

The Pentagon's 21st Century Counterinsurgency Wars: Latin America and South Asia

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Global Research, August 01, 2009

1 August 2009

Region: [Asia](#), [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

More than half a year after the departure of the George W. Bush administration the United States is embroiled in its largest combat operation since the second attack on Fallujah in November of 2004 and the most extensive and lengthy offensive in its nearly eight-year-old war in Afghanistan.

It has also announced plans to intensify its involvement in the 45-year counterinsurgency war in Colombia with deployments of 1,400 additional soldiers and contractors to five more military bases there.

The qualitative escalations of counterinsurgency wars in Afghanistan and Colombia are, first of all, integrally related and, second, both part of far broader regional strategies. The current Obama administration has continued and accelerated the expansion of the Afghan war into neighboring Pakistan, with almost six times the population of its neighbor and nuclear weapons; and its enhanced role in Colombia, a nation that launched a military assault into Ecuador in March of last year and has been installing bases and deploying troops on its border with Venezuela, can also drag the entire Andean region into the vortex of armed confrontation and eventual war.

Two recent appointments have signalled that cross-border counterinsurgency wars in Asia and South America will be the dubious "peace dividend" following withdrawal of troops – far slower and less extensive than promised – from Iraq .

On June 10th of this year the US Senate approved former chief of the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command, Stanley McChrystal, to replace General David McKiernan, previously sacked, as commander of the U.S. Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), putting him in charge of over 90,000 US, NATO and NATO partner troops in Afghanistan.

The Joint Special Operations Command was created in December of 1980 after the disastrous Operation Eagle Claw operation in Iran . A 2006 book by The Times of London journalist Michael Smith on the Command is titled Killer Elite: The Inside Story of America's Most Secret Special Operations Team.

During McChrystal's tenure as its commander he oversaw counterinsurgency operations, acknowledged and clandestine, in Iraq from the invasion in 2003 to last year.

A report called " US shifts focus to counterinsurgency in Afghanistan " synopsised the current situation by mentioning that "With the US pulling out from major Iraqi cities, many believe Washington is switching its focus to AfghanistanBy the end of this year, 68

thousand US troops will be in Afghanistan , more than double the number at the end of 2008. General Stanley McChrystal is the top commander of the US and NATO troops.” [1]

Afghanistan: US Shifts Troops From Iraq, NATO Provides 10,000 More

Entire US military units have been transported directly from Iraq to Afghanistan or had deployments slated for the first switched to the second in recent months, including 4,500 airborne troops. The US escalation has been supplemented by boosts in the number of soldiers, armor, attack helicopters and warplanes deployed or scheduled for deployment by NATO allies. Germany is soon to have the 4,500-troop maximum currently allowed by parliamentary restrictions, along with Tornado warplanes, Marder tanks and AWACS; Italy is sending more troops, helicopters and drones; Turkey may dispatch an additional 1,000 soldiers; Romania has been tapped for over 1,000 troops; Britain, which has lost 191 soldiers, its highest combat fatalities since the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War, recently revealed it was deploying yet more troops, Chinook and Merlin helicopters and Predator drones.

In mid-June outgoing NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer pledged between 8,000 and 10,000 troops for the war, adding to nearly 65,000 already under NATO command in Afghanistan .

US and NATO drones, planes and helicopters now routinely violate the airspace of neighboring Pakistan , usually with deadly consequences.

On July 27 NATO and the Pentagon activated a new global Strategic Airlift Capability in Papa, Hungary – described in the local press as “the biggest NATO project in 40 years” [2]

For the occasion the first C-17 Globemaster III transport plane, “used for rapid strategic airlift of troops and cargo to main operating bases or forward operating base anywhere in the world,” [3] arrived at the base where “Soldiers, combat vehicles...will be flown on the heavy transport planes, primarily to remote countries, even amid warlike conditions.” [4] Afghanistan will be their chief destination.

Troops, arms and equipment are pouring into Afghanistan from all parts of the world. US ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder has just recruited more New Zealand special forces; Armenia announced that it may send its first troops under NATO Partnership for Peace obligations to join those from its Caucasus neighbors Georgia and Azerbaijan; South Korea has been pressured to return military forces withdrawn in 2007 as part of a hostage release deal; Japanese government officials have recently spoken of deploying soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan even while armed hostilities rage, a violation of the nation’s constitution; the army of Mongolia, wedged between Russia and China, “which has not seen major combat since assisting the Soviet invasion of Manchuria in 1945” will soon deploy troops as part of its “third neighbor” policy “to reach out to allies other than China and Russia” and “cement its alliance with the United States and secure grants and aid....Mongolia’s deployment will mark its largest military presence in Afghanistan since the age of Genghis Khan....” [5]

On July 28, the world’s newest nation, diminutive Montenegro (population 650,000), announced that it was assigning an initial 40 troops to NATO for the war. On the same day it was reported that fellow Balkan nation Albania, inducted into NATO in March, will double its contingent and CBS News reported that US Green Beret-trained Colombian commandos

were headed to Afghanistan to apply their brutal counterinsurgency methods in South Asia.

There will soon officially be military units from fifty or more nations serving under NATO command in Afghanistan – including what is left of alleged neutral nations in Europe (Austria , Finland , Ireland , Sweden and Switzerland) – from four continents and the Middle East . Never before in history have soldiers from so many nations served under a common military structure in a single war theater. Afghanistan is the training and testing ground for an embryonic world army.

From Nominal Peacekeeping to Classic Counterinsurgency and Warfare

No longer will this international military force disguise itself under a mask of providing security for the capital of Kabul or national elections, for peacekeeping and reconstruction. It now has only one purpose, to wage war. Counterinsurgency war.

On July 28 McChrystal was interviewed by the Los Angeles Times and asked concerning the war in Afghanistan if there “has been too much focus on counter-terrorism?”

His response was: “I think there hasn’t been enough focus on counterinsurgency. I am certainly not in a position to criticize counter-terrorism. But at this point in the war, in Afghanistan , it is most important to focus on almost classic counterinsurgency.” [6]

This May a Western airstrike killed an estimated 140 Afghan civilians in the province of Farah and the following month it was reported that “ US airstrikes have killed hundreds of Afghan civilians over the past months” and “some 800 civilians have perished in the past five months during clashes between US-led troops and insurgents affiliated with the Taliban.” [7]

As he was stepping down from the post of NATO Supreme Allied Commander late last month US General Bantz Craddock shouted the truth about Afghanistan over his shoulder as it were: “The politicians can call it whatever they like. I am a military man and for me it is a war.” [8]

Within weeks of now General McChrystal assuming control of all US and NATO military forces in Afghanistan and nearby nations (Kyrgyzstan , Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) on July 2nd the US launched its largest combat offensive in Asia (and probably the world) since its war in Indochina decades ago. Operation Strike of the Sword (Khanjar) began with an assault by Marines, tanks and attack helicopters and is still raging almost a month afterwards. Britain began a simultaneous and complementary offensive, Operation Panther’s Claw, also in Helmand Province . Less than two weeks after the commencement of both German NATO Rapid Response Force troops started a major, Germany ‘s first, combat offensive in the northern province of Kunduz which is still being carried out and may last six weeks altogether.

A Reuters account of the American offensive was entitled “First major action under Obama’s war plan: US launches big offensive in Helmand” and detailed that “Thousands of US Marines on Thursday [July 2] stormed deep into Afghanistan’s Helmand province, the Afghan Taliban’s stronghold, launching the biggest military offensive there since 2001, and the first under the presidency of Barack Obama.” [9]

The operations have contributed to this month being the deadliest for both US and NATO troops in a war that will be eight years old in October. The US has lost 40 soldiers and

Western forces in general 70 so far this July.

In tandem with the US and British attacks the Pakistani army was deployed to the border with Helmand .

On July 10 the Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, Admiral Giampaolo di Paola, “said that either Pakistan was already carrying out a military operation against militants in Balochistan bordering southern Afghanistan or would be doing so in line with ongoing action on the other side of the border.” [10]

To Cross-Border South Asian Conflict

The expansion of the Afghan War into Pakistan began in earnest in the last months of 2008 with drone missile attacks and helicopter raids in the nation. It has intensified appreciably under the current US administration. Dozens of drone strikes have been carried out this year so far, the deadliest to date in June which targeted a funeral of victims killed earlier in the day, resulting overall in 80 dead and almost 100 wounded, referred to in the Western press as “terrorists.” “The US has carried out at least 35 drone attacks on Pakistan ‘s tribal areas, killing and wounding over 500 people over the past year.” [11]

A week later another US drone fired three missiles inside Pakistan ‘s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which killed 15 and wounded dozens on a Friday, the Muslim prayer day.

As regards claims that some 180 victims at a funeral were all al-Qaeda operatives or Taliban militants, a news source from the region wrote:

“The airstrikes are said to be aimed at militants, but Pakistani media say only one in six have targeted Taliban insurgents in the country. More than five hundred Pakistanis have been killed over the past year in US drone strikes.”

In between the two deadly attacks, in late June, the Pentagon inaugurated its new Pakistan Afghanistan Coordination Cell (PACC) “to ensure expertise developed during deployments to Afghanistan gets channeled directly back into supporting warfighters on the ground.

“Army Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal came up with the PACC concept, based on a similar model that’s proven successful in Iraq , while he was director of the Joint Staff.”

US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy told a Congressional committee “the new cell’s focused support for McChrystal’s effort will have a big impact on advancing the administration’s Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy.” [12]

The Pentagon no longer offers even the pretense of a distinction between war in Afghanistan and war in Pakistan . It and its NATO allies are waging a cross-border war in South Asia .

As the US , British and German offensives were underway in Southern and Northern Afghanistan, the Pakistani press on July 26 reported a massive build-up of NATO forces on the country’s borders. US and NATO troops and equipment were moved to Afghan areas adjoining North Waziristan in Pakistan . One major newspaper reported on this unprecedented deployment that “Armoured vehicles, tanks and helicopters are included in the build-up.

“Planes of the American Air Force have come into action. It has also been learnt that American jet fighters are hovering over these areas and about 80 NATO vehicles have been shifted to these areas.

“NATO brigades in the Afghan provinces of Khost, Paktia and other areas are preparing to move to these areas. [13]

Another account, relying on eyewitnesses in Waziristan, said that “Official and tribal sources...from the border villages of North Waziristan [reported] unusual movement of what they termed a ‘huge number’ of US and NATO forces along the Pak-Afghan border.

“They said the NATO troops were armed with helicopter gunships, tanks and armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and had started establishing camps and checkpoints along the border.” [14]

A third report from the same day documented that “NATO helicopter gunships violated... Pakistan ‘s airspace,” which “was the fifth incident of violation of Pakistan ‘s airspace by NATO.” [15]

McChrystal’s counterinsurgency strategy resembles that of the Pentagon in 1970 when it expanded the Vietnam War into Cambodia , but Pakistan is far larger and more dangerous in relation to Afghanistan than Cambodia was to Vietnam .

McChrystal’s Commanders: Robert Gates and James Stavridis – Colombian Counterinsurgency to Be Replicated in Afghanistan

McChrystal is in charge of the prototype of history’s first international army in Afghanistan , forged in the fire of war and soon to reach 100,000 troops from over 50 nations, but himself must report to two superiors.

The first is US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, former CIA director who in his earlier positions with the Agency help create the current Afghan tragedy by supplying arms and training to the Pakistan-based mujahedin from 1979 to 1989 under the largest covert undertaking in the CIA’s history, Operation Cyclone.

The second is the recently appointed top NATO military commander, James Stavridis. He was head of the Pentagon’s Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) from October of 2006 until being sworn in as NATO Supreme Allied Commander on July 2, the same day the American offensive began in Afghanistan .

As SOUTHCOM chief Stavridis was in charge of US military operations in the Caribbean and Central and South America . Those included the ongoing counterinsurgency war in Colombia .

In an interview with an American newspaper in June he said, inter alia:

“The operations I’ve been most focused on in South America has been the insurgency in Colombia . My experience there will translate well to my role as the NATO commander in Afghanistan....[M]y experiences in understanding and learning counter-insurgency I think are up to the task.

“I’m very encouraged with the selection and conformation of Gen. Stan McChrystal to be the

commander of ISAF, which is the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan , the NATO command in country. I think he's a perfect choice." [16]

A New York Times profile of Stavridis in its June 29th edition – in truth a fawning puff piece called "For a Post in Europe , a Renaissance Admiral" – included these excerpts:

"In [his new] NATO position, he will be a partner with Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, who recently became the new commander of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan, where he must carry out a new strategy that is the premier national security initiative of the Obama administration.

"Reflecting on his tour as the top officer at Southern Command, Admiral Stavridis said he was proud of the counterinsurgency and counternarcotics assistance to Colombia" [17]

His predecessor as NATO Supreme Allied Commander and head of the Pentagon's European Command (EUCOM) – the two posts go together – was the aforementioned General Craddock who was also transferred to the two commands from that of SOUTHCOM and overseeing Plan Colombia, nominally a drug eradication and interdiction but in fact a counterinsurgency operation.

SOUTHCOM's Targets: FARC, Venezuela and Iran

Stavridis' replacement as SOUTHCOM chief is General Douglas Fraser, who in late June, not wasting any time is identifying future casus belli, said that "Iran's growing influence in Latin America is a 'potential risk' to the region" and "I'm concern with the military build-up in Venezuela because I don't understand the threat that they see." [18]

Fraser was also paraphrased as saying "Southern Command would continue to help [Colombia] combat leftist guerillas like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the FARC" and was quoted as saying that "The FARC is not defeated and we need to continue that effort....." [19]

Shortly afterward Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez responded that the "government is strengthening its military because the United States is a threat to Caracas ."

Chavez recommended someone give Fraser a mirror over which was inscribed "Look, general, you're the threat!" [20]

A month later, after the story broke about Washington taking over five more military bases in neighboring Colombia, Chavez renewed his concerns and said that Colombia is acting as a base for "those who constantly attack us and to those who are getting ready new attacks against us." [21]

The threat that he was alluding to is exemplified by a news story of earlier this month about a US special forces training camp in North Carolina called Pineland.

The latter was described as "a fictional country created five decades ago, made up of 16 counties in central North Carolina " which is "the setting for Robin Sage, the Special Forces final exam. In it, students from nearby Fort Bragg parachute and helicopter into Pineland at the end of almost a year of training, organize a guerrilla force and overthrow an oppressive regime on the eve of an American invasion."

The training at Pineland includes “an exercise that borrows liberally from actual American missions in Iraq , Afghanistan and Colombia .” [22]

US-Trained Colombian Counterinsurgency Commandos on Way To Afghanistan – Colombia: Pentagon’s Proxy Used Against ALBA

CBS news on July 28 ran a feature on General Stavridis’ two wars coming together, revealing that the US was sending Green Beret-trained Colombia commandos to Afghanistan and quoted an unnamed Pentagon official as saying “The more Afghanistan can look like Colombia , the better.”

The story also stated that “For Colombia , it’s a way to give something back to the U.S. , and the American Green Berets who’ve spent the last decade training them.

“The relationship took years to build with the Green Berets working to turn Colombia ‘s best soldiers into an organized special operations force. They helped train a police Special Operations unit known as the ‘Jungle Commandos.’ The Commandos hit targets deep in the jungle....

“With the help of America ‘s best warriors, the Colombian Special Forces have become some of the finest soldiers in the world.” [23]

The above account could definitively lay to rest US government and media attempts to present the war in Colombia as either a campaign against drugs or an anti-terrorist operation.

A Chilean defense official in mid-June partially described the extent of the Pentagon’s penetration of Colombia , one which in the decade beginning in 1998 has seen US military assistance rise from \$50 million to \$5 billion annually:

“What Colombia has is even more dangerous than any F-16 or aircraft carrier. It has access to United States satellite technology that allows it to monitor and supervise operations anywhere in real time. No other country in the region can do that.” [24]

On July 23th Venezuela, responding to the heightened threat that the US was presenting to it from Colombia on its western border, announced that it was negotiating the purchase of Russian T-90 main battle tanks, and its president said, “We are going to buy more tanks to have an armored force at least twice the size of what we have today and “We need to strengthen our forces on land, at sea, and in the air and we are going to continue doing that.” [25]

On the following day Miguel Carvajal, Domestic and Foreign Security Minister of Ecuador , Colombia ‘s southwestern neighbor, said that his nation “will react to further Colombian military incursions into the country” and “that there will be a military escalation against Colombia if that country makes another incursion into Ecuador such as happened March 1, 2008 .” [26]

On July 25th the Colombian government said it had conducted a deadly bombing raid against suspected FARC guerrillas in the south of the country. The warplanes employed weren’t named but their origin is certain.

Last week the Uribe regime in Bogota announced a billion dollar a year “war tax” on the

wealthy and businesses, which is to say those who domestically most benefit from the decades-old counterinsurgency war. [27]

What the tax will pay for and what the Pentagon official's desire to have Afghanistan look more and more like Colombia may mean were revealed last month by Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions.

US Transfers South American Death Squads To South Asia - Honduras: 20th Century Coup Targets 21st Century Latin American Independence

Referring to behavior by the US-trained Colombian army in general and the killing of impoverished urban youth as part of a combination of false body counts and bounty killing - defenseless victims were murdered and then represented as slain guerrillas - Alston denounced the army's actions as "cold-blooded, premeditated murder of innocent civilians for profit." [28]

Colombian rights groups have estimated the death toll from such murders as being in the hundreds.

Perpetrators of this gruesome campaign may be on their way to Afghanistan .

In addition to bordering and threatening Ecuador and Venezuela , Colombia also abuts Panama , its former possession, and as such Central America .

Should a regional armed conflict result from the June 28 coup d'état in Honduras , where hundreds of troops on the orders of US-trained commanders attacked the presidential quarters and arrested President Manuel Zelaya, Colombia may be called upon by its American paymasters to assist in more conflicts than that in Afghanistan .

How fraught the lingering crisis in Honduras, artificially prolonged by the US, is with the threat of escalating into a conflict not only in Central America but one also engulfing South America is demonstrated by developments that started on the day of the coup.

The day after the coup and the simultaneous assault by Honduran troops on the ambassadors and embassies of Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba - all three members of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) along with Bolivia and Ecuador itself until the coup - Venezuelan President Chavez stated "If our ambassador or embassy were attacked, that would be de facto beginning a war" and "Venezuela's National Armed Forces have been put on alert" [29] as they were after the Colombian attack in Ecuador last year.

The same day the head of the new Honduran junta Roberto Micheletti blustered that "the country's armed forces are ready to cope with any external threats." [30]

Two weeks later Bolivian President Evo Morales said, according to a press report characterization of the time, "the Honduras military coup was a warning from Washington to stop the growth of governments opposed to US imperialism." [31]

The same dispatch quotes Morales as saying, "This threat doesn't scare us; on the contrary, with more force, we will be stronger." [32]

A week later Morales urged ALBA members to increase defense cooperation in the wake of the Honduran military takeover and said "This coup is a threat against the continued growth

of ALBA.” [33]

Following that he leveled the accusation that “I have first-hand information that the empire, through the U.S. Southern Command, made the coup d’etat in Honduras .” [34]

The Southern Command whose head is now NATO’s top military commander in charge of the Alliance ‘s expanding war in South Asia .

Also last week Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa said that “it is unlikely the Honduras coup took place without the knowledge of the U.S. military, which has a base in that country” and “the coup is a message from Latin American and U.S. ‘ultraconservatives’ to keep leftist governments in line.” [35]

Russian analyst Nil Nikandrov wrote that throughout 2008 John Negroponte, US ambassador to Honduras from 1981-1985 and a key architect of the Reagan administration’s contra wars and military build-up in Central America, “was building in Central America an intelligence and diplomacy network charged with the mission of regaining the positions lost by the US as well as of neutralizing left regimes and ALBA integration initiative.

“At present the US ambassadors to Latin American countries – Hugo Llorens to Honduras , Robert I. Blau [Deputy Chief] to El Salvador , Stephen G. McFarland to Guatemala , and Robert J. Callahan to Nicaragua – are Negroponte’s people. All of them have practical experience in destabilizing and subverting political regimes unfriendly to the US , launching propaganda campaigns, and creating fifth columns in the form of various NGOs.” [36]

If the attempt in the Honduras to effect “regime change” other than through the recently fashionable mode of “color revolutions” should give rise to a conflict between the Micheletti junta and its Central American neighbors – or with the ALBA bloc – the US would prefer to have a military client regime do its dirty work for it. Mexico currently has its own problems to contend with and so Colombia would be the chief candidate for the job.

Coups and counterinsurgencies engineered and supported by Washington are no longer relics of the past century. Coups of the Georgian variety and its offshoots or of the Honduran model and Vietnam-style counterinsurgency wars have been reactivated as foreign policy options of choice. What is new is the degree of international coordination now practiced by the US and its allies.

Notes:

[1]. China Central Television, July 2, 2009

[2]. Hungary Around The Clock, July 28, 2009

[3]. Wikipedia

[4]. Hungary Around The Clock, July 28, 2009

[5]. Trend News Agency, July 22, 2009

[6]. Los Angeles Times, July 28, 2009

[7]. Press TV, June 30, 2009

- [8]. Agence France-Presse, June 30, 2009
- [9]. Reuters, July 2, 2009
- [10]. The Nation (Pakistan), July 10, 2009
- [11]. Trend News Agency, June 25, 2009
- [12]. U.S. Department of Defense, American Forces Press Service, June 26, 2009
- [13]. The Nation (Pakistan), July 26, 2009
- [14]. The News, July 26, 2009
- [15]. Online News, July 26, 2009
- [16]. Florida Times-Union, June 15, 2009
- [17]. New York Times, June 29, 2009
- [18]. Agence France-Presse, June 25, 2009
- [19]. Ibid
- [20]. Press TV, June 28, 2009
- [21]. Xinhua News Agency, July 22, 2009
- [22]. Associated Press, July 3, 2009
- [23]. CBS News, July 28, 2009
- [24]. Global Post, June 18, 2009
- [25]. Russian Information Agency Novosti, July 24, 2009
- [26]. Poder, July 25, 2009
- [27]. Reuters, July 21, 2009
- [28]. Press TV, June 19, 2009
- [29]. Xinhua News Agency, June 29, 2009
- [30]. Xinhua News Agency, June 29, 2009
- [31]. Press TV, July 13, 2009
- [32]. Ibid
- [33]. Bloomberg News, July 20, 2009
- [34]. Agence France-Presse, July 23, 2009

[35]. Associated Press, July 23, 2009

[36]. Strategic Culture Foundation, July 24, 2009

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