

Global Military Agenda: Increased US-NATO Military Presence in Southeast Asia. Completing Plans For Asian NATO

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Global Research, October 22, 2010
[Stop NATO](#) 22 October 2010

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In keeping with the global trend manifested in other strategically vital areas of the world, the United States and its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – a consortium of all major Western military (including nuclear) powers and former colonial empires – are increasing their military presence in Southeast Asia with special emphasis on the geopolitically critical Strait of Malacca.

The latter is one of the world's most important shipping lanes and major strategic chokepoints.

In an opinion piece The Times of London granted to George Robertson and Paddy Ashdown – the first a former NATO secretary general and current Baron Robertson of Port Ellen, the other a past intelligence officer and the West's viceroy in Bosnia at the beginning of the decade who nearly reprised the role in Afghanistan two years ago – in June of 2008 which in part rued the fact that “For the first time in more than 200 years we are moving into a world not wholly dominated by the West.” [1]

In fact for the first time in half a millennium the founding members of NATO in Europe and North America are confronted with a planet not largely or entirely under their control.

With the elimination of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and its network of allies around the world a generation ago, the prospect of the West reestablishing uncontested worldwide domination appeared a more viable option than it had at any time since the First World War.

Much as the British Empire had done earlier in positioning its navy and its military outposts overlooking maritime access points to monitor and control vital shipping lanes and to block adversaries' transit of military personnel and materiel, the West now collectively envisions regaining lost advantages and gaining new ones in areas of the world previously inaccessible to its military penetration.

Southeast Asia is one such case. Divided during the colonial epoch between Britain, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain (with the U.S. supplanting the last-named in the Philippines in 1898), it has a combined population of approximately 600 million, two-thirds that of the Western Hemisphere and almost three-quarters that of Europe.

The Strait of Malacca runs for 600 miles between Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore to the east and the Indonesian island of Sumatra to the west. According to the United Nations

International Maritime Organization, at least 50,000 ships pass through the strait annually, transporting 30 percent of the goods traded in the world including oil from the Persian Gulf to major East Asian nations like China, Japan and South Korea. As many as 20 million barrels of oil a day pass through the Strait of Malacca, an amount that will only increase with the further advance of the Asian Century.

When the U.S. went to war against Iraq in 1991, notwithstanding claims concerning Kuwait's territorial integrity and fictitious accusations of infants being torn from incubators in the country's capital, one of the major objectives was to demonstrate to a new unipolar world that Washington had its hand on the global oil spigot. That it controlled the flow of Persian Gulf oil north and west to Europe and east to Asia, especially to the four nations that import the most oil next to the United States: Japan, China, South Korea and India. The first three receive Persian Gulf oil primarily by tankers passing through the Strait of Malacca.

The U.S. Department of Energy has provided a comprehensive yet concise blueprint for the Pentagon to act on:

"Chokepoints are narrow channels along widely used global sea routes. They are a critical part of global energy security due to the high volume of oil traded through their narrow straits. The Strait of Hormuz leading out of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Malacca linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans are two of the world's most strategic chokepoints. Other important passages include: Bab el-Mandab which connects the Arabian Sea with the Red Sea; the Panama Canal and the Panama Pipeline connecting the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans; the Suez Canal and the Sumed Pipeline linking the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea; and the Turkish/Bosporus Straits joining the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea region to the Mediterranean Sea." [2]

The U.S. has moved its military into the Black Sea and Central Asia as well as into the Persian Gulf, and two years ago the Pentagon inaugurated U.S. Africa Command primarily to secure oil supplies and transport in Africa's Gulf of Guinea and in the Horn of Africa.

The Strait of Malacca is the main channel connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. On its southeastern end it flows into the South China Sea where the natural resource-rich Paracel and Spratly island groups are contested between China on the one hand and several members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on the other. The Spratly Islands are claimed in part by ASEAN member states Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam as well as Taiwan. The Paracel Islands were seized by China in a naval battle with South Vietnam in 1974.

The U.S. deployed the USS George Washington nuclear-powered supercarrier and the USS John S. McCain destroyer to the South China Sea in August for the first joint military exercise ever conducted by the U.S. and (unified) Vietnam, three weeks after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said while attending the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in the Vietnamese capital that "The United States...has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea," adding "The United States is a Pacific nation, and we are committed to being an active partner with ASEAN."

Clinton's trip to Hanoi was preceded by visits to the capitals of Pakistan, Afghanistan and South Korea, all three Asian nations solidly in the U.S. military orbit. While in the last country she traveled to the Demilitarized Zone separating South from North Korea with Pentagon

chief Robert Gates, in the first such joint visit by U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the start of the Korean War (which led to war with China within three months).

Four days after Clinton left Seoul the U.S. launched the Invincible Spirit joint war games in the East Sea/Sea of Japan with South Korea, the following month the latest of annual Ulchi Freedom Guardian military exercises with 30,000 American and 56,000 South Korean troops, and in September anti-submarine drills in the Yellow Sea. [3]

Reflecting on Clinton's statements at July's ASEAN summit, Malaysian-based journalist and analyst Kazi Mahmoud wrote:

"Washington is using the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regional group for a bigger military purpose and this strategy is becoming clear to observers due to the U.S. push for greater influence in Asia.

By reaching out to nations like Vietnam, Laos and even Myanmar (Burma) as it has lately - ASEAN consists of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam - "The United States is fomenting a long-term strategy to contain both China and Russia in Southeast Asia....Before the Afghan war, the Americans could count on Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia along with Brunei in the region. Today the U.S. has Vietnam and Cambodia on its side." (In July U.S. Pacific Command and U.S. Army Pacific led the Angkor Sentinel 2010 multinational exercises in Cambodia.)

Furthermore, Washington's recruitment of ASEAN nations, initially over territorial disputes with China, will lead to "turn[ing] ASEAN into a...military corps to fight for American causes in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and surely Georgia and North Korea....Once the U.S. has achieved such goals, it will control the Malacca Straits and the seaways of the region." [4]

Non-ASEAN nations Taiwan, with which the U.S. formalized a \$6.4 billion arms deal earlier this year [5], is involved in a Spratly Islands territorial dispute with China and Japan is at loggerheads with China over what it calls the Senkaku Islands and China the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

On October 11 U.S. Defense Secretary Gates met with Japanese Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa at the ASEAN defense ministers' meeting in Hanoi, and the "defense chiefs agreed in their talks...that their countries will jointly respond in line with a bilateral security pact toward stability in areas in the East China Sea covering the Senkaku Islands that came into the spotlight in disputes between Japan and China...." [6]

The pact in question is the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States signed in 1960, comparable to mutual military assistance arrangements the Pentagon has with Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand in the Asia-Pacific region. "It is also developing a strong strategic relationship with Vietnam, of all places. It is also working hard on Indonesia and Malaysia, both of which have indicated they want to get closer to Washington." [7]

During the Shangri-La Dialogue defense ministers' meeting in Singapore this June Gates stated: "My government's overriding obligation to allies, partners and the region is to

reaffirm America's security commitments in the region." [8]

Singapore and, since July, Malaysia are official Troop Contributing Countries for NATO's war in Afghanistan. In June Malaysia and Thailand joined this year's version of the annual U.S.-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) naval exercises, the largest in the world (with 20,000 troops, 34 ships, five submarines and over 100 aircraft this year), hosted by the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Hawaii. RIMPAC 2010 marked the two Southeast Asian nations' first participation in the war games. Other nations involved were the U.S., Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, Indonesia, Japan, the Netherlands, Peru, Singapore and South Korea.

In addition to occupying Afghanistan with 152,000 U.S. and NATO troops, building an Afghan army and air force under the West's command, and integrating Pakistan in joint commissions with the U.S. and NATO [9], Washington is also consolidating a strategic military partnership with India. Last October the U.S. Army participated in the latest and largest of Yudh Abhyas (training for war) war games held since 2004 with its Indian counterpart. Exercise Yudh Abhyas 2009 featured 1,000 troops, the U.S.'s Javelin anti-tank missile system and the first deployment of American Stryker armored combat vehicles outside the Afghan and Iraqi war theaters. [10]

The U.S. has also been holding annual naval exercises codenamed Malabar with the world's second most populous country and in the past four years has broadened them into a multinational format with the inclusion of Canada, Australia, Japan and Singapore.

Malabar 2007 was conducted in the Bay of Bengal, immediately north of the Strait of Malacca, and included 25 warships from five nations: The U.S., India, Australia, Japan and Singapore.

This September 28 India and Japan held their first army-to-army talks in New Delhi which "aimed at reviewing the present status of engagements, military cooperation and military security issues...." Japan thus became the ninth country with which the Indian Army has a bilateral dialogue, joining the U.S., Britain, France, Australia, Bangladesh, Israel, Malaysia and Singapore. At the same time the Indian Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Pradeep Naik, was on a "three-day goodwill visit" to Japan to meet with his Japanese counterpart, Air Self-Defense Force chief of staff General Kenichiro Hokazono. [11]

On October 14 the Pentagon launched the latest bilateral Amphibious Landing Exercise (PHIBLEX) and Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) in the Philippines, with over 3,000 U.S. troops and six ships and aircraft involved.

If a recurrence of the 1974 Battle of the Paracel Islands or the 1988 Chinese-Vietnamese clash over the Spratly Islands erupts between China and other claimants, the U.S. is poised to intervene.

On October 13 South Korea for the first time hosted an exercise of the U.S.-formed Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) naval interdiction operation, launched by President George W. Bush in 2003 with initial emphasis on Asia but which in the interim has assumed a global scope. [12]

To end on October 22, it involves the participation of 14 nations including the U.S., Canada, France, Australia and Japan, which are contributing a guided missile destroyer, maritime patrol planes and anti-submarine helicopters.

Six years ago Admiral Thomas Fargo, at the time head of U.S. Pacific Command, promoted a Regional Maritime Security Initiative which was described as “grow[ing] out of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)” and designed to “deploy US marines with high-speed boats to guard the Malacca Straits....” [13] Both Indonesia and Malaysia objected to the plan to station American military forces off their coasts.

In January of 2009 NATO announced plans for the Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 (SNMG1), part of the NATO Response Force of up to 25,000 troops designed for global missions, to engage in “a six-month deployment to the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean” and to travel “through areas such as the Strait of Malacca, Java and the South China sea, an area of the world that is not frequented by NATO fleets.” [14] The Indian Ocean, which the Pentagon divides between its Central Command, Africa Command and Pacific Command, is now also being patrolled by NATO warships. [15]

The SNMG1, which was the first NATO naval group to circumnavigate the African continent two years before, was diverted to the Gulf of Aden for NATO’s Operation Allied Provider begun in April of 2009 and succeeded in August with the still active Operation Ocean Shield. Also last April, the NATO naval group, with warships from Canada, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, arrived in Karachi, Pakistan “to conduct a two-day joint naval exercise with the Pakistan Navy in the North Arabian Sea” [16] en route to Singapore. According to the Alliance, “The deployment of warships in South East Asia demonstrates the high value NATO places on its relationship with other partners across the globe....” [17]

Just as the U.S. has reactivated Cold War-era military alliances in the Asia-Pacific region in the first decade of this century, [18] so have its main NATO allies.

Shortly after Washington deployed the USS Abraham Lincoln nuclear-powered supercarrier with “F/A-18C Hornet, F/A-18E/F super Hornet, C-2A Greyhound, MH-60R Seahawk and MH-60S Seahawk helicopters and other fighter jets” [19] to the Port Klang Cruise Centre in Malaysia this month, the defense ministers of the United Kingdom-initiated Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) collective – whose members are Britain, Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore – met in the capital of Singapore for the 13th FPDA Defence Chiefs’ Conference.

“The Defence Chiefs...issued the FPDA Exercise Concept Directive during the conference.

“The directive aims to guide the development of future FPDA exercises and activities to strengthen interoperability and interactions between the armed forces of the five member countries.

“It also aims to further enhance the FPDA’s capacity in conducting conventional and non-conventional operations....” [20] The five defense chiefs then left Singapore to attend the opening ceremony of Exercise Bersama Padu 2010 at the Butterworth Airbase in the Malaysian state of Penang on October 15.

The military exercise continues to October 29 and includes “13 ships and 63 aircraft from the five FPDA countries working together in a multi-threat environment.” [21]

The FPDA was set up in 1971, at the height of the Cold War, and along with similar military groups – NATO most prominently – has not only continued but expanded in the post-Cold War period.

According to the Australian Department of Defence, Bersama Padu 2010, “is a three-week exercise [commenced on October 11] designed to enhance regional security in the area.

“The exercise, which is part of the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA), will take place at various locations across the Malaysian Peninsula as well as the South China Sea.” It includes four Australian warships and eight F/A-18 multirole fighter jets. Australian Lieutenant General Mark Evans, Chief of Joint Operations, said “the FPDA countries shared a common interest in the security and stability of the region, and the exercise would enhance the interoperability of the combined air, ground and naval forces of member nations.” [22]

All five FPDA members are engaged in NATO’s war in Afghanistan as part of a historically unprecedented exercise in warfighting interoperability with some 45 other nations. Britain has the second largest amount of troops assigned to NATO’s International Security Assistance Force, an estimated 9,500, and Australia the most of any non-NATO member state, 1,550. [23]

Afghanistan is the training ground for a global expeditionary NATO. And for a rapidly emerging Asian NATO, one which is being prepared to confront China in the South China Sea and elsewhere.

Notes

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