

NATO summit in Riga: Sharp conflicts over Afghanistan

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The NATO summit, which took place in the Latvian capital of Riga on Tuesday and Wednesday this week, was marked by bitter divisions between the US on the one side and France, Germany, Italy and Spain on the other.

Ostensibly the differences at the summit centred on the demand by the US that Europe make more troops available for deployment in Afghanistan and start sending its troops into the conflict-ridden south and the east of the country. However, more fundamental questions were at stake concerning the future role of NATO and the increasing clash of interests between the US and Europe.

Washington wants to transform NATO from a transatlantic into a global military alliance, to include countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Israel and South Africa, which would then function as a repository for troops that the US could deploy for its global military campaigns. As the German weekly *Die Zeit* ironically noted, this “new NATO” would be a “like a permanent pool of coalitions of the willing under American leadership.”

For their part, the Europeans are also in favour of expanded global military deployment—but not in the form of back-up troops for the Americans. As French President Jacques Chirac put it in an article released to the international press on the eve of the summit, “For too long the Europeans have relied on our US allies. We must strengthen our national contributions and boost the EU’s role.”

These differences find concentrated expression in the dispute over troop deployment in Afghanistan. Despite all of the differences of opinion on display at the summit, those taking part were agreed that this largest deployment in the history of NATO, involving the alliance’s highest casualties, was, in the words of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, a “litmus test” for the future of the alliance.

Three years ago, NATO took over the leadership of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. There are currently a total of 32,000 soldiers taking part in the ISAF operation. They come from all 26 NATO member states and an additional eleven countries. Some 12,000 troops have been sent by the US.

Originally, the ISAF mission was limited to securing the new government in the Afghan capital of Kabul, but ISAF is now operating throughout the country. Particularly in the south and the east, NATO units find themselves in a state of permanent combat with armed rebels. ISAF casualties are now even higher proportionately than US casualties in Iraq, when one takes into account the total number of troops involved in the two wars.

This year alone, 150 ISAF soldiers have been killed. The units that have been mainly affected come from the US, Canada, Britain and the Netherlands. Some 90 percent of deaths are from these four countries.

Other countries have provided their troops with a “caveat,” a limited

mandate, which excludes any participation in the dispute-ridden southern and eastern provinces. Germany, for example, has approximately 3,000 soldiers—the third largest ISAF contingent—but its operational area is limited to the relatively calm northern region of Afghanistan. France has stationed 1,100 soldiers in the capital, and Italian and Spanish soldiers are not directly involved in the fighting in the south.

For months, pressure has been growing on these countries to waive these restrictions and allow their troops to be sent on combat missions in the south and the east. In addition, NATO has called for an increase of around 2,500 soldiers for the ISAF contingent.

This pressure was systematically stepped up in the weeks before the Riga summit. At a conference in Berlin, US Deputy Secretary of State Nicolas Burns urged the German government to increase its military expenditure and consider “whether the very narrow rules of engagement laid down for its troops was sensible for NATO.”

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, a Dutchman, made a similar comment. He declared, “Putting caveats on operations means putting caveats on NATO’s future. At Riga, I will convey this message to our heads of state and government, loud and clear.”

The theme was taken up by President Bush in a speech he gave at the opening of the summit at the University of Riga. He said NATO would be successful in Afghanistan only when “its commanders on the ground have the resources and flexibility they need to do their jobs.” He continued, “The Alliance was founded on a clear principle: an attack on one is an attack on all. That principle holds true whether the attack is on our home soil, or on our forces deployed on a NATO mission abroad.”

In his typically thuggish manner, Bush combined the language of a bully with gross distortions of fact to argue for an intensification of violence. “We’ve killed many hundreds of Taliban, and it has removed any doubt in anybody’s mind that NATO can do what we were sent here to do,” he said.

Although increasing numbers of civilians have been killed by the brutal operations of the occupation troops against alleged Taliban fighters, Bush attributed the growing resistance exclusively to “Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters” combined with “drug traffickers and criminal elements and local warlords” who “remain active and committed to destroying democracy in Afghanistan.” Bush ignored the fact that most of these warlords and drug dealers were involved in the war against the Taliban regime and allied with the US, and were largely dependent on American support for their power and influence.

Bush went on to praise the corrupt and hated puppet regime of Hamid Karzai as an epitome of democracy. “Because of our efforts,” he claimed, “Afghanistan has gone from a totalitarian nightmare to a

free nation, with an elected president, a democratic constitution, and brave soldiers and police fighting for their country.”

European governments were adamant in their rejection of Bush’s demand for a greater military commitment. At every available opportunity, German Chancellor Merkel stressed that German soldiers in the north of the country were carrying out “good construction work” and would not be sent into combat. After the meeting, Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi commented, “Our position remains absolutely unchanged as does that of France, Spain and Germany.”

Indirectly, they are accusing the Bush administration of escalating the conflict through its one-sided concentration on military force in a dispute that cannot be resolved solely through military means.

This standpoint has been promoted in the German media in manifold forms. The Berlin daily *Tagesschau* wrote, “The international force has in many places been the subject of incomprehension, anger and enmity because of its large-scale military operations. NATO bombers have repeatedly destroyed houses and infrastructure and again and again ISAF patrols have inadvertently shot civilians.”

Prior to the summit, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote, “It would be fatal to concentrate on the demand for additional troops. This would only bring about a new stage in the escalation against an opponent that cannot be defeated militarily. The fate of the US in Iraq should be a lesson for NATO. The world power has five times as many soldiers in Iraq as NATO in Afghanistan. And nevertheless it is no longer fighting for victory, but only for a specific form of defeat.”

At the conclusion of the summit, the participants made a show of unity in accepted diplomatic fashion, but nothing remained of the original demands for more troops and the removal of “caveats.” German and French troops are to provide assistance to beleaguered forces in the south only in “emergencies”—a provision that already was in place. It appears that Denmark, Canada and the Czech Republic were prepared to slightly increase their contingents. However, this was officially announced.

France was able to push through its demand for a “contact group” through which all important international players, including the United Nations, the European Union and the World Bank, are to coordinate their activities in Afghanistan—a demand that was obviously directed against the dominance of the US.

The discussion on the future extension of NATO, which was to have been the central theme of the summit, was largely dropped. Only the three small Balkans states of Albania, Croatia and Macedonia are to be accepted as members in 2008, following negotiations on accession. On the question of Georgian and Ukrainian membership, something vigorously promoted by the US, there was only a noncommittal agreement for “further dialogue.” Other potential candidates such as Japan, Australia and New Zealand were not even mentioned.

According to Germany’s conservative *Frankfurt Allgemeine Zeitung*, “For all the agitated discussion on alliance solidarity and the strategy of the alliance in Afghanistan, the results were quite modest: Much ado about not very much.”

It would be quite wrong, however, to interpret the conflict over whether to use so-called “soft” power or “hard” power, which dominated at the Riga summit, as a dispute between a peaceful foreign policy and one based on force.

The European Union is actively involved in developing its own military capabilities—to some extent in direct competition with NATO. The French military, in particular, has repeatedly proved in Africa that it is quite capable of measuring up to the US in terms of the brutality employed in suppressing anti-colonial rebellions. Up to now, the post-

war German army has lacked opportunities to demonstrate what it is capable of, but the collaboration between the German military and the US in illegal kidnappings and torture demonstrates that it has few scruples when it comes to violence.

At the root of the differences over how to proceed in Afghanistan are opposing strategic interests. The European powers fear being dragged behind American foreign policy and into the vortex of the disaster in Iraq should they bow to US control of NATO. Nor are they prepared to allow the US to jeopardise their extensive economic interests in the Middle East. At the same time, they regard the weakening of the position of the US president as an opportunity to intensify their efforts to advance their own imperialist interests.

The scale of the conflicts over foreign policy was reflected in another question not openly addressed at the summit—Europe’s relationship with Russia.

The fact that a NATO summit was held for the first time in a country that was formerly part of Soviet Union was seen as a provocation against Moscow. The Russian government regards the former Soviet Union as Russia’s current sphere of influence, and sees any advance by NATO towards its borders as a threat.

In opening the summit, Bush noted that it marked “the first time our Alliance has met in one of the ‘captive nations’ annexed by the Soviet Union.” He alluded to the Latvian Freedom Monument close by the summit meeting place. The monument had been erected in 1935 by the authoritarian regime of Karlis Ulmani, who had taken power in a coup one year previously.

Bush managed to avoid any mention of the four-year-long occupation of Latvia by the Nazis, who, with the support of Latvian SS units, had murdered the entire Jewish population and large numbers of partisans. Instead, he referred to the expulsion of the Nazis by the Soviet Red Army in 1944 as the start of a dictatorship lasting five decades. This is precisely the sort of interpretation of Latvian history that one finds in extreme right-wing publications.

Bush then drew a parallel between the fight for “freedom” against “communism” with what he called the “crucial ideological struggle of the 21st century,” namely, the “war on terror,” which will, he declared, bring the Middle East the sort of “freedom” and “peace” which currently prevail in Europe.

None of the assembled European heads of the government sought to challenge this complete distortion of historical fact, but French President Jacques Chirac did organize his own form of rebuff by inviting Russian President Vladimir Putin, who had not been invited to the summit, to take part in his 74th birthday party in Riga. According to the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, Bush reacted with outrage upon hearing of the proposal. In the end, it was the Latvian president, Vaira Kike-Freiberga, who blocked Putin from coming.

At the moment it is such lesser issues and quarrels that reveal the true state of tension between the various NATO partners. But the drifting apart of great power interests threatens the very unity of the NATO alliance and augurs conflicts on a scale to match those which erupted in the first half of the last century.



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