

Pentagon Consolidates Control Over Balkans: US Military Presence in the former Yugoslavia

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Ahead of, during and after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's 25th summit in Chicago on May 20-21, the Pentagon has continued expanding its permanent military presence in the former Yugoslavia and the rest of the Balkan region.

The military bloc's two-day conclave in Chicago formalized, among several other initiatives including the initial activation of its U.S.-dominated interceptor missile system and Global Hawk-equipped Alliance Ground Surveillance operations, a new category of what NATO calls aspirant countries next in line for full Alliance membership. Three of them are former Yugoslav federal republics – Bosnia, Macedonia and Montenegro – and the fourth is Georgia, conflicts involving which could be the most immediate cause of a confrontation between the world's two major nuclear powers.

This year new NATO partnership formats have sprung up like poisonous toadstools after a summer rain: Aspirants countries, the Partnership Cooperation Menu, the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme, the Connected Forces Initiative and partners across the globe among them.

The military bloc's inauguration as an active, aggressive military force in Bosnia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1990s laid the groundwork for the U.S.'s already unmatched military to move troops, hardware and bases into Southeast Europe for actions there and to points east and south: The Middle East, the Caucasus, North Africa and Central and South Asia.

Since 2004 several nations in the east and west Balkans – Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia and Albania – have been incorporated into the alliance as full members and the remainder – Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and the generally unrecognized Republic of Kosovo – have in the first four instances joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program and in the last had its nascent armed forces, the Kosovo Security Force, built from scratch by the leading alliance powers.

Macedonia, which would have become a full member in 2009 except for the lingering name dispute with Greece, and Montenegro have been granted the Membership Action Plan, the final stage before full accession, and Bosnia will be accorded the same once the quasi-autonomous Republika Srpska is deemed properly stripped of the last vestige of self-governance.

NATO and the wars waged under its command, not only in the Balkans but in Afghanistan and all but officially in Iraq, have provided the Pentagon the mammoth Camp Bondsteel in

Kosovo and three major air bases in Bulgaria and Romania as well as headquarters for new military task forces and jumping-off points for “downrange” operations outside Europe. The U.S. Department of Defense has also acquired subservient legionaries for wars in Asia and Africa and training grounds for American and multinational expeditionary units employed in 21st century neo-colonial wars far beyond the Euro-Atlantic area. Romania will host 24 U.S. Standard Missile-3 interceptors starting in three years.

NATO’s Cooperative Longbow and Cooperative Lancer 2012 command and field exercises started in Macedonia on the second day of the Chicago NATO summit, May 21, and ended on May 29. The largest of four such exercises held within the framework of the Partnership for Peace program - “to train, exercise, and promote the interoperability of Partnership for Peace forces using NATO standards” - to date, this year’s Longbow/Lancer drills included 2,200 troops from several NATO and a dozen Partnership for Peace nations, a total of 25 countries including the U.S.

On May 26 U.S. Army Europe and U.S. Air Forces in Europe launched the Immediate Response 2012 exercise in Croatia with military personnel from the host country, Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro and Slovenia. Macedonia and Serbia sent observers.

A report on the opening of the exercise posted on the website of U.S. European Command appended this paragraph:

“U.S. Army Europe is uniquely positioned to advance American strategic interests across Eurasia, building teams, assuring allies and deterring enemies. The relationships we build during more than 1,000 theater security cooperation events in more than 40 countries each year lead directly to support for U.S. actions such as in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.”

Balkan states Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania and Slovenia deployed troops to Iraq after 2003 and all those nations as well as Montenegro (which became independent in 2006) have troops under NATO command in Afghanistan currently.

NATO’s Allied Joint Force Command Naples has military missions in Bosnia, Macedonia and Serbia.

On May 28 the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff began a two-week disaster management and crisis response exercise, Shared Resilience 2012, in Bosnia. In addition to the U.S. and Bosnia, participating nations include Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia and Slovenia.

Immediately before the NATO summit, the U.S. Marines Corps’ Black Sea Rotational Force 2012 held multinational exercises near Constanta, Romania from May 7-18. The Black Sea Rotational Force was established in 2010 and last year doubled the duration of its training exercises in the Balkans, the Black Sea region and the South Caucasus from three to six months annually.

Now spending half the year in the geopolitically vital area, the Black Sea Rotational Force recently announced its mission of building “enduring partnerships with 19 nations throughout Eastern Europe.” The U.S. Marines are being hosted by Romania from April 2 to September 1. Prior to that Black Sea Rotational Force 2012 participated in the Agile Spirit 2012 exercise in Georgia in March.

U.S. Army Europe’s Task Force East, employing Stryker combat vehicles, also operates out of Romania as well as Bulgaria: The Mihail Kogălniceanu Airfield and the Babadag Training

Area in the first country and the Novo Selo Training Area in the second. In 2009 Task Force East spent three months training in Romania and Bulgaria, primarily preparing troops from the U.S. and the two host nations for operations in Afghanistan.

This year NATO officially identified Afghanistan and Iraq as military partners, in the category of partners across the globe. Since the end of NATO operations against Libya last October, the bloc's secretary general and its American ambassador, Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Ivo Daalder, have mentioned Libya joining NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue military partnership with the other nations of North Africa.

Each NATO military operation over the past 17 years, in Bosnia, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Libya, has provided the alliance with bases, centers, troops and logistics for later and for future wars. Air bases in Bulgaria and Romania were employed for the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya and, as noted above, every Balkan nation but Serbia has supplied troops for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Pentagon and NATO military personnel, aircraft, ships and radar in Southeast Europe can be used in attacks on Syria and Iran and in any new armed conflict in the South Caucasus, such as the five-day war between Georgia and Russia four years ago.

The U.S. and its NATO allies are expanding their military presence and infrastructure ever closer to new theaters of war.

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