

Afghanistan: Global NATO's First Ground War In Its Tenth Year

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The military alliance that 61 years ago identified its core mission as to “promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area” is now embroiled in the tenth year of a war in Afghanistan launched by its dominant member, the United States.

South Asia is as far removed from the North Atlantic Ocean as possible while remaining in the Northern Hemisphere.

After “promoting stability and well-being” in the Balkans in the last decade by conducting a three-week bombing campaign against the Bosnian Serb Republic (Republika Srpska) in 1995 and a 78-day air war against Yugoslavia four years later, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization intervened in Macedonia in 2001 and shortly thereafter invoked its founding treaty’s Article 5 – “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and...each of them...will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith...such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force” – on September 12, 2001.

In doing so NATO signed on for participation in Washington’s so-called Global War on Terror, last year renamed Overseas Contingency Operations and perhaps to be called something else tomorrow as pretexts change.

As a consequence and demand alike of doing so, the North Atlantic Alliance deployed military forces to the first major military base the Pentagon has secured in Africa, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, and on October 4, 2001 launched Operation Active Endeavour to patrol the entire Mediterranean Sea from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Suez Canal and the Dardanelles Strait, ostensibly to – in NATO’s own words – “help detect, deter and protect against terrorist activity” and especially to “combat...the proliferation and smuggling of weapons of mass destruction.” The terrorism-weapons of mass destruction link was an obedient reflection of Washington’s rhetoric at the time, though the second half of the combination has been shifted away from Iraq toward Iran as the 2003 invasion of the first failed to locate any weapons of mass destruction as well as connections to al-Qaeda.

No vessel enters or leaves the Mediterranean except under NATO surveillance. The Alliance’s ships have hailed over 100,000 commercial vessels and boarded an admitted 155 or more. “Since April 2003, NATO has been systematically boarding suspect ships....[M]erchant ships passing through the Eastern Mediterranean are hailed by patrolling NATO naval units and asked to identify themselves and their activity. This information is then reported to both NATO’s Allied Maritime Component Commander in Naples, Italy, and

the NATO Shipping Centre in Northwood, England.” [1]

Without a mandate from the United Nations or attempt to obtain one and no justification under international law, the U.S.-dominated military bloc arrogates to itself the right to stop, board (peaceably or otherwise) and search any ship in the Mediterranean and in theory to seize its cargo and detain its crew, even to impound the ship itself. What is tantamount to a blockade of the entire sea if not what if perpetrated by a non-state actor would be condemned as piracy on the high seas.

NATO's Active Endeavour is now in its tenth year and there is no indication that it will ever end, even though not a single terrorist has been apprehended or a weapon of mass destruction confiscated. When an Israeli German-made Dolphin submarine, assumed to carry missiles with nuclear warheads – the ultimate weapon of mass destruction – crossed from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea in June of 2009, NATO made no attempt to interdict it.

The Mediterranean Sea has become NATO's mare nostrum.

A similar situation exists in the Horn of Africa where NATO nations have deployed troops to Djibouti since the beginning of the century to join 2,000 American and 3,000 French troops based in the small nation. Germany, Britain, Spain and the Netherlands are or have been among the troop contributors. By no later than the beginning of 2002 Germany had more than 1,200 soldiers, several warships and spy planes based there, with the second component at the time representing “Germany's biggest naval deployment since World War Two.” [2] It also based surveillance aircraft in Kenya in early 2002, where NATO warships have docked since.

In March of 2009 NATO began rotating the Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 (SNMG1) and Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) off the Horn of Africa, first with Operation Allied Provider until August of 2009 and since with Operation Ocean Shield, which has been extended for over three years more. As with Operation Active Endeavor in the Mediterranean, NATO warships in the Gulf of Aden will never leave voluntarily.

This March NATO began airlifting Ugandan troops into war-torn Somalia where they are belligerents in the armed conflict and not peacekeepers. 1,700 were flown in and 850 out.

But it is in Afghanistan, and of late Pakistan, that NATO has emerged as a global combat force. With the recent transfer of tens of thousands of U.S. troops from Operation Enduring Freedom to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the Alliance now has the most troops under its command in a foreign mission in its history: 120,000 in Afghanistan compared to 60,000 in Bosnia in 1995, 50,000 in Kosovo in 1999, several thousand in Djibouti since 2001 and a smaller force in Macedonia starting in the same year.

Afghanistan is also the theater furthest from its European territory NATO has even deployed troops to and the war there is the bloc's first military conflict in Asia and its first ground war.

The Afghan war is also the battleground on which NATO has lost its first soldiers in combat operations.

As of October 10, the U.S. and its NATO allies have lost 2,144 troops, almost 1,100 since last year. So far this year 574 foreign troops have been killed, 27 percent of the total in the over nine-year-long war, compared to 55 in Iraq, a more than ten-to-one ratio. And whereas all

those killed in Iraq this year were American servicemen, almost 35 per cent of all occupation forces slain in Afghanistan were non-American. 4,475 of 4,743 foreign troops killed in Iraq since 2003 – 94.3 percent – were from the U.S. while 820 of the 2,144 killed in Afghanistan since 2001 – 38.3 percent – were not.

Nations that have not been engaged in a war since World War Two and in some instances longer or never at all are now providing NATO troops for Afghanistan: Germany, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland, the Czech Republic/Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, Austria and Mongolia. (Many of the above, especially new NATO members, also supplied troops for deployment to Iraq after 2003, which have since been withdrawn and redeployed to Afghanistan.)

Even Switzerland, a NATO Partnership for Peace member, assigned a nominal contingent from 2004-2008, withdrawing it because “The peacekeeping support mission in South Afghanistan has gradually turned into an operation to combat insurgents,” according to a Swiss source. [3]

Other nations have troops in Afghanistan that had not sent military forces to a foreign combat zone since the Korean War – Belgium, Canada, Greece and Turkey – and the Vietnam War: Australia, New Zealand and South Korea. [4]

In the last week of September NATO helicopter gunships launched four deadly raids into Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas and on September 30 an attack by two NATO helicopters killed three Pakistani soldiers in the Kurram Agency there.

This month the Czech Republic announced that it was increasing its NATO contingent by 30 percent, from 530 to 730 troops, and was redeploying its special forces to Afghanistan. Many of the troops are being transferred from NATO’s Kosovo Force to its International Security Assistance Force, as with those of other NATO members and much as occurred from December of 2008 onward when all Eastern European nations’ troops were reassigned from Iraq to Afghanistan.

Meeting with Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg in Washington on October 6, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton “said she had been happy at the Czech step.” [5]

The day before, Clinton met with Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nikolay Mladenov and the two “discussed the situation in Afghanistan,” [6] where Bulgaria announced this summer it was deploying a “700-strong combat unit to boost its troops...as of 2013 at the latest,” [7] notwithstanding talks of a drawdown of foreign troops next July.

At a joint press conference with Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri in Washington before the second meeting of the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission within the framework of the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Cooperation on October 6, Clinton applauded the South Caucasus nation for increasing its troop strength in Afghanistan to almost 1,000, condoled it on the recent loss of four soldiers there, supported its NATO aspirations and in effect demanded Russia remove its troops from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The governments of the latter two nations reacted to Clinton’s characterization of them as “occupied Georgian territories,” and Abkhazia “challenged Mrs Clinton to label countries like Iraq and Afghanistan American-occupied territories.” [8]

A U.S. armed forces publication recently disclosed that U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) is training joint terminal attack controllers (JTACs) from fellow NATO nations at an American Air Force school in Germany to order bombing runs in Afghanistan. “[T]he Air Force has ramped up efforts to train more [controllers] from allied nations, many of whom could deploy to Afghanistan to call in NATO airstrikes....USAFE Commander Gen. Roger Brady has directed the Europe-based school to double its training capacity, from 72 to 144 graduates a year....At least 50 percent of those students are expected to come from countries other than the United States.” [9] In a five-week initial qualification class this month, U.S. Air Force personnel were joined by counterparts from Belgium, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Romania and Slovenia, all but two of whom are new NATO members inducted since 1999.

Canada, which has more than once announced plans to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan without doing so, reactivated the 1st Canadian Division Headquarters in Kingston, Ontario on October 8 under the command of Major-General David Fraser, who commanded NATO troops in Kandahar in southern Afghanistan in 2006. Fraser said “putting the organization back in place means that the Forces will be more nimble and can respond to future missions – be it combat such as Afghanistan or humanitarian assistance in Haiti – faster and smoother.” He added that the multi-service (army, air force and navy) rapid deployment headquarters “incorporates a lot of what we learned in Afghanistan.” [10]

On October 6 an Afghan soldier fired a rocket-propelled grenade at an outpost manned by French troops in the northeastern province of Kapisa.

Three NATO soldiers were killed in attacks in southern and eastern Afghanistan and NATO lost a drone in Paktika province near the Pakistani border on October 7. The next day three more ISAF soldiers were killed in the south of the country while NATO forces killed what were described as six pro-government militiamen in the southeastern province of Khost. “Local villagers took the bodies to the governor’s office in the provincial capital, also called Khost, to protest the killing,” an Afghan police official reported. [11]

Also on October 7, a German soldier was killed and six others wounded – two seriously, one critically – in northern Afghanistan in a suicide bomb attack, bringing Germany’s death toll to 44. A German news agency reported that “The Germans came under mortar and rifle fire after the detonation and the skirmish apparently lasted for several hours.” [12] The same source stated that there are 5,350 German soldiers now stationed in the north, up from the 4,500 maximum allowed for by the Bundestag until this February. The number is substantially higher than any previous amount of German troops stationed abroad – and moreover for war – since World War Two.

On October 9 four Italian soldiers were killed and another injured in an attack in western Afghanistan, bringing Italy’s death count to 34. “The victims were killed when a bomb exploded near their armoured car, part of a column of 70 Italian military vehicles.” [13]

On the same day a member of Australia’s Special Operations Task Group was wounded in a roadside bomb attack. Australia is the largest NATO partnership nation (one of four Contact Countries along with Japan, New Zealand and South Korea) contributor to the war, with 1,550 troops in theater. According to the country’s Ministry of Defence, 21 Australian soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan and 150 wounded, 50 of the latter this year.

With the war in Afghanistan and its expansion into Pakistan, NATO is not only waging an

armed conflict in Asia, it is also consolidating military partnerships with nations in the Asia-Pacific area and creating the nucleus of an Asian NATO. [14]

On October 8 Britain's Chief of Joint Operations, Air Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, signed a Memorandum of Understanding at his nation's Permanent Joint Headquarters with the minuscule Pacific island nation of Tonga (which has a population of 104,000) to supply over 200 troops for NATO's ISAF in Afghanistan. The deployment is to occur over the next two years, beginning with a contingent of 55 soldiers to be trained by the British Royal Air Force next month for stationing in Helmand province. Although a news report attributes the move to Tonga's alleged desire to "show its support to the alliance," it also revealed that "the Tongan service members will receive an operational allowance in British pounds in addition to their standard salary for the duration of their deployment." [15]

Tonga has now become the 48th Troop Contributing Nation for NATO's war effort, with reports that Bangladesh, with a population far larger than the island state (160,000,000), is being recruited to be the next by U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke. [16]

If the latter materializes, the latest five nations offering troops for NATO in Afghanistan will all be from the Asia-Pacific region: Mongolia, South Korea, Malaysia, Tonga and Bangladesh. Australia, New Zealand and Singapore also have troops serving under NATO as do – assuming the broader definition of Asia – Jordan and the United Arab Emirates in the Middle East and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the South Caucasus. Thirteen Asia-Pacific nations in all would be contributing forces for NATO's first Asian war. [17]

The recruitment of new national contingents and the expansion of ones already in place give the lie to Washington's claim that a transition to Afghan government control of security operations in the nation will begin next July.

Not only is NATO intensifying its involvement in Afghanistan as well as extending its combat operations into Pakistan, but it is preparing more missions of the nature and scope of that in South Asia as part of its 21st Strategic Concept to be adopted next month at its summit in Portugal.

On October 7 Reuters reported in a story called "NATO says must stay capable of Afghan-size missions," that NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has emphasized "the need for NATO to retain the ability to mount major missions around the world."

In a recent speech on the Strategic Concept, he said:

"No other organization can marshal, deploy and sustain NATO's military power. I am totally unconvinced by the media suggestions that after Afghanistan, NATO might never take on another big mission.

"First and foremost, because I have no doubt that we will succeed in Afghanistan. And second, because there will be other missions in future for which only NATO can fit the bill. We will have to be ready." [18]

A war in its tenth year in which NATO's casualties mount by the day is not sufficient for an increasingly ambitious and expansionist, indeed global, NATO. While attacks on its forces increase steadily and its troop strength reaches record levels – and with at least 170 of its

oil tankers destroyed in Pakistan since the killing of Pakistani troops on September 30 – the military bloc is planning new wars on the scale of the one in Afghanistan.

As to where those future operations will be conducted, Rasmussen recently stated in a video post on his blog: “We should reach out to new and important partners, including China and India. We should encourage consultations between interested allies and partners on security issues of common concern, with NATO as a hub for those discussions.” Not with the United Nations, not with regional organizations on an equal footing, but with NATO as the initiator of and chief force conducting operations in Asia.

While reasserting that “the ‘pillars’ upon which NATO was founded in 1949 – including the principle of collective defence, a powerful military capability and strong transatlantic relations – were ‘still fundamental,’” the NATO chief advocated that “the alliance also needed to look beyond its borders, as it had done in Afghanistan, where its military mission is supported by 19 non-NATO countries, in addition to the alliance’s 28 members.”

In Rasmussen’s own words: “Defence of our territory and our citizens no longer begin[s] at our borders. Threats can originate from Kandahar or from cyberspace....As a consequence, NATO must build more partnerships and engage more with the wider world.” [19]

The American-led military alliance is no longer a strictly North Atlantic one. It is rather only residually based in and controlled from that region of the world. It is no longer confined to the alleged defense of its member states, even the twelve new ones far to the east of NATO’s original area of operations.

It is instead the world’s first international military formation, one which even aspires to render nations like the BRIC states (Brazil, Russia, India and China) junior partners in an international military-security structure. [20]

The war in Afghanistan has provided NATO the opportunity to initiate new and candidate members into its 21st century network under combat conditions and to recruit and integrate the armed forces of nations in six continents for the same purpose.

When leaders from NATO’s 28 member states and from scores of partnership allies gather in Lisbon next month as the Afghan-Pakistani war continues to escalate to even more dangerous dimensions, the formal institutionalization of NATO as a Western-initiated, U.S.-directed global organization will be unveiled to the world.

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