

U.S., NATO Poised For Most Massive War In Afghanistan's History

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Over the past week U.S. newspapers and television networks have been abuzz with reports that Washington and its NATO allies are planning an unprecedented increase of troops for the war in Afghanistan, even in addition to the 17,000 new American and several thousand NATO forces that have been committed to the war so far this year.

The number, based on as yet unsubstantiated reports of what U.S. and NATO commander Stanley McChrystal and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen have demanded of the White House, range from 10,000 to 45,000.

Fox News has cited figures as high as 45,000 more American soldiers and ABC News as many as 40,000. On September 15 the Christian Science Monitor wrote of "perhaps as many as 45,000."

The similarity of the estimates indicate that a number has been agreed upon and America's obedient media is preparing domestic audiences for the possibility of the largest escalation of foreign armed forces in Afghanistan's history. Only seven years ago the United States had 5,000 troops in the country, but was scheduled to have 68,000 by December even before the reports of new deployments surfaced.

An additional 45,000 troops would bring the U.S. total to 113,000. There are also 35,000 troops from some 50 other nations serving under NATO's International Security Assistance Force in the nation, which would raise combined troop strength under McChrystal's command to 148,000 if the larger number of rumored increases materializes.

As the former Soviet Union withdrew its soldiers from Afghanistan twenty years ago the New York Times reported "At the height of the Soviet commitment, according to Western intelligence estimates, there were 115,000 troops deployed." [1]

Nearly 150,000 U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan would represent the largest foreign military presence ever in the land.

Rather than addressing this historic watershed, the American media is full of innuendos and "privileged" speculation on who has leaked the information and why, as to commercial news operations the tawdry world of Byzantine intrigues among and between American politicians, generals and the Fourth Estate is of more importance than the lengthiest and largest war in the world.

One that has been estimated by the chief of the British armed forces and other leading Western officials to last decades and that has already been extended into Pakistan, a nation

with a population almost six times that of Afghanistan and in possession of nuclear weapons.

Two weeks ago the Dutch media reported that during a visit to the Netherlands "General Stanley McChrystal [said] he is considering the possibility of merging...Operation Enduring Freedom with NATO's ISAF force." [2] That is, not only would he continue to command all U.S. and NATO troops, but the two commands would be melded into one.

The call for up to 45,000 more American troops was first adumbrated in mid-September by U.S. armed forces chief Michael Mullen, with the Associated Press stating "The top U.S. military officer says that winning in Afghanistan will probably mean sending more troops." [3]

Four days later, September 19, Reuters reported that "The commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan has drawn up a long-awaited and detailed request for additional troops but has not yet sent it to Washington, a spokesman said on Saturday.

"He said General Stanley McChrystal completed the document this week, setting out exactly how many U.S. and NATO troops, Afghan security force members and civilians he thinks he needs." [4]

The Pentagon spokesman mentioned above, Lieutenant-Colonel Tadd Sholtis, said, "We're working with Washington as well as the other NATO participants about how it's best to submit this," refusing to divulge any details. [5]

Two days later the Washington Post published a 66-page "redacted" version of General McChrystal's Commander's Initial Assessment which began with this background information:

"On 26 June, 2009, the United States Secretary of Defense directed Commander, United States Central Command (CDRUSCENTCOM), to provide a multidisciplinary assessment of the situation in Afghanistan. On 02 July, 2009, Commander, NATO International Security Assistance Force (COMISAF) / U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A), received direction from CDRUSCENTCOM to complete the overall review.

"On 01 July, 2009, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe and NATO Secretary General also issued a similar directive.

"COMISAF [Commander, NATO International Security Assistance Force] subsequently issued an order to the ISAF staff and component commands to conduct a comprehensive review to assess the overall situation, review plans and ongoing efforts, and identify revisions to operational, tactical and strategic guidance."

The main focus of the report, not surprising given McChrystal's previous role as head of the Joint Special Operations Command, the Pentagon's preeminent special operations unit, in Iraq, is concentrated and intensified counterinsurgency war.

It includes the demand that "NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) requires a new strategy....This new strategy must also be properly resourced and executed through an integrated civilian-military counterinsurgency campaign....This is a different kind of fight. We must conduct classic counterinsurgency operations in an environment that is uniquely

complex....Success demands a comprehensive counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign.”

McChrystal’s evaluation also indicates that the war will not only escalate within Afghanistan but will also be stepped up inside Pakistan and may even target Iran.

“Afghanistan’s insurgency is clearly supported from Pakistan. Senior leaders of the major Afghan insurgent groups are based in Pakistan, are linked with al Qaeda and other violent extremist groups, and are reportedly aided by some elements of Pakistan’s ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence].

“Iranian Qods Force [part of the nation’s army] is reportedly training fighters for certain Taliban groups and providing other forms of military assistance to insurgents. Iran’s current policies and actions do not pose a short-term threat to the mission, but Iran has the capability to threaten the mission in the future.”

That the ISI has had links to armed extremists is no revelation. The Pentagon and the CIA worked hand-in-glove with it from 1979 onward to subvert successive governments in Afghanistan. That Iran is “training fighters for certain Taliban groups” is a provocational fabrication.

As to who is responsible for the thirty-year disaster that is Afghanistan, McChrystal’s assessment contains a sentence that may get past most readers. It is this:

“The major insurgent groups in order of their threat to the mission are: the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), the Haqqani Network (HQN), and the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HiG).”

The last-named is the guerrilla force of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the largest recipient of hundreds of millions (perhaps billions) of U.S. dollars provided by the CIA to the Peshawar Seven Mujahideen bloc fighting the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan from 1978-1992.

While hosting Hekmatyar and his allies at the White House in 1985 then President Ronald Reagan referred to his guests as “the moral equivalents of America’s founding fathers.”

Throughout the 1980s the CIA official in large part tasked to assist the Mujahideen with funds, arms and training was Robert Gates, now U.S. Secretary of Defense.

Last December BBC News reported:

“In his book, *From the Shadows*, published in 1996, Mr Gates defended the role of the CIA in undertaking covert action which, he argued, helped to win the Cold War.

“In a speech in 1999, Mr Gates said that its most important role was in Afghanistan.

““CIA had important successes in covert action. Perhaps the most consequential of all was Afghanistan where CIA, with its management, funnelled billions of dollars in supplies and weapons to the mujahideen, and the resistance was thus able to fight the vaunted Soviet army to a standoff and

eventually force a political decision to withdraw,' he said." [6]

Now according to McChrystal the same Gulbuddin Hekmatyar who was cultivated and sponsored by McChrystal's current boss, Gates, is in charge of one of the three groups the Pentagon and NATO are waging ever-escalating counterinsurgency operations in South Asia against.

To make matters even more intriguing, former British foreign secretary Robin Cook – as loyal a pro-American Atlanticist as exists – conceded in the Guardian on July 8, 2005 that "Bin Laden was...a product of a monumental miscalculation by western security agencies. Throughout the 80s he was armed by the CIA and funded by the Saudis to wage jihad against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. Al-Qaida, literally 'the database', was originally the computer file of the thousands of mujahideen who were recruited and trained with help from the CIA to defeat the Russians."

Russian analyst and vice president of the Center for Political Technologies Sergey Mikheev was quoted in early September as contending that "Afghanistan is a stage in the division of the world after the bipolar system failed. They [U.S. and NATO] wanted to consolidate their grip on Eurasia...and deployed a lot of troops there. The Taliban card was played, although nobody had been interested in the Taliban before." [7]

Pentagon chief Gates' 27 years in the CIA, including his tenure as director of the agency from 1991-1993, is being brought to bear on the Afghan war according to the Los Angeles Times of September 19, 2009, which revealed that "The CIA is deploying teams of spies, analysts and paramilitary operatives to Afghanistan, part of a broad intelligence 'surge' that will make its station there among the largest in the agency's history, U.S. officials say.

"When complete, the CIA's presence in the country is expected to rival the size of its massive stations in Iraq and Vietnam at the height of those wars. Precise numbers are classified, but one U.S. official said the agency already has nearly 700 employees in Afghanistan.

"The intelligence expansion goes beyond the CIA to involve every major spy service, officials said, including the National Security Agency, which intercepts calls and e-mails, as well as the Defense Intelligence Agency, which tracks military threats."

U.S. and NATO Commander McChrystal will put the CIA to immediate use in his plans for an all-out counterinsurgency campaign. The Los Angeles Times article added:

"McChrystal is expected to expand the use of teams that combine CIA operatives with special operations soldiers. In Iraq, where he oversaw the special operations forces from 2003 to 2008, McChrystal used such teams to speed up the cycle of gathering intelligence and carrying out raids aimed at killing or capturing insurgents.

"The CIA is also carrying out an escalating campaign of unmanned Predator missile strikes on Al Qaeda and insurgent strongholds in Pakistan. The number of strikes so far this year, 37, already exceeds the 2008 total, according to data compiled by the Long War Journal website, which tracks Predator strikes in Pakistan."

Indeed, on September 13 it was reported that “Two NATO fighter jets reportedly flew inside Pakistan’s airspace for nearly two hours on Saturday.

“The airspace violation took place in different parts of the Khyber Agency bordering the Afghan border.” [8]

Two days later “NATO fighter jets in Afghanistan...violated Pakistani airspace and dropped bombs on the country’s northwest region.

“NATO warplanes bombed the South Waziristan tribal region....Moreover, CIA operated spy drone planes continued low-altitude flights in several towns of the Waziristan region.” [9]

The dramatic upsurge in CIA deployments in South Asia won’t be limited to Afghanistan. Neighboring Pakistan will be further overrun by U.S. intelligence operatives also.

On September 12 a petition was filed in the Supreme Court of Pakistan contesting the announced expansion of the U.S. embassy in the nation’s capital.

“Pakistani media have been reporting that the United States plans to deploy a large number of marines with the plan to expand its embassy in Islamabad.” [10]

The challenge was organized by Barrister Zafarullah Khan, who “said that Saudi Arabia was also trying to get 700,000 acres (283,400 hectares) of land in the country.”

He was quoted on the day of the presentation of the petition as warning “Giving away Pakistani land to U.S. and Arab countries in this fashion is a threat for the stability and sovereignty of the country” and “further added that the purpose of giving the land to U.S. embassy was to establish an American military base...there.

“He maintained that such a big land was enough even to construct a military airport.” [11]

Intelligence personnel and special forces are being matched by military equipment in the intensification of the West’s war in South Asia.

On September 10 Reuters revealed in an article titled “U.S. eyes military equipment in Iraq for Pakistan” that “The Pentagon has proposed transferring U.S. military equipment from Iraq to Pakistani security forces to help Islamabad step up its offensive against the Taliban....”

A U.S. armed forces publication a few days afterward wrote that “U.S. hardware is moving out of Iraq by the ton, much of it going straight to the overstretched forces in increasingly volatile Afghanistan” and “The U.S. military has already started moving an estimated 1.5 million pieces of equipment – everything from batteries to tanks – by ground, rail and air either to Afghanistan for immediate use....” [12]

In the middle of this month “U.S. military leaders infused Gen. Stanley McChrystal’s ideas of how to win the war in Afghanistan” by conducting a large-scale counterinsurgency exercise in Grafenwoehr, Germany.

“Dozens of Pashtun speakers joined more than 6,500 U.S. troops and civilians in an exercise for the Afghanistan-bound 173rd Airborne Brigade and Iraq-bound 12th Combat Aviation Brigade. It was the largest such exercise ever held by the U.S. military outside of the United States....” [13]

The Pentagon and NATO have their work cut out for them.

“A security map by the London-based International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) showed a deepening security crisis with substantial Taliban activity in at least 97 percent of the war-ravaged country.

“The Council added that the militants now have a permanent presence in 80 percent of the country.” [14]

The United States is not alone in sinking deeper into the Afghan morass.

On September 14 U.S. ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder, in celebrating the “resilience and deep-seated support from our allies for what is happening in Afghanistan,” was equally enthusiastic in proclaiming “Over 40 percent of the body bags that leave Afghanistan do not go to the U.S. They go to other countries....” [15]

Daalder also gave the lie to earlier claims that NATO troop increases leading up to last month’s presidential election were temporary in nature by acknowledging that “Many of the extra troops that NATO countries sent to Afghanistan for the August presidential elections would stay on.” [16]

Leading up to the Washington Post’s publication of the McChrystal assessment, NATO’s Military Committee held a two-day conference in Lisbon, Portugal which was attended by McChrystal and NATO’s two Strategic Commanders, Admiral Stavridis (Supreme Allied Commander, Operations) and General Abrial (Supreme Allied Commander, Transformation) which “focused mainly on the operation in Afghanistan and on the New Strategic Concept.” [17]

The 28 NATO defense chiefs present laid a wreath to the Alliance’s first war dead, those killed in Afghanistan.

Earlier this month the Washington Post reported that “The U.S. military and NATO are launching a major overhaul of the way they recruit, train and equip Afghanistan’s security forces,” an announcement that came “in advance of expected recommendations by Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal.” [18]

The article quoted Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee:

“We’re going to need many more trainers, hopefully including a much larger number of NATO trainers. We’re going to need a surge of equipment that is coming out of Iraq and, instead of coming home, a great deal of it should be going to Afghanistan instead.” [19]

According to the same report, this month NATO will “will establish a new command led by a three-star military officer to oversee recruiting and generating Afghan forces.

“The goal is to ‘bring more coherence’ to uncoordinated efforts by NATO contingents in Afghanistan while underscoring that the mission ‘is not just America’s challenge’...” [20]

Contributing to its quota of body bags, NATO has experienced losses in Afghanistan that have reached record levels. "According to the icasualties website, 363 foreign soldiers have died in Afghanistan so far this year, compared to 294 for all of 2008." [21]

This month Britain lost its 216th soldier in the nearly eight-year war. Canada lost its 131st. Denmark its 25th. Italy its 20th. Poland, where a recent poll showed 81 percent support for immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan, its 12th.

Russian ambassador to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov, who had been in the nation in the 1980s, was cited by Associated Press on September 12 as reflecting that in 2002 the U.S. had 5,000 troops in the nation and "Taliban controlled just a small corner of the country's southeast."

"Now we have Taliban fighting in the peaceful Kunduz and Baghlan (provinces) with your (NATO's) 100,000 troops. And if this trend is the rule, if you bring 200,000 soldiers here, all of Afghanistan will be under the Taliban."

Associated Press also cited Kabulov's concern that "the U.S. and its allies are competing with Russia for influence in the energy-rich region....Afghanistan remains a strategic prize because of its location near the gas and oil fields of Iran, the Caspian Sea, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf."

He also said "Russia has questions about NATO's intentions in Afghanistan, which...lies outside of the alliance's 'political domain'" and "Moscow is concerned that NATO is building permanent bases in the region."

The concerns are legitimate in light of this month's latest quadrennial report by the Pentagon on security threats which "put emerging superpower China and former Cold War foe Russia alongside Iran and North Korea on a list of the four main nations challenging American interests." [22]

At the same time a U.S. military newspaper reported on statements by Pentagon chief Robert Gates:

"Gates said the roughly \$6.5 billion he has proposed to upgrade the [Air Force] fleet assures U.S. domination of the skies for decades.

"By the time China produces its first - 5th generation - fighter, he said, the U.S. will have more than 1,000 F-22s and F-35s. And while the U.S. conducted 35,000 refueling missions last year, Russia performed about 30.

"The secretary also highlighted new efforts to support robust space and cyber commands, as well as the new Global Strike Command that oversees the nuclear arsenal." [23]

To add to Russian and Chinese apprehensions about NATO's role in South and Central Asia, ten days ago the U.S. ambassador to Kazakhstan, which borders Russia and China, "offered to Kazakhstan to take part in the peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan."

At the opening ceremony of the NATO Steppe Eagle-2009 military exercises in that nation

envoy Richard Hoagland said “Kazakhstan may again become part of the international NATO peacekeeping force in Afghanistan.” [24]

Radio Free Europe reported on September 16 that NATO was to sign new agreements with Kyrgyzstan, which also borders China, for the use of the Manas Air Base that as many as 200,000 U.S. and NATO troops have passed through since the beginning of the Afghan war.

On the same day NATO’ plans for expanding transit routes through the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea region were described. “[T]he air corridor through Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan is the most feasible.

“This route will be best suited if ISAF transport planes fly directly to Baku from Turkey or any other NATO member....Moreover, it [Azerbaijan] is not a CSTO [Collective Security Treaty Organization] member, which allows Azerbaijan more freedom for maneuver in the region when dealing with NATO.” [25]

Just as troops serving under NATO command in the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan now include those from almost fifty countries on five continents, so the broadening scope of the war is absorbing vaster tracts of Eurasia and the Middle East.

America’s longest armed conflict since that in Indochina and NATO’s first ground war threatens to not only remain the world’s most dangerous conflagration but also one that plunges the 21st Century into a war without end.

Notes

- 1) New York Times, February 16, 1989
- 2) Radio Netherlands, September 12, 2009
- 3) Associated Press, September 15, 2009
- 4) Reuters, September 19, 2009
- 5) Ibid
- 6) BBC News, December 1, 2008
- 7) Russia Today, September 7, 2009
- 8) Asian News International, September 13, 2009
- 9) Press TV, September 15, 2009
- 10) Xinhua News, September 12, 2009
- 11) Ibid
- 12) Stars and Stripes, September 19, 2009
- 13) Stars and Stripes, September 13, 2009

- 14) Trend News Agency, September 11, 2009
- 15) Reuters, September 14, 2009
- 16) Ibid
- 17) NATO, September 20, 2009
- 18) Washington Post, September 12, 2009
- 19) Ibid
- 20) Ibid
- 21) Agence France-Presse, September 22, 2009
- 22) Agence France-Presse, September 15, 2009
- 23) Stars and Stripes, September 16, 2009
- 24) Interfax, September 14, 2009
- 25) Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, September 16, 2009

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