

U.S. And NATO Prolong And Expand Greater Afghan War

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Over 150,000 foreign troops from more than fifty nations will spend another Christmas in Afghanistan. The tenth since the U.S. and Britain invaded the nation on October 7, 2001 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization activated its Article 5 collective military assistance provision the preceding month.

Western forces have occupied and waged war in the nation for longer than Soviet troops were stationed there, from December 27, 1979 until February 15, 1989. There are approximately a time and a half as many U.S. and NATO troops in the country as there were Soviet ones at their peak.

The duration of the war, also the most protracted in U.S. history, is lengthening and the amount of foreign soldiers in theater is growing, with a rash of recent revelations establishing that the foreign occupation will continue to 2014 and perhaps substantially longer and documenting a steady increase in reinforcements from several NATO nations and the recruitment of new troop contributing nations.

Christmas Day will find troops from the U.S. and NATO allies also based, billeted and bivouacked in Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as well as other generally unacknowledged outposts in the greater Afghan war, one which in truth ranges from the Strait of Gibraltar on the Atlantic Ocean to the Strait of Malacca in the Pacific. In addition to the Afghan campaign, NATO's invocation of its Article 5 has been employed to support the over nine-year-old Operation Active Endeavor maritime surveillance and interdiction mission throughout the Mediterranean Sea, and U.S. and NATO allies' naval and air deployments in support of the Afghan war overlap with operations off the Horn of Africa in the Gulf of Aden and throughout the Indian Ocean and into the Persian Gulf.

Last week the USS Halsey and USS Shoup destroyers rejoined the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group in the northern Indian Ocean region stretching from Pakistan in the east to Somalia and Yemen in the west. The two new warships linked up with the Abraham Lincoln nuclear aircraft supercarrier and its attached warplanes, the guided missile cruiser USS Cape St. George and destroyers USS Momsen and USS Sterett.

Indicating the range of the greater Afghan war area of operations, that of the original Operation Enduring Freedom and global war on terror, a U.S. Navy website disclosed that the "Shoup will be initially assigned to counter-piracy operations in and around the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and Red Sea; Momsen will be initially assigned to Commander, Task Force (CTF) 152 in the Arabian Gulf; and Halsey will be initially assigned to CTF 50, supporting Abraham Lincoln Strike Group operations." [1]

Arabian Gulf is an allusion to what is generally known as the Persian Gulf and its use is an intentional provocation to Iran. Combined Task Force 152, in its own words, “operates in the international waters of the Arabian Gulf and takes part in Operation Enduring Freedom.” [2] CTF 50 is presumably Combined Task Force 150, an American-led multinational naval force with logistics facilities at Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, where U.S. Africa Command maintains its only full-service military base on the African continent and stations its Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa whose area of responsibility includes Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Seychelles, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Yemen and increasingly Comoros, Mauritius and Madagascar.

The theater of operations for the greater Afghan war stretches across the entire expanse of the Arabian Sea. [3]

After an unscheduled return to home port for repairs, the Charles de Gaulle arrived in the Arabian Sea recently where the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group and the Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group are currently deployed. The U.S. possesses all eleven of the world’s supercarriers and all but one of its twelve nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, the Charles de Gaulle being the other. American supercarriers are accompanied by strike groups and regularly prowl the planet’s oceans and seas.

In the skies over Afghanistan, the U.S. and its NATO allies delivered 4,615 bombs and missiles to targets in that Asian nation so far this year, already surpassing last year’s total of 4,184, with 1,000 bombs and Hellfire missiles used in October alone. Total combat sorties have risen by 20 percent over the same period.

On November 29 the French Defense Ministry announced that a Rafale multirole jet fighter plunged into the Arabian Sea a hundred miles off the Pakistani coast after taking off from the Charles de Gaulle and flying a combat mission over Afghanistan.

The U.S. Defense Department reported to Congress on November 22 that “violence in Afghanistan was at an all-time high since the nine-year-old war started” and “progress made by the NATO-led forces there was limited.” [4] Combat incidents in Afghanistan so far this year are up fourfold over 2007 and what the Pentagon refers to as “kinetic events” – direct and indirect fire, surface-to-air fire and exploded, discovered and disabled roadside bombs – increased by nearly 55 percent in this year’s third quarter, July-September, from the preceding one.

NATO deaths in Afghanistan during the first eleven months of 2010 are at 700, 30 percent of the total in over nine years of fighting.

Tony Karon wrote in Time magazine two days before the event that on November 27 the U.S. and NATO “will have been in Afghanistan a day longer than the Soviet Union had been when it completed its 1989 withdrawal.

“What’s more, the U.S. announced during last weekend’s NATO summit that it intends to spend at least four more years, and possibly longer, in the Hindu Kush. Even then, many Afghans — perhaps even the president installed by the U.S. invasion — appear to doubt that the Americans will succeed where their erstwhile Cold War nemesis failed.” [5]

Romanian President Traian Basescu was in Afghanistan on November 30, accompanied by his defense minister, Gabriel Oprea, U.S. ambassador to Romania Mark Gitenstein and

senior American defense official at the American embassy in Bucharest Colonel Bruce West. The head of state visited some of his nation's 1,663 troops in the country, all but eight of whom are under NATO command, and announced that the number will rise to 1,800 by the end of this month.

Since Romania joined NATO in 2004, 17 of its soldiers have been killed and 55 wounded in Afghanistan, the nation's first casualties in a wartime deployment, along with three killed and eight injured in Iraq, since the Second World War.

Romania joins its neighbor Bulgaria and other NATO nations including Italy and the Czech Republic in pledging an increase in troops and a shift from other duties to combat roles for an Afghan war that shows no sign of winding down. Just the opposite. In the past year several countries have become new Troop Contributing Nations for NATO's International Security Assistance Force: Armenia, Montenegro, Mongolia, Malaysia, South Korea and Tonga, and more being enlisted.

Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell recently referred to the latest deadline for the commencement of a gradual withdrawal of American and other NATO forces from Afghanistan - 2014 - as an "aspirational goal" and the new chief of Britain's Defence Staff, Sir David Richards, has suggested that Western troops could remain in the country a good half century after the 2001 invasion.

Romania's Basescu, flanked by his American handlers but where none but a Romanian reporter could hear him, was equally if not more forthcoming in speaking of NATO's tenure in South and Central Asia while inspecting his country's expeditionary troops earlier this week.

Thanking the latter "for what you do for Romania, for what you do for NATO, for what you do for the civilized world," he added:

"As we pledged when we came to Afghanistan, we are only going to leave this country after accomplishing our mission.....But what I am telling you for sure is that 2014 must not be regarded as a deadline [when] NATO withdraws from Afghanistan.

"Examinations show that 2014 is still an optimistic deadline. Therefore, we shall stay here till Afghanistan is fully secure...." [6]

If the beginning of a "drawdown" of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan and several neighboring and nearby nations in 2014 is aspirational for the Pentagon, it is at best problematic for Romania's president and certainly a premature and transparently dishonest schedule to disinterested observers. [7]

Too many reinforcements, too many new nations providing troops, too many new deployments of military aircraft and armored vehicles, including 14 Abrams tanks to be dispatched to southwest Afghanistan this month, to allow for any other interpretation of events but that of a war expanding without foreseeable abatement.

Moreover, the war is continuing to expand into Pakistan with its population of 170 million.

On November 26 and 28 the U.S. delivered the latest of as many as 16 drone missile strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas for the month, killing at least eight people, making a total of close to 100 deaths in the Central Intelligence Agency-directed attacks in November.

Last week a prominent Indian news agency revealed that a U.S. Defense Department report confirmed that American and NATO military personnel will be deployed in Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Balochistan province. [8]

On November 27 a Pakistani lawyer appealed to the Lahore High Court against the deployment and "submitted before the court that the government had handed over a big area to foreign forces for setting up an airbase, which was against the country's sovereignty.

"The government was not authorised to hand over the country's lands to foreigners." [9]

Four days earlier NATO helicopter gunships resumed attacks inside Pakistan, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas where the U.S. has launched the bulk of drone missile attacks that have killed almost 2,000 people. "[T]wo NATO gunship helicopters encroached upon Pakistani airspace during flights near Landi Kotal and Torkham and violated international boundaries.

"Officials...claimed hearing sounds of blasts while the helicopters were hovering over...." [10]

On November 26 another report surfaced of an attack by NATO helicopters in Pakistan. "Witnesses said two NATO helicopters were hovering for 10 minutes and fired at the Lawra Mandi village in the Datta Khel area in North Waziristan," injuring three people who were rushed to a hospital in Miranshah, the capital of the tribal district. [11]

NATO launched four helicopter attacks in the country in late September, killing three border troops on September 30.

In October NATO warplanes and helicopter gunships intruded into both Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly the North-West Frontier Province) and Balochistan.

NATO warplanes violated Pakistani airspace over Balochistan in February as well.

A Chinese commentary of late last week warned: "Despite Pakistan's clear-cut political stance adopted amid stern warnings and the subsequent U. S. written apology and denials, NATO aircraft continued breaching Pakistani airspace, raising [questions] if these incursions are being used as a barometer for testing Pakistani tolerance to possible further advances into [the nation's] territory, a general fear creeping into Pakistani policy." [12]

Moves to draw India into the West's military orbit, both in reference to the Afghanistan-Pakistan war theater and vis-a-vis China, have been typified by visits to that country last month by U.S. President Barack Obama and British Defence Secretary Liam Fox.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is currently on a four-day trip to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Bahrain.

Former Indian diplomat and veteran journalist M. K. Bhadrakumar penned a column for The Hindu last week in which he observed:

"From a seemingly reluctant arrival in Afghanistan seven years ago, NATO is deepening its presence and recasting its role and activities on a long-term basis.

“The summit meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in Lisbon constituted a significant event for South Asia. The alliance is transforming itself into playing a global political-military role.”

He added: “Clearly, the U.S. will be in the driving seat in the Hindu Kush for the long-term. The billions of dollars the U.S. has been pumping in for upgrading Soviet-era military bases in Afghanistan and constructing new military bases now fall into perspective....Overarching these considerations comes the U.S. strategy visualising NATO as the provider of security to the Silk Road that transports the multi-trillion dollar mineral wealth in Central Asia to the world market via the port of Gwadar” on Pakistan’s Arabian Sea coast. [13]

NATO’s top military chief, Supreme Allied Commander Europe Admiral James Stavridis, recently boasted that the U.S.-dominated military bloc is “a wealthy alliance” with a \$31 trillion collective Gross Domestic Product and is a “big and capable alliance” with 7 million troops and 3,400 ships....” [14]

The West’s, particularly Washington’s, geopolitical designs on Eurasia don’t permit it to withdraw from Central and South Asia. Nor do they give the U.S. and its military allies any incentive to do so.

Notes

- 1) Navy NewsStand, November 25, 2010
- 2) Combined Maritime Forces
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- 3) Arabian Sea: Center Of West’s 21st Century War
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- 4) Xinhua News Agency, November 24, 2010
- 5) Tony Karon, The Afghanistan War Reaches a Milestone — and Keeps Going
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- 6) Romanian News Agency
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- 7) Timetable Abandoned: U.S. And NATO To Wage Endless War In Afghanistan
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- 8) Asian News International, November 25, 2010
- 9) Daily Times, November 28, 2010
- 10) Geo News/The News International, November 24, 2010
- 11) Xinhua News Agency, November 26, 2010
- 12) Xinhua News Agency, November 28, 2010
- 13) M. K. Bhadrakumar, NATO and South Asian security
The Hindu, November 26, 2010
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- 14) Defense News, November 29, 2010

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