

War In Afghanistan Evokes Second World War Parallels

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Global Research, April 07, 2010

[Stop NATO](#) 6 April 2010

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With the Pentagon and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization planning the largest military campaign of the Afghan war this summer in the south, Kandahar province, a complementary offensive in the north, Kunduz province, and increased troop strength of 150,000 in preparation for the assaults, a war that will enter its tenth calendar year this October 7 is reaching the apex of its intensity.

The length of the war if not the amount of troops deployed for it inevitably conjures up a comparison with the U.S. war in Vietnam, before now the longest in America's history. Not only protracted but intractable, with its escalation in earnest beginning in early 1965 and the end of U.S. combat operations not occurring until 1973.

Another analogy is with the Korean War, far shorter in duration - three years - and with fewer U.S. troops and deaths than in Vietnam.

In at least two manners the Korean War more closely resembles the current armed conflict in South Asia. First, foreign intervention was formally authorized by the United Nations although in effect it was a U.S.-led and -dominated military operation on the Asian mainland.

Second, Washington then, as now, recruited troops from allied nations, particularly from members of post-World War II military blocs it had formed or was in the process of establishing. In addition to South Korea, soldiers from fifteen other countries fought under U.S. (and nominal UN) command.

From NATO, formed the year before the Korean War began in 1950: Britain, Canada, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and then candidate members Greece and Turkey.

From the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS), formed during the Korean War in September of 1951: All three members.

From what in 1955 would be formalized as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), envisioned at the time as an Asian parallel to NATO: The Philippines, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand, along with the U.S., Britain and France which were also founding members.

Washington additionally dragooned between 1,800-3,000 troops each from Colombia, Ethiopia and apartheid South Africa for the war effort.

SEATO was dissolved in 1977 and ANZUS remains an active alliance, although for the expanding war in Afghanistan (and neighboring Pakistan) all foreign troops, including in the near future "virtually all American forces," [1] are or will be under NATO command,

including the first contingent of troops from Colombia. Australia and New Zealand, with 1,550 and 200 troops respectively, are now identified as NATO Contact Countries.

To return to the Vietnam precedent, on July 2, 2009 the U.S. launched its largest military offensive anywhere since the second attack on Fallujah in Iraq in 2004, Operation Phantom Fury, which included a total of 10,000-15,000 American troops.

In Operation Khanjar (Strike of the Sword) conducted in Afghanistan's Helmand province, 4,000 U.S. forces and fifty aircraft participated in an assault that included "the biggest offensive airlift by the Marines since Vietnam." [2]

In February 15,000 U.S., NATO and Afghan government troops launched the largest joint military attack of the war against the town of Marjah in Helmand province, with an estimated population of 75,000-80,000 and by one account as few as 400 suspected insurgents. [3] A more than 27-1 ratio of armed belligerents. The insurgents were not only outnumbered but outgunned and unlike their opponents didn't have warplanes for air cover and bombing and strafing runs. Western troops were ferried in by helicopters and rockets were fired from a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, in one case killing ten members of an Afghan family when their house was hit.

Nevertheless a U.S. officer described the fighting being as tough as that in Fallujah six years earlier. "In Fallujah, it was just as intense. But there, we started from the north and worked down to the south. In Marjah, we're coming in from different locations and working toward the centre, so we're taking fire from all angles." [4]

The offensive was initiated on February 13th and six weeks later it was reported that U.S. and NATO troops were "still coming under fire and being targeted by bomb attacks despite efforts to restore Afghan government control." [5]

The Russian ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, "said he was puzzled by allied claims that the offensive was a success," according to the Associated Press, which moreover attributed a further statement of Rogozin's - "So the result (of the Marjah offensive) was that the mountain shook, but only a mouse was born" - to a "Russian proverb." [6]

What the Russian envoy no doubt knew if the U.S. news agency's writer and editors didn't was that Rogozin's line was a quote from the Roman poet Horace: Parturiunt montes; nascetur ridiculus mus. The mountains are in labor; a ridiculous mouse will be born.

While the mountain was writhing with a stillborn victory, U.S. President Barack Obama paid an unannounced one-day visit to the Afghan capital of Kabul to, as it can be safely assumed, remind his Afghan counterpart Hamid Karzai who was in charge of the country.

The following day the U.S.'s top military commander, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, visited Marjah forty days after the offensive was unleashed there and in a news report entitled "Mullen in Afghan war zone as US gears up for Kandahar" it was disclosed that "The United States and allies have boosted their troop numbers to 126,000, with the number set to peak at 150,000 by August as the fight expands into neighbouring Kandahar province, the heartland of the insurgency." [7]

If the U.S. and its NATO allies faced 400-2,000 armed fighters in Marjah (the most common figure cited in the Western press was 600), a town of no more than 80,000 inhabitants, and still confronted snipers and improvised explosive devices a month and a half into the

operation, Kandahar presents a challenge several orders of magnitude greater. The province has a population of almost one million with half that number in the capital. It is also, in the copy and paste style of the American establishment news media, routinely referred to as the “heartland of the insurgency” and the “birthplace of Taliban.”

The assault on Marjah was intended and presented as a warm-up exercise for the campaign in Kandahar province and city scheduled to begin as early as June, and the public relations blitz before the February attack on Marjah was of a scope customarily reserved for high-budget Hollywood releases and professional sports events. The self-celebratory propaganda in advance of the offensive in Kandahar can be expected to exceed it in bravado and extravagance. To be proportionate to the scale of the fighting. The “battle for Kandahar” is intended to be the decisive victory in what will then be a nearly nine-year war, one that permits Washington and its Western allies to “retreat in dignity” from the Afghan imbroglio.

In preparation for the offensive the U.S. is increasing the transfer of troops and military equipment to the war zone. In early April the Pentagon’s Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Ashton B. Carter affirmed that a “massive amount of equipment and supplies being sent to support troops in Afghanistan is a historic logistical effort,” and stated:

“I think it’s fair to say that there’s never been, like in these months that we’re witnessing right now, as dramatic a logistics effort as we see in Afghanistan.” [8]

He was further cited as saying “From the ramp up of airlifts, sealifts and ground supply lines, to the building of forward operating bases, runways and tent cities...the effort to build up and supply the plus up of troops in Afghanistan is critical to NATO’s success there.” [9]

In 2008 NATO established its first multinational Strategic Airlift Capability operation at the Papa Air Base in Hungary, intended for supplying war efforts around the world in future but for the conflict in Afghanistan most immediately. The “first-of-its-kind mobility unit comprising airmen from 12 nations” [10] is staffed by U.S. military personnel, who are also now permanently stationed at bases in Bulgaria and Romania and later this month will be in Poland as well. Late last July the “first-ever multinational strategic airlift unit was officially activated...at a ceremony at Papa Air Base, Hungary, according to a U.S. Air Forces in Europe release.” [11]

A Pentagon website disclosed this April 2nd that the Hungarian-based “Heavy Airlift Wing, comprised of 12 nations, recently moved 2.1 million pounds of equipment essential to surge operations supporting the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

“The international wing has been part of the operation to move more than 6 million pounds of basic expeditionary airfield resources, or BEAR materiel, to build six forward operating bases supporting 3,500 people....” [12]

At a press conference at the same time the new commander of the U.S. Third - “Patton’s Own” - Army (United States Army Central), Lieutenant General William G. Webster, informed reporters in Kuwait that “The military is scrambling to finish what it calls the largest movement of troops and equipment since the buildup of World War II as it draws down in

Iraq and ramps up in Afghanistan.”

He added that “the military is moving as fast as it can on the massive and complex job. There are roughly 3 million pieces of equipment in Iraq, including 41,000 vehicles and trailers,” and said “officials expect to be able to move the more than 5,000 vehicles needed for the Afghanistan buildup into that country by the end of the summer.

“Besides air deliveries to Afghanistan, the military is moving goods through neighboring Pakistan and is using a system of roads, rail and sea routes through Uzbekistan and other points to the north in Central Asia.” [13]

His was not the only recent reference to World War II in regards to the Afghan war. There is no literal comparison between the ongoing fighting in Afghanistan and the most deadly and destructive armed conflict in human history. The Second World War included all the world’s major industrial powers as belligerents (Sweden alone possibly excepted), which collectively mobilized up to 100 million troops.

The war cost the lives of as many as 70 million people, soldiers and civilians alike.

In the nuclear age the world would not survive any attempt at a similar conflagration.

But that war is increasingly becoming the frame of reference for the fighting in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater.

In the April 1st edition of Toronto’s Global and Mail Michael O’Hanlon, director of research and senior fellow on foreign policy issues at the Brookings Institution, wrote in an opinion piece called “Kandahar is what the Canada-U.S. alliance is all about” that “Americans need to feel unabashed about asking Canada to stay on in Afghanistan past 2011,” as the two nations “are beginning the most important combined wartime operation since the Second World War.” [14]

Canada has lost 141 soldiers in Afghanistan, most all of them in Kandahar. That death toll is Canada’s highest since the Korean War, which ended 57 years ago. Australia, which has not suffered combat casualties since the wars in Korea and Vietnam, has acknowledged that twenty of its soldiers have been wounded in Afghanistan so far this year.

The carnage against Afghan civilians perpetrated by the U.S. and NATO from the sky and on the ground is steadily mounting (as deaths from U.S. drone missile attacks in adjoining Pakistan near the 800 mark). From Kunduz last autumn and Marjah the last two months to the unconscionable murder of two pregnant women (one a mother of ten, the other of six), a teenage girl and others in the village of Khataba in Paktia province in February, the counterinsurgency strategy of General McChrystal, commander of all U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, is having its lethal effect.

The war is also costing NATO a rising number of casualties in the military bloc’s first ground war. As of April 3rd Western nations had lost 144 soldiers this year. In the first three months of 2010 the NATO-led International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) acknowledged at least 138 deaths as compared to 78 during the same quarter in 2009, which itself was the deadliest year for U.S. and NATO forces – 520 losses – since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. “Military planners have said they expect an escalation of deaths and injuries among foreign troops as deployments surge to a peak of 150,000 by August....” [15]

American combat deaths also “roughly doubled in the first three months of 2010 compared to the same period last year,” and “have been accompanied by a dramatic spike in the number of wounded, with injuries more than tripling in the first two months of the year and trending in the same direction based on the latest available data for March.”

“U.S. officials have warned that casualties are likely to rise even further as the Pentagon completes its deployment of 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan and sets its sights on the Taliban’s home base of Kandahar province, where a major operation is expected in the coming months.” [16]

On April 2nd three German soldiers were killed and five seriously wounded in a firefight with an estimated 200 insurgents in the northern Afghan province of Kunduz. According to Deutsche Presse-Agentur, “It was the highest number of casualties the postwar German armed forces, the Bundeswehr, have suffered in battle and brought to 39 the number of German soldiers killed in Afghanistan.” [17] That is, the three soldiers killed represented the most German combat fatalities in a single exchange since the defeat of the Third Reich in 1945. The 39 deaths in total are also the first since the end of World War II.

German NATO troops responded by killing six Afghan government soldiers in the same province on the same day.

In mid-March German General Bruno Kasdorf, chief of staff of the International Security and Assistance Force in the Afghan capital, informed German public radio that “There will definitely be an operation up there in Kunduz (province),” and that the offensive would be “similar” in scale “to the offensive currently underway in the southern province of Helmand involving 15,000 US, NATO and Afghan troops.” [18]

Germany currently has approximately 4,300 troops in Afghanistan, the third largest contingent after the U.S. and Britain and the most deployed abroad in the post-World War II period since 8,500 troops were assigned to the NATO force in Kosovo in 1999. [19]

In Afghanistan, as evidenced above, they are in an active war zone for the first time in 65 years. Last September 5th German troops called in NATO air strikes against villages near their base in Kunduz which resulted in the deaths of over 150 Afghan civilians. [20]

German Federal Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development Dirk Niebel, who was in Afghanistan on the day of the deadly fighting that cost the lives of five of his own country’s soldiers and six from the government of Afghanistan, the protection of which is the pretext for German military involvement in the nation, in speaking of his nation’s combat troops at a ceremony for those killed on April 2nd stated “They want people to understand that they have to defend themselves - sometimes also preventatively. And they don’t understand why they have to explain themselves to the German public, or why they could even be prosecuted.” [21]

Another report of the same day quoted German Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg asseverating, “We will stay in Afghanistan” although the mission is being conducted under “war-like” circumstances and the situation confronting German troops could be categorized as a war.

“The remarks reflect calls by Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle and some

others to reclassify the German mission in Afghanistan as 'armed conflict.' So far, German military forces have been subjected to the civil penal code, given their participation in training Afghan police and soldiers and in reconstruction activities." [22]

Reclassifying Germany's - overt and incontrovertible - combat mission in Afghanistan as war in place of the previous designations of peacekeeping and reconstruction would allow for a relaxation of legal and other constraints on its troops, so-called combat caveats, so that massacres like that in Kunduz last September will be more likely to be repeated and less likely to be prosecuted.

Germany's military role in NATO's first Asian war is of special significance as the May 8th (May 9th in much of Eastern Europe) 65th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe approaches.

When the leaders of the Big Three allied powers - Britain, the Soviet Union and the U.S. - met in Yalta and Potsdam in 1945 to discuss what a post-war Europe would look like, particular emphasis was placed on building a new legal and security structure that would prevent the possibility of the horrors of the Second World War ever again being inflicted on the continent and the world.

The nation that had ignited the deadliest war in human history - Germany with its invasions of Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Yugoslavia, Greece and the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1941 - was to be demilitarized. At the time many in the world hoped the model might be extended to all of Europe and even to the rest of the world.

That wish was dashed with the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949 and the inclusion of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) into the military bloc six years afterward.

Germany itself would violate the post-World War II prohibition against engaging in armed conflicts by supplying Luftwaffe warplanes for NATO's 78-day air war against Yugoslavia in 1999 and then by deploying troops for what has now become a full-fledged combat role in Afghanistan. German forces have been appointed to lead fellow NATO nations' troops in the upcoming large-scale military offensive in Kunduz province.

On May 9th troops from the other Second World War allied powers in the European theater - the U.S., Britain and France - are for the first time to March in the Victory Day parade in the Russian capital.

There are different ways to commemorate the end of the world's bloodiest war.

Britain's Sunday Telegraph ran a feature on April 4th titled "Luftwaffe and RAF join forces in Afghanistan," which celebrated the fact that "Sixty-five years after the end of the Second World War" a "Luftwaffe navigator has flown into combat in the same plane as an RAF pilot for the very first time."

That the British Royal Air Force and its German opposite number would not only forget dogfights over the English channel and bombing raids over the continent in the early 1940s but join ranks in combat missions over an unoffending nation and its people in faraway South Asia seemed a cause for approbation to the major British daily, which detailed that "the [German] navigator climbed into a Tornado GR4 ground attack aircraft at Kandahar

airbase in southern Afghanistan to provide air support for troops in Helmand province.” The British Tornado GR4 multirole fighter, equipped for Storm Shadow and Brimstone missiles, earlier saw action in Iraq.

In fact the Tornado combat plane jointly flown by a German and a British pilot in Afghanistan “was armed with 500lb Paveway air-to-ground bombs, Brimstone missiles and a 27mm cannon.” [23]

On May 8th and 9th when the world remembers the end of a conflict that accounted for the largest-ever loss of human life, two distinct, exclusive and even opposite interpretations will be offered on the events of 65 years ago.

One is that humanity must never allow the use of war to achieve political, territorial and economic objectives or in the name of redressing past grievances, which all too often is reduced to motives of revenge.

The other is that the majority of the world’s major military powers must intensify plans for international armed intervention based on global rapid deployment forces able to confront and attack any nation accused of posing a threat outside or inside its borders. “Preventatively.”

The West’s war in Afghanistan – with an ever-widening network of military bases and transit infrastructure in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, the Middle East, and Central and South Asia servicing it – is the era’s most egregious example of the second strategy.

Notes

- 1) Associated Press, March 16, 2010
 - 2) Associated Press, July 1, 2009
 - 3) Associated Press, February 14, 2010
 - 4) Christian Science Monitor, February 14, 2010
 - 5) Agence France-Presse, March 31, 2010
 - 6) Associated Press, March 15, 2010
 - 7) Agence France-Presse, March 31, 2010
 - 8) U.S. Department of Defense
American Forces Press Service
April 2, 2010
 - 9) Ibid
 - 10) U.S. Air Forces in Europe, June 2, 2009
 - 11) Stars and Stripes, July 29, 2009
 - 12) United States European Command, April 2, 2010
 - 13) Associated Press, April 2, 2010
 - 14) Globe and Mail, April 1, 2010
 - 15) Daily Jang/The News, March 31, 2010
 - 16) Associated Press, March 28, 2010
 - 17) Deutsche Presse-Agentur, April 2, 2010
 - 18) Agence France-Presse, March 18, 2010
 - 19) New NATO: Germany Returns To World Military Stage
Stop NATO, July 12, 2009
- <http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/08/31/new-nato-germany-returns-to-world-military-sta>

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20) Pajhwok Afghan News, September 5, 2009

Following Afghan Election, NATO Intensifies Deployments, Carnage

Stop NATO, September 6, 2009

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/09/06/following-afghan-election-nato-intensifies-deployments-carnage>

21) Deutsche Welle, April 4, 2010

22) Deutsche Welle, April 4, 2010

23) Sunday Telegraph, April 4, 2010

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