

Towards Military Escalation? U.S. And NATO Drag Asia Into Afghan Quagmire

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On October 7 the American and North Atlantic Treaty Organization war in Afghanistan entered its tenth year and in slightly over two months will be in its eleventh calendar year.

There are currently more than 150,000 foreign troops in the nation and the number is steadily rising.

As examples, this February Germany raised its troop numbers in Afghanistan from 4,500 to a post-World War Two overseas high of 5,350.

Italian Defence Minister Ignazio La Russa recently pledged 1,200 more troops for the war, bringing the nation's total to 4,000, during a meeting with commander of all U.S. and NATO forces General David Petraeus. This month Italy also announced it was sending three new military helicopters to the war theater and La Russa stated that he was considering authorizing bombings by Italian fighter jets in Afghanistan.

Newer NATO members in Eastern Europe have authorized comparable increases in troop deployments, with the senate of the Czech Republic voting on October 27 to boost its nation's contingent to 720 troops and Bulgaria confirming it will raise its figure to 600 by the end of the year. Moreover, the Czech Republic will redeploy special forces to Afghanistan and Bulgaria will shift from security duties to combat operations.

Not only are NATO member states continuing to enlarge the amount of troops for a war without a foreseeable end, but Washington and Brussels are intensifying joint efforts to recruit troops from nations that have until now avoided being pulled into the Afghan imbroglio.

Earlier this year Armenia, Montenegro, Mongolia, South Korea and Malaysia became the 43rd-47th official Troop Contributing Countries for NATO's International Security Assistance Force. On October 8 the diminutive South Pacific nation of Tonga was recruited by Britain as the 48th and will deploy "more than two hundred troops to Afghanistan" as - to believe British and NATO accounts of the agreement - Tonga "wants to show its support to the alliance." [1]

A few days before, the U.S.'s Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke pressured the foreign minister of Bangladesh to supply combat troops to serve under NATO in Afghanistan. Four days later, on September 30, the charge d'affaires of the US mission in Dhaka, Nicholas Dean, stated, "The United States has intensified its discussion on Bangladesh's engagement in Afghanistan...." [2]

In the past week new disclosures indicate that the U.S. and NATO are broadening their Afghan war recruitment campaign throughout Asia.

A Kyodo News report of two weeks ago revealed that Japan is to deploy ten or more Self-Defense Forces medical officers and nurses to Afghanistan by the end of the year, according to sources in the nation's Ministry of Defense and military. The medical personnel would be the first members of the Self-Defense Forces stationed in the Afghan war zone, the second violation of the nation's constitutional prohibition against stationing troops in a war theater, the first being in Iraq in 2006.

According to the Japanese press, with the new mission "Japan intends to demonstrate its personnel contributions to Afghanistan through the planned dispatch when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is expected to decide on fresh support measures in November," at the military bloc's summit in Portugal.

"The United States, which is engaged in fighting the Taliban, has called for its allies to provide more physical support and Tokyo has determined 'it is necessary to meet such expectations,'" according to the sources. [3]

However, to indicate that Japan has been no stranger to NATO's operations in Afghanistan, earlier in the month an explosive device was set off at a NATO Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) camp in the capital of Ghor province. "The majority of the personnel in the [contingent] have been deployed to multinational missions in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan previously. Representatives of Denmark, Georgia, Japan, the USA, Poland, Finland and Ukraine serve together with Lithuanian military and civilian personnel in the Ghor PRT camp in Chaghcharan." [4]

On October 25 President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, who had earlier provided troops for the Polish-led and NATO-supported Multinational Division Central-South in Iraq, met with NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen in Brussels, after which the Kazakh head of state announced that "Several Kazakhstani troops will serve at the headquarters of the international coalition in Afghanistan," and the NATO chief "called Kazakhstan a 'leading partner' of the coalition." [5]

Since shortly after Washington launched Operation Enduring Freedom, NATO forces have been based in other Central Asian nations: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Including the Middle East and the South Caucasus, NATO's Asia-Pacific roster in the Afghanistan-Pakistan war theater consists of (and soon may) a growing number of nations: Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Georgia, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Tonga and the United Arab Emirates, in addition to Afghanistan (and Pakistan).

With all 28 NATO members and nine European members of the Alliance's Partnership for Peace program already having supplied troops - and only six European states to date not having done so (Belarus, Cyprus, Malta, Moldova, Serbia and Russia) - the U.S. and NATO necessarily have to look beyond the Euro-Atlantic region for more troops. In doing so the war in Afghanistan has become an Asian war in two senses: The first prolonged war in the continent the U.S. has waged since that in Vietnam and the first Asian war in NATO's history, and a conflict that is pulling more and more Asia-Pacific countries into its bloody grip.

As of October 28 the U.S., its NATO allies and partnership countries had lost 605 soldiers this year, compared to 521 for 2009, itself the highest annual total until now. The combined death count for 2009-2010 - 1,126 - is over half of all foreign soldiers killed since the war began on October 7, 2001, which is 2,175. Seventeen NATO soldiers were killed in three days, October 13-15, alone.

Afghan civilians have fared even worse. Last month, two months after General David Petraeus took over command of all U.S. and NATO forces from Stanley McChrystal [6], American and NATO air strikes in Afghanistan had increased to 700 from 257 in September of 2009 according to U.S. Air Force statistics. [7]

Although nominally targeting insurgents, the bombings and missile strikes have left scores of Afghan civilians dead. Recent reports include:

Early this month a NATO air strike killed at least 18 people in an attack on a residence in Helmand province.

A week later, October 11, at least 20 civilians were killed by a Western rocket attack in the same province. [8]

A U.S.-NATO air strike in Baghlan province killed at least 18 people and wounded several others on October 17, with "eyewitnesses and local sources [saying] all those killed in the attack were civilians." [9]

On October 23 Afghan government officials accused NATO troops of firing indiscriminately at civilians in Wardak province, causing the deaths of two schoolchildren. "The attack prompted a brief demonstration by angry villagers, demanding an explanation from NATO forces over the killing." [10] The following day it was reported that four Afghan civilians, including a child, were killed by a U.S.-NATO air strike in the same province.

Regarding the overall, cumulative effect of the Western war and occupation in Afghanistan, on October 10 - the United Nations-supported World Mental Health Day - Afghanistan's Dr. Suraya Dalil, Deputy Minister for Policy and Planning and Acting Minister of the Ministry of Public Health, stated that "More than 60 percent of Afghans are suffering from stress disorders and mental problems," a figure substantiated by the World Health Organization. [11]

Seventeen days afterward Saleem Kunduzi, Acting Minister of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, told a gathering marking World Food Day that "Two years ago, five million people in Afghanistan lived in extreme poverty, but now the number has increased to nine million," [12] almost a third of the population.

In the nine years since the U.S. and NATO invaded Afghanistan, opium cultivation has expanded by 40,000 percent and now accounts for over 90 percent of the world's supply.

On June 9-10 of this year an international forum called Drug Production in Afghanistan: A Challenge to the International Community was held in Moscow and was addressed by among others President Dmitry Medvedev and Viktor Ivanov, Director of the Federal Drug Control Service of the Russian Federation. The second had stated earlier at a similar conference in Berlin that "Revenues derived from smuggling the 'white death' to Europe, Asia and America are estimated to score billions of dollars. In fact, the production and illegal trafficking of Afghan drugs should be classified as a threat to international peace and

security.” [13]

The U.S. and NATO have also escalated attacks inside Pakistan. Last month witnessed the largest amount of unmanned aerial vehicle (drone) missile strikes inside the country since their inception in 2004, with at least 20 attacks – many involving the firing of several missiles – causing the deaths of at least 140 people.

NATO also launched four helicopter gunship attacks inside Pakistan in September and killed three Pakistani soldiers in the last, on the 30th.

A minimum of 14 drone strikes by the 28th of this month have killed close to 90 people.

On October 12 two NATO helicopters violated Pakistani airspace in the province of Balochistan and a week later “NATO warplanes and helicopter gunships entered up to 15 kilometers inside Pakistani airspace” in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. [14]

A South Asian news source recently wrote that “US officials may [be planning] raids into Balochistan....Indeed the attacks would be even more controversial than the previous ones, as the earlier helicopter attacks were in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), while military officials are now seeking raids into Pakistan proper, into the Balochistan province....” [15]

A full-scale incursion by U.S. and NATO troops into Pakistan appears to be only a matter of time.

The U.S. led its allies into three wars in less than four years – from March 24, 1999 to March 20, 2003 – in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Along the way the Pentagon has acquired dozens of new military bases in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central and South Asia, including future strategic air bases in Bulgaria, Romania, Iraq and Afghanistan.

It has also recruited a permanent “coalition of the willing” to wage wars and conduct military occupations in campaigns that have moved inexorably to the east, from Southeastern Europe to the Persian Gulf to the Afghan-Chinese border.

Almost all the 48 nations contributing troops for NATO’s International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan also provided troops for NATO’s Kosovo Force from 1999 to the present and the Multi-National Force – Iraq from 2004-2008. The vast majority have supplied forces for all three missions. In Iraq twenty graduate and current members of NATO’s Partnership for Peace transitional program sent troops: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine. All 12 countries absorbed into NATO since the war cycle began in 1999 have deployed troops to Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. Nine out of 15 former Soviet republics had troops in Iraq.

Non-European and non-former Soviet nations that currently have troops in or headed to Afghanistan also had troops in Iraq: Australia, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea and Tonga. Others that have troops in Afghanistan also assigned troops to NATO’s Kosovo Force: Malaysia, Mongolia and the United Arab Emirates.

In 2002 U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld “put forward a proposal to create a NATO

rapid reaction force,” which was endorsed at the 2002 Alliance summit in the Czech Republic and launched at the 2004 summit in Turkey to conduct “Any mission, anywhere in the world.” [16]

With partners on every populated continent – Colombia has been tapped for troops to be deployed to Afghanistan and Egypt, a NATO Mediterranean Dialogue partner, has security personnel there – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has proven an effective vehicle for the U.S. to establish, train, deploy and integrate a global expeditionary military force which has been used in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, with increasing emphasis on the last.

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Notes

- 1) BNO News, October 8, 2010
- 2) Indo-Asian News Service, October 1, 2010
- 3) Kyodo News, October 15, 2010
- 4) Baltic Course, October 11, 2010
- 5) Central Asia Online, October 27, 2010
- 6) Afghan War: Petraeus Expands U.S. Military Presence Throughout Eurasia
Stop NATO, July 4, 2010
<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/07/05/afghan-war-petraeus-expands-u-s-military-presence-throughout-eurasia>
- West’s Afghan Debacle: Commander Dismissed As War Deaths Reach Record Level
Stop NATO, June 25, 2010
<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/06/25/wests-afghan-debacle-commander-dismissed-as-war-deaths-reach-record-level>
- 7) ABC News Radio, October 13, 2010
- 8) Press TV/Afghan Islamic Press, October 12, 2010
- 9) Press TV, October 18, 2010
- 10) Reuters, October 23, 2010
- 11) Agence France-Presse, October 10, 2010
- 12) Pajhwok Afghan News, October 27, 2010
- 13) Russian Information Agency Novosti, June 6, 2010
- 14) Asian News International, October 19, 2010
- 15) The Nation/Asian News International, October 15, 2010
- 16) North Atlantic Treaty Organization
http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49755.htm

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