China.

“During her visit to India, the US Secretary of State Ms Hillary Clinton urged India to expand its traditional sphere of influence from South Asia to Central Asia and Southeast Asia to contain China’s increasing assertiveness. Ostensibly, Clinton’s slip of the tongue suggests a strategy that aims to encircle China in its backyard in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Rim on

one hand and to boost engagement in Central Asia, on China's western flank, on the other.

"Clinton's tone is confrontational. It justifies the containment of China by Washington and New Delhi on the ground of 'common values and interests.' Clinton also announced that the Obama administration would soon launch a three-way dialogue with India and Japan to counter China." [13]

At the beginning of the year U.S. Defense Department spokesman Geoff Morrell told reporters:

"We have 28,500 troops on the Korean Peninsula. We've got, I think, north of 50,000 troops in Japan. So we have significant assets already there. Over the long-term lay-down of our forces in the Pacific, we are looking at ways to even bolster that, not necessarily in Korea and Japan, but along the Pacific Rim, particularly in Southeast Asia." [14]

In September a U.S. Pacific Command spokesperson told The Diplomat "that ASEAN's pursuit of regional defence industry collaboration would help advance US national interests in the Asia-Pacific as it would usher in a new set of standards, similar to NATO, (that) will facilitate interoperability among ASEAN and US militaries."

The feature also stated:

"From an operational perspective, the adoption of NATO standards by ASEAN would advance long-term plug-and-play interoperability between NATO and ASEAN militaries. While this would improve joint-military action across numerous mission spaces, it also would allow Pentagon defence planners to view ASEAN militaries as potential forward-based force multipliers for some regional scenarios with potential adversaries, including China." [15]

As the year nears its end it is apparent that the Pentagon and its increasingly global military bloc, NATO, are concentrating on integrating the militaries of Southeast Asia in their inexorable drive to contain and confront China and abort the emergence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a viable, non-military alternative to them in Eurasia.

Notes

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