

# Top NATO Military Brass Meet Behind Closed Doors

Realities Collide at Halifax “War Conference”

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While the world’s top military elites gather inside a fortified hotel to discuss NATO’s future, protesters question the organisation’s legitimacy, secrecy, and the lack of democratic debate about the increasingly unpopular war in Afghanistan.

An imposing ‘United States of America’-emblazoned aircraft greeted visitors on the tarmac of Halifax International Airport Friday, as more than 250 of the Western world’s top military leaders and their brain trust descended on the city for the inaugural Halifax International Security Forum.

Co-sponsored by the government of Canada and the U.S.-based German Marshall Fund think tank, over 60 percent of the attendees hailed from these host nations for what is being dubbed a World Economic Forum-style conference for militarists.

Announcing the Forum last July, German Marshall Fund President Craig Kennedy called it “a step in the process of changing the conversation” about Canada’s role in the ‘trans-Atlantic community,’ toward a recognition of its being a top-tier power in its own right that is worthy of a seat at the table with the globe’s most powerful war-fighting nations.

Canada’s transformation to a counterinsurgency-capable expeditionary force and its contribution to the war in southern Afghanistan has earned it the respect of NATO’s key power, the United States, which, in turn, has boosted its global profile among other NATO allies.

With Friends Like These...

In the opening session featuring Canadian Minister of Defence Peter MacKay and U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, MacKay said “We take great pride in knowing that Canadian’s contribution to transatlantic cooperation as a steadfast reliable friend and ally is recognised.”

Gates lauded Canada as a “major contributor” to the Afghan war and for helping to “hold the line in the South before U.S. reinforcements arrived,” following a mini-surge that began in the latter days of the Bush administration, and was subsequently bolstered by President Barack Obama’s addition of over 20,000 troops to the conflict since last March.

Currently, the Obama administration is deliberating over whether or not to implement an Iraq-style “surge” of upwards of tens of thousands of troops into Afghanistan. Canada’s former Chief of Defence Staff, Rick Hillier, who spoke on a panel about the war with Republican Senator John McCain Saturday, said “The surge...is fundamental here, it’s

absolutely essential.”

For his part, Senator McCain insisted that the Iraqi surge can be replicated in Afghanistan and that within the next year to 18 months, “We can turn the situation around.”

Reflecting its parallels with other high-profile meetings among global elites, most of the Forum’s agenda is off-the-record and closed to the media. Aside from the more than 25 journalists who are ‘embedded’ inside the proceedings, where comments can only be reported based on ‘Chatham House Rules’ – that is, not for attribution to particular individuals – most reporters are given limited access to the panelists and attendees, and are sequestered in a press room under tightly controlled conditions.

During his prepared remarks, Peter MacKay referred to this format as “a chance where people can speak openly, honestly, among friends,” albeit largely outside of public scrutiny. Contrary to its undemocratic overtones, MacKay said that he feels the conference is “an example of democracy promotion, having an international forum such as this...talking about issues that relate to the democracies of the world.”

MacKay also spoke proudly about instances where “the United States and Canada have collaborated in the past on democracy promotion, certainly Afghanistan is a good example of that.”

The Halifax Forum took place on the heels of Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s inauguration, following NATO-sponsored elections last August that are widely seen to have been fraudulent.

The biggest such conference ever to be hosted in Canada, Halifax was seen as the ideal site given its strategic geographic location, and its position as a launching site for many of Canada’s military forces. Although Halifax is known as a pro-military community, outside on Friday a small group of protesters denounced the forum, which they called a “war conference” that is being held to “work out the justification for the global expansion of NATO and to extend the ongoing illegal occupation of Afghanistan.”

On Saturday, a larger protest took place which featured former Afghan parliamentarian Malalai Joya, who has been [touring North America](#) promoting her new book, [A Woman Among Warlords](#).

An outspoken critic of the ongoing occupation of her country, Joya has called for NATO to withdraw its forces. No Afghans participated in the Forum itself, and Joya was forced to deliver her short speech while separated from the Forum venue by a wall of police.

Joya told the several dozen boisterous protesters that the invasion of her country pushed the Afghan people “from the frying pan into the fire because they brought into power a photocopy of the Taliban,” referring to the corrupt government of Karzai, which is comprised of many known warlords and suspected war criminals.

Joya added that a surge of U.S. troops in Afghanistan “will translate into killing more innocent people,” and argued that “the policies of the Obama administration in Afghanistan are no different from that of Bush.”

During a press briefing Friday, Sen. McCain said that he would be “glad to meet” with Joya,

and acknowledged that “she has kindred spirits here in Canada and in the United States who share exactly her view.”

A CBS poll earlier this week showed that 69 percent of U.S. citizens think the Afghan war is on the wrong track, the highest ever level of opposition that has been registered during the eight-year occupation. Despite this, McCain added that “the majority of Afghan people don’t share that particular position.”

Apparently unfamiliar with Joya’s position toward the unpopular war, McCain said, “in the course of our conversation, I would have to also try to get from her how she views the situation in Afghanistan after all the troops are gone.”

Earlier this week, Joya told IPS correspondent Chris Arsenault, in a sit-down interview, that, “The war in Afghanistan has fostered terrorism, even though the stated goal is to fight it. The biggest beneficiaries of the conflict have been extremist groups who take advantage of legitimate grievances against NATO.”

“They [the occupying forces] say if troops leave, the Taliban will eat us. But they are supporting the Taliban today, supporting warlords. Both of them are eating us. To fight against one enemy is easier than two. We are between two enemies [the occupiers and the extremists],” she said, urging an immediate troop withdrawal. •

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