

Escalation of US NATO War in Afghanistan: The Risks of Regional Conflagration

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On October 7 the United States' and NATO's war in Afghanistan entered its ninth year. The escalating conflict has over the past year become indistinguishable from military operations in neighboring Pakistan where the U.S. and NATO have tripled deadly drone missile attacks and the Pakistani army has launched large-scale offensives that have displaced over 3 million civilians in the Northwest Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, with the province of Baluchistan the next battle zone.

On September 29 the U.S. conducted four drone attacks in Pakistan's North Waziristan Agency in twenty four hours and during the past year has fired over 60 missiles into the area causing more than 550 deaths.

Three days later the Pentagon announced 72 more American military deaths in the fifteen-nation Operation Enduring Freedom, Greater Afghan War theater – Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Cuba (Guantanamo Bay Naval Base), Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, the Philippines, the Seychelles, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Yemen – bringing the official total to 774.

The U.S. Department of Defense and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) acknowledge that so far this year 406 foreign soldiers have been killed, the bulk of which, 240, are American.

On the eight anniversary of the beginning of the war, however, an authoritative Russian news source estimated that overall "The United States has...lost 1,500 servicemen, while its allies have lost several hundred." [1]

American and NATO military deaths this year are the highest since the war commenced and are steadily rising. 2009 has also brought the largest amount of Afghan civilian deaths of the war.

Far from the carnage abating any time soon, events of the past week give every indication that the nation scourged by thirty years of war is to be the site of unprecedented Western troop increases and yet more deadly fighting.

On October 3 an American outpost in Afghanistan's Nuristan province was attacked by over 300 insurgents. Eight U.S. soldiers were killed and three Apache helicopters hit by rifle fire or rockets, with the American troops still alive fleeing and a rebel flag left flying over the camp.

In a reminder that the U.S.'s Afghan war is not eight but thirty years old, a Washington Post

report of the attack reminded its readers of the major recipient of billions of dollars of CIA money funneled to Pakistan for the fighting in Afghanistan from 1978-1992:

"The attack involved Taliban fighters and appeared to be led by a local commander of the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin insurgent group, which is run by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former mujaheddin leader during the Soviet war in Afghanistan during the 1980s." [2]

The former CIA official who boasted that the campaign to support Hekmatyar and his colleagues, Operation Cyclone, was the "most consequential of all" the agency's "successes" was Robert Gates, now U.S. Defense Secretary in charge of waging the war in Afghanistan.

On October 9 the Wall Street Journal reported that the top military commander of both American and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, presented a report to U.S. President Barack Obama which "includes three different options, with the largest alternative including a request for more than 60,000 troops, according to a U.S. official familiar with the document." [3]

The following day the armed forces publication Stars and Stripes posed the question: "As President Barack Obama ponders whether or how to grant his Afghanistan commander's urgent request for up to 60,000 more troops to expand the flagging war against Taliban insurgents, one obvious question arises: Why not simply transfer thousands of soldiers from nearby Iraq?" [4]

The Pentagon has revealed troop rotation plans that include "a combat brigade and combat aviation brigade totaling approximately 6,100 service members," among them "2,800 soldiers of the 101st Combat Aviation Brigade" to "provide sufficient military capability for the NATO-International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)." [5]

The Stars and Stripes also recently reported that General McChrystal's top deputy, Lieutenant General David Rodriguez, will head up "a revised command structure that will go into effect next week...a new, subordinate headquarters called the ISAF Joint Command."

The division of labor, an integral part of plans for the influx of new American and NATO troops and equipment allotted for a marked escalation of combat operations, will permit McChrystal to "focus more on the political and strategic complexities of the Afghanistan mission" and Rodriguez to "assume control of day-to-day tactical operations." [6]

On the same day, October 10, an article called "Obama picks Army general to lead Afghan training," detailed that the new commander, Lieutenant General Gen. William B. Caldwell IV, was a classmate of McChrystal's at West Point and that his appointment entails "elevating the command from a two-star to three-star general."

The U.S. and NATO military commander selected his former associate as "McChrystal advocates accelerating growth of the Afghan forces from 200,000 soldiers to 400,000." [7]

New commands, new commanders and as many as 60,000 more American and thousands of other NATO nations' troops signal plans for a dramatic intensification of a war that will only extend substantially further into time and expand into broader tracts of South and Central Asia.

As Agence France-Presse reported on October 9, only hours after the announcement that American president Obama had won this year's Nobel Peace Prize he "shouldered his duties as commander in chief of the US armed forces and convened his war council for crucial talks on Afghan strategy."

Participants at the meeting with the president were "Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, McChrystal via video link, top military officers and the US ambassadors to Islamabad and Kabul." It was held following McChrystal's offering "the president several alternative options, including a maximum injection of 60,000 extra troops." [8]

In lockstep and unvarying conformity with White House and Pentagon initiatives, Britain's Home Secretary Alan Johnson announced that "All member countries of NATO including the UK will send more forces soon to Afghanistan." [9]

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen chimed in by affirming to England's Sky News that "NATO troops would stay in Afghanistan 'as long as it takes to finish our job.'" [10]

The new head of the British army, General Sir David Richards, told one of his nation's major newspapers that he "backed calls for more international forces to be deployed to Afghanistan" and that "reinforcements would enable Nato to achieve its objectives...." [11]

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown met with General McChrystal at the former's office on Downing Street recently and in an article titled "Afghan army training to be centre of NATO efforts" was reported to have faithfully parroted his guest's demands in stating he "agreed that accelerated training of Afghan army and police needs to be at the centre of NATO's counter-insurgency efforts in future."

Brown confirmed that he "looked forward to further discussion of General McChrystal's recommendations amongst NATO allies in coming weeks." [12]

As the two met Britain lost its 221st soldier in the nation's fourth Afghan war, its 84th death this year.

Other NATO member states and partners were not remiss in shedding blood, their own and that of others, and in pledging more troops and weapons for the war.

Spain suffered another combat fatality and five other casualties last week, yet "Madrid recently agreed to a Washington request for the deployment of 220 more Spanish troops to Afghanistan." [13]

France announced that it "will order a first batch of infantry medium-range missiles and firing posts for Afghanistan as well as 200 Meteor beyond visual range air-to-air missiles next year" [14] and days later that it will purchase "some 300 missiles and 50 to 60 launchers, with an estimated budget of 70 million euros (\$103 million) for an urgent operational requirement for Afghanistan." [15]

Poland recently appointed a new commander for its more than 2,000 troops in Afghanistan – his predecessor had either resigned or been sacked over disagreements with the government on the prosecution of the war – and committed to offering NATO another 200

troops.

Six days later, October 9, two Polish soldiers were killed and four wounded in a bomb attack.

Germany has announced that it will deploy 1,200 police to join some 4,500 troops in Afghanistan. "An official request for the officers would come in the next week from NATO....

"The German officers would be needed for the NATO Training Mission Afghanistan, which is due to start in April.

"Under the program, some 10,000 foreign instructors would train the Afghan security forces." [16]

Earlier this month German forces engaged in a combat operation in Afghanistan's Kunduz province where last month German commanders called in a NATO air strike that killed 150 people.

"[R]ebels engaged German troops in the Kharoti Tapa village of the Chardara district...and the firefight lasted for one hour." [17]

A German news source reported "a Taliban spokesman claimed that the rebel fighters destroyed four German tanks and killed up to 13 soldiers." [18]

A major function of the Afghan war is to train military forces from over fifty nations – in five continents, the Middle East and Oceania – under NATO command for counterinsurgency and other combat operations both in South Asia and afterwards in other parts of the world.

In doing so numerous NATO partnership countries – Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Colombia, Croatia, Finland, Georgia, Ireland, Japan, Macedonia, Mongolia, Montenegro, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine and the United Arab Emirates – are to varying degrees being integrated into the bloc's plan for history's first global army.

In early October four Finnish soldiers were wounded in a roadside bomb attack in northern Afghanistan, where the nation's troops have already been engaged in firefights. The latest incident resulted in the nation's first wartime casualties since World War II.

Days later two Swedish soldiers were wounded in a deadly exchange of fire. "The Swedish soldiers were patrolling with Finnish soldiers when their ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) armoured vehicle came under rocket fire. The soldiers were then attacked with high calibre rifles.

"The soldiers engaged the enemy fighter and at least three of the attackers were reported to have been killed....Swedish forces have been operating in Afghanistan since 2002. Since then two Swedes have been killed." [19]

Nominally neutral Sweden and Finland are in charge of NATO-led ISAF operations in four Afghan provinces.

The NATO Special Representative for the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Robert Simmons, was in Georgia last week for the annual NATO Week held in that country. U.S. Marines have been training the nation's armed forces for deployment to Afghanistan.

Simmons revealed another critical component of the war in Afghanistan, that of being a gateway to full NATO membership, in stating to Georgia's defense minister that "Georgia-NATO relations are entering a new phase, which confirms Georgia's intention to participate in the Alliance's operations in Afghanistan.

"Georgia's decision on it is very important for NATO, and Georgia's participation in operations in Afghanistan will contribute to Georgia's further integration into the Alliance." [20]

The ensnarement of previously non-aligned nations into NATO's Afghan war operations and from there into its global network is not limited to nations providing troops for the war.

Last week French President Nicolas Sarkozy was in Kazakhstan and in what was described as "a diplomatic coup" by one press agency secured major military and hydrocarbon arrangements with his host country, "clinching a raft of lucrative energy deals."

"France is among several Western nations courting Kazakhstan, a large ex-Soviet republic with rich oil and gas resources and a strategic location bordering China and Russia – long the dominant regional force – north of Afghanistan."

Sarkozy also won "an agreement to allow military hardware for French forces fighting in Afghanistan to pass through Kazakh territory" which "covers both air transit and train transit of French military personnel and equipment via Kazakhstan, according to a French Foreign Ministry spokesman. He said train traffic could then go through neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where France already has a military presence.

"The U.S. also reached an agreement earlier this year with neighboring Kyrgyzstan to continue using the Manas air base, crucial to military operations against the Taliban. France and Spain are trying to win similar agreements to use Manas, while the French military also use an air field in Tajikistan." [21]

In August the head of the Pentagon's Central Command, General David Petraeus, also visited Kazakhstan as well as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to discuss military transit agreements and in the case of Kazakhstan troops for the war in Afghanistan.

Not only did the Pentagon buy back the right to transit troops and equipment for the war in Afghanistan this July through the Manas base, which an estimated 200,000 American and NATO troops have passed through over the last eight years, but is now planning "the construction of a second runway at the Manas airport" and "has recently promised to allocate \$60 million" for the purpose. [22]

In fact last week Kyrgyzstan approved the deployment of French and Spanish NATO troops in the nation. "French and Spanish officials will soon visit the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek to discuss the details of the agreements." [23]

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are – at least for the time being – members of the only security and military alliance in former Soviet space, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) along with Russia and China. The Afghan war, launched less than four months after the founding of the SCO, is a tool used by NATO to eliminate its only competition in Central Asia and Eurasia as a whole.

The war in Afghanistan is extending its scope outward to all compass points. To Pakistan in the east and south. To the former Soviet Central Asian republics in the north. And to Iran on Afghanistan's western border.

The Pentagon announced on October 2 that "Extra troops called for by the head of foreign forces in Afghanistan would be sent mainly to the north and west of the country," an unnamed American official informed Agence France-Presse. [24]

North means to the borders of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. West means to the Iranian border.

A Fox News poll of earlier this month claimed that 61 percent of Americans support "the use of force to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons" and that "By a two-to-one margin the public thinks the U.S. will eventually need to use military force to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons...." [25]

The question posed was loaded – "obtaining nuclear weapons" – but the preparation of the U.S. public for military attacks against Iran is indisputable.

If McChrystal gains the additional 60,000 American troops he's requested and NATO provides several thousand more, combined Western military forces in Afghanistan could number some 180,000. With control of former Soviet airbases in the nation in addition to air fields in Central Asia, Iraq, the South Caucasus, Turkey and the Black Sea nations of Bulgaria and Romania, Washington and its allies could be poised for military operations against Iran far more ambitious than any discussed or rumored before.

The expansion of the South Asian war into Pakistan also allows the West to employ that nation for future attacks against Iran.

On October 10 the Pakistani press reported "the frequent arrival and take-off of heavy US cargo aircraft" in the nation's capital.

"[H]uge Starlifters, used by the US Air Force and Army to transport troops and heavy loads, have been flying in and out of the Benazir International Airport (BIAI) on a regular basis over the past few days." [26]

A day before that The Times of London reported that "Britain is building a training camp for Pakistan's paramilitary Frontier Corps in the southwestern province of Baluchistan." Baluchistan borders southeastern Iran.

"The British personnel will work with six American trainers at the camp, which is designed to house 550 people....The plan is politically sensitive because the British and US trainers will be the first foreign forces formally stationed in Baluchistan since Pakistan's independence in 1947, although US special forces operated there during the invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001." [27]

In what is not an unrelated development, the Pentagon recently revealed that it is completing the deployment of a new "bunker buster" bomb: "At a hefty 30,000 pounds, the new penetrator bomb weighs almost 4 tons more than the U.S. military's former heavyweight champion, the nearly 22,000-pound massive ordnance air blast conventional bomb, known by the acronym MOAB." [28]

From October 12-16 the U.S. and Israel will conduct the biennial Juniper Cobra military exercises in the latter nation, “their biggest joint air-defence exercise...testing missile interceptors that would serve as a strategic bulwark in any future showdown with Iran.

“American forces taking part will include 17 ships and ground personnel operating the Aegis and THAAD missile interceptors, which will be meshed with Israel’s Arrow II missile-killer for computer-simulated tests....” [29]

The Pentagon has also begun its biennial Bright Star war games, the largest held in the Middle East, in Egypt.

In addition to American and Egyptian personnel “the coalition of military forces participating in the exercises also includes France, Greece, Italy, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom....The training exercise will take place in Cairo and Alexandria from Oct. 10-26, and will include airborne, aviation, and naval and Marine field training exercises, along with a multinational command post battle-tracking exercise.” [30]

On October 12 the annual Anatolian Eagle exercise will began in Turkey, “which would have involved the forces of several Nato countries” and was “to have included aerial attacks in Turkish airspace near the borders with Syria, Iraq and Iran.” [31]

At the last moment Turkey cancelled the participation of its NATO allies over their insistence that the Israeli Air Force take part in the war games. As the Jerusalem Post characterized the incident, “the cancellation of the exercise came after both the US and NATO threatened to pull out if the IAF [Israeli Air Force] did not participate.” [32]

Had the exercises gone on as planned, U.S.-led military maneuvers – land, naval, air and missile – would have been held in Israel, Egypt and Turkey at the same time.

At the other end of the Afghanistan-Pakistan war zone – India – on October 12 “US and Indian troops will ...stage their biggest joint manoeuvres, including live-fire exercises, as the two nuclear powers build up military ties....

“Lieutenant General Benjamin Mixon, commander of US Army forces in the Pacific, said 200 US soldiers and 17 Stryker infantry combat vehicles were taking part in the Yudh Abhyas exercises at Babina, south of New Delhi, from October 12 to 29.

“It is the largest contingent sent by the US to the annual joint exercises since they began in 2004....It will be the largest deployment of Strykers outside Iraq or Afghanistan.” [33]

The Stryker combat vehicle was first used in Iraq in 2003 and introduced in Afghanistan this June. “Stryker brigades are better suited to the near free-form modern battlefield, rather than the matched-force scenarios envisioned for tanks during the Cold War....The Stryker’s ability to deploy more infantryman on the battlefield than any other type of brigade and its wheeled configuration are key advantages over conventional armor formations.” [34]

On October 1 the U.S. Army announced a contract for 352 more Strykers.

That Strykers are being used in India, their first overseas deployment outside an active war theater, is a watershed in American plans to recruit the world’s second most populous nation into what has come to be labelled Asian NATO.

"[B]esides holding joint military exercises with the U.S. military, India has also been buying U.S. armaments worth billions of dollars.

"The latest India-U.S. defense deal is the sale of this Airborne Early Warning Air Craft, Hawkeye E-2D, developed by American arms manufacturer, Northrop Grumman.

"Woolf Gross, the corporate director at the company, says the reconnaissance plane has yet to be introduced in the U.S. Navy. Its sale to India, he says, is a symbol of how close India/U.S. military relations are."

The same source adds, "Military analysts say the ongoing military cooperation between India and the United States is bound to grow as India plans to spend billions of dollars for modernizing its defense capabilities. India, they say, is preparing for short term threats from Pakistan and long-term deterrence against China." [35]

In announcing the attack against Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, President George W. Bush threatened:

"Today we focus on Afghanistan, but the battle is broader. Every nation has a choice to make. In this conflict, there is no neutral ground...."

The conflict has indeed proven to be much broader than Afghanistan. It has already reached throughout South and Central Asia, dragging in troops from all parts of the planet and crisscrossing much of Eurasia and the Middle East with the transit of soldiers, arms, military cargo planes and armored vehicles. It has become a battleground on which the Pentagon and NATO are forging a worldwide military alliance, hardened in combat and interoperable for deployment to other fronts.

It has also positioned the military forces of all major Western nations, including three possessing nuclear arsenals, at the crossroads of Central, South and Far East Asia where the interests of Russia, China, India, Pakistan and Iran converge.

The U.S. and NATO war in Afghanistan is a threat to that nation, the region and the world.

Notes

- 1) Voice of Russia, October 7, 2009
- 2) Washington Post, October 4, 2009
- 3) Wall Street Journal, October 9, 2009
- 4) Stars and Stripes, October 11, 2009
- 5) U.S. Department of Defense, October 9, 2009
- 6) Stars and Stripes, October 10, 2009
- 7) Associated Press, October 10, 2009
- 8) Agence France-Presse, October 9, 2009
- 9) Press TV, October 7, 2009
- 10) Deutsche Welle, October 4, 2009
- 11) BBC News, October 4, 2009
- 12) 10 Downing Street, October 9, 2009
- 13) Press TV, October 7, 2009
- 14) Defense News, October 1, 2009
- 15) Defense News, October 9, 2009
- 16) Der Spiegel, October 10, 2009

- 17) Xinhua News Agency, October 5, 2009
- 18) Deutsche Welle, October 4, 2009
- 19) The Local (Sweden), October 9, 2009
- 20) Trend News Agency, October 8, 2009
- 21) Associated Press, October 7, 2009
- 22) Trend News Agency, October 7, 2009
- 23) Russian Information Agency Novosti, October 5, 2009
- 24) Agence France-Presse, October 3, 2009
- 25) Fox News, October 3, 2009
- 26) Asian News International, October 10, 2009
- 27) The Times, October 9, 2009
- 28) American Forces Press Service, October 9, 2009
- 29) Reuters, October 8, 2009
- 30) Fayetteville Observer, October 4, 2009
- 31) The Times (London), October 12, 2009
- 32) Jerusalem Post, October 11, 2009
- 33) Reuters, October 8, 2009
- 34) Defense News, October 5, 2009
- 35) Voice of America, October 8, 2009

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