US extends its military influence in Eastern Europe

Niall Green
11 November 2003

In the run up to America's assault on Iraq US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld identified the former Stalinist states of Eastern Europe as part of a "new" Europe in contrast to the "old" Europe of France and Germany.

The distinction reflected more than immediate irritation in the US administration at France and Germany's stance on the Iraq war. It pointed to a change in the general trajectory of US military strategy towards new networks of alliances and away from reliance on its former West European allies.

Subsequently *Jane's Intelligence Digest* noted that there has been a "fundamental shift in US strategy towards what the Bush administration considers to be its more reliable allies in the 'new' Europe", a process to be accompanied by a redistribution of US foreign military bases in what some military analysts are suggesting will be the biggest realignment of American overseas forces since 1945.

After the fall of the Soviet Union the US sought to establish its authority in East Europe and the Balkans at the expense of Russia and the European Union, partly by encouraging the former Soviet satellites to join NATO but also through the development of bilateral economic and security arrangements. An aspect of this has been the preparations of new military posts on former Warsaw Pact bases from Poland to Romania. In Pentagon parlance these would be "virtual" bases—relatively small posts rather than big bases that the US military relied upon during the Cold War—that are to act as "lily pads" across Europe and into the Central Asian and Middle Eastern regions that are central to American geo-strategic ambitions.

Marine General James L. Jones, the top ranking US officer in Europe, told the press in April: "I don't think we're talking about building another Ramstein [America's largest German air base] or another strategically large, big installation where you have the small-town USA come with it, like families and schools and everything else. But what we're trying to do is develop a family of bases that can be scalable—that can go from cold to warm to hot if you need them to be, to be very efficiently and economically built."

The US Department of Defense has invested heavily in huge transport aircraft capable of lifting entire units plus their equipment from military bases in America to forward bases across the globe, hoping to allow military planners leeway to by-pass opposition to future wars of aggression from rival governments and mass popular opinion. This restructuring, which has been prepared by Pentagon strategists throughout the 1990s, provides another sharp indicator of the unilateralist and aggressive course of US imperialism since the liquidation of the Soviet Union opened up large tracts of the globe from which US forces had hitherto been excluded.

The military redeployment will lead to several of America's 16 German military bases being closed. In recent years US military officials have complained that training exercises have become increasingly difficult in Germany due to environmental and other legal restrictions. Part of the rationale for the eastward movement of US bases comes from US imperialism's desire to operate in an unrestrained fashion, freed from potentially problematic ties to its major European rivals. Peter Singer, defence analyst with the Brookings Institute, told Radio Free Europe, "[I]t makes sense to shift some of these forces around, to move them into areas where there's greater need, to take them out of areas where there's local resistance, where they're unpopular, where they're not able to carry out their training."

The movement of US bases to Eastern Europe is unlikely to prove any more popular in the long run in their new locales. Public opinion in "new" Europe regarding the US assault on Iraq was broadly in line with that in Western Europe, while US forces based in the former Yugoslavia have developed a reputation for involvement in prostitution and other criminal activities. However, among the ex-Stalinists and semi-gangster types that constitute the ruling elites in the former Soviet satellites the Bush administration feels it has partners that it can easily manipulate to support its militarist agenda.

* Poland, a NATO member and one of Bush's staunchest allies in the invasion and occupation of Iraq, is also the largest of the ten countries to join the EU at the beginning of next year. Despite the opposition of France and Germany to the invasion, Poland firmly sided with the US—sending Special Forces to Iraq during the invasion and a brigade of troops to aid the occupation. In return the Polish elite hopes that US plans to base over 10,000 military personnel in the country—with the associated financial spin-offs—will be finalised. At present the US is spending millions of dollars improving infrastructure at the Kreziny air base in Western Poland.

* As with all new EU members, the US is seeking to strengthen its bilateral relations with Hungary even as it is drawn closer into the orbit of the European powers. Like Poland, Hungary has been an especially active supporter of the "war against terrorism" and the invasion of Iraq. Since 1995 the Taszar air base in the country has been home to a logistical support centre for US and NATO forces operating in the Balkans. In the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq the US used this base—ostensibly set up to assist operations in the former Yugoslavia—to train exiled Iraqi mercenaries associated with Ahmed Chalabi.

* According to *Jane's Intelligence Digest*, following a visit to the country by Donald Rumsfeld earlier this year, Albania could be in line to host a permanent US military presence. Albania has been a key ally

© World Socialist Web Site

of the US in the Balkans, arming and funding the Kosovo Liberation Army, a US-backed outfit encouraged to attack Serbian forces during the 1999 NATO assault on Serbia.

* Bulgaria is expected to join NATO next year. Its military has undergone extensive restructuring since the end of the Soviet era, a process that has largely taken place under the auspices of the US. As part of a $60 million deal to buy Huey helicopters from the US Air Force, Bulgarian defence contractors have been given the contract to become the main regional repair centre for US military equipment. The US also has its Regional Information Center for Democratic Development in South-East Europe established in Sofia, an institution widely known to provide cover for CIA and NATO intelligence operations in the region.

The US commandeered the country's Sarafovo airport as a base for KC-135 midair refuelling planes and used the nearby port during its campaign against Iraq. The Bulgarian and American governments are discussing the possibility of establishing a permanent base there. A small contingent of Bulgarian troops is currently serving in Afghanistan.

* Since 1997, when Clinton announced a strategic partnership with the country, Romania has been seen as a key ally of the US in the Balkans. Romania was the first country to join the NATO Partnership for Peace scheme that has been used as a halfway house for countries seeking to join the alliance. The US plans to set up an air base at Mikhail Kogalniceau airfield and a naval base at the Black Sea port of Konstanca. During the attack on Iraq the port was used as a crucial staging post for the US military. Romanian Prime Minister Adrian Nastase has had meetings with General Myers, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, and US European Air Force chief Gregory Martin regarding the possibilities of such a move. Nastase has offered his country as "an excellent platform for various regions" such as the Caucasus and the Middle East.

Bulgaria and Romania are looking to join the EU in 2007 and are presently engaged in accession negotiations. However, following their fulsome support for the US earlier this year, French President Chirac slapped them down—saying that the two states had been "particularly irresponsible" in defying the Franco-German position—jeopardising their request to join the EU. But the Bulgarian and Romanian ruling elites felt that the temporary ire of France was a price worth paying for potentially lucrative contracts with the Pentagon. Speaking of US plans to have permanent military bases in the two countries, Janusz Bugajski of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C. said: "These countries proved themselves very good allies during the Iraqi campaign as well as in other issues such as the Afghani reconstruction and generally in the anti-terrorism campaign . . . It's sort of payback."

The US plans to redeploy large sections of its European military apparatus to countries in the Balkan Peninsula involves far more than just "payback" for compliance with the war in Iraq. It comes as a result of the proximity of the area to the world's major sources of oil and gas. From the US encouragement of the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, through the NATO bombing of Serbia and the current movement of US troops into new bases there, American imperialism has sought to establish itself as the dominant power in South-East Europe. From there the US military is intended to be able reach into the Middle East and Caspian basin, linking up with the string of new US bases that have been established under the guise of the "war on terror" from Qatar to Kyrgyzstan.

The US has been able to extend its influence and military deployments in Eastern Europe in spite of the economic dominance of the region by the European Union. Most of the countries on the eastern border of the EU are due to join the EU next year, or hope to join later, and most of the currencies of these countries are pegged to the euro, having previously been pegged to the German mark. Universally amongst candidate countries, at least half their trading relations are with EU countries against relatively small amounts of direct trade with the US. Poland, for example, sends 70 percent of its exports to the EU and receives 61 percent of imports from the EU. By contrast only 2.4 percent of exports and 3.4 percent of imports are traded with the US.

The new military partnerships that the US has been building in the region are intended in part to act as a counterweight to the economic supremacy of EU. For their part the governments of the East European states hope that they can take advantage of their subservience to US militarism to increase their clout within an EU that threatens to overwhelm them.

Washington also believes that it can maintain divisions in Europe using a series of bilateral agreements, threats and bribes tailored to its immediate foreign policy needs. US ties with Eastern European countries are therefore designed to stymie any coherent European response, such as the European Defence Force, to American foreign policy objectives.

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz recently told the *New York Times*: "Their [US foreign bases] function may be more political than actually military, they send a message to everyone."

As the new East European bases are likely to be manned by some of the 68,000 armed forces personnel currently based in Germany, the Bush administration hopes that the eastward redeployments will also send a warning to the German government to not make the mistake of opposing the US as it did in the United Nations prior to the invasion of Iraq. Similarly, following the Turkish government's refusal to permit an attack on Iraq from its territory, the US plans to reduce personnel at its Incirlik air base from 3,000 to a skeleton staff of 500. On a more general level, a political signal is being sent out by Washington that America considers its old Cold War alliances to be expendable and that the opposition of once erstwhile allies can be counteracted by the support of another more "flexible" alliance.

Any repositioning of US forward bases will be hugely expensive, at least in the short term, as the proposed bases in Eastern Europe would require substantial remodelling if not rebuilding. Furthermore, present German bases are subsidised by the German Federal government to the tune of $1 billion per year out of a total annual cost of $7 billion. The economically crippled East European states are unlikely to provide any subsidies. Rather they are likely to seek payments for the development of surrounding infrastructure. Even after the US redeploys forces from its German bases, the US Department of Defense will have to pay for redevelopment and cleanup operations that can be equivalent to having the bases remain in operation for up to eight years. Thus billions of extra dollars will have to be added to the US military budget to facilitate the plans.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site