NATO backs US escalation of war in Central Asia

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The NATO 60th anniversary summit in Strasbourg, France, and Kehl, Germany, ended with a headline commitment for Europe to provide “up to” 5,000 additional troops for Afghanistan.

This was the smallest commitment the European leaders could make without delivering an open rebuke to the United States. Nevertheless it paves the way for an escalation of the war in Afghanistan and its extension across the border into Pakistan—aims which are at the centre of the foreign policy of the Obama administration.

While keeping substantial troop forces in Iraq, President Barack Obama has championed the shift in military focus long demanded by sections of the US bourgeoisie towards Central and indeed Southern Asia, which is a strategic focus for US imperialism. A military success in Afghanistan is seen as key in countering both Russian and Chinese global influence and securing US hegemony over strategic concerns such as oil, pipelines, transit routes and markets.

Control over Afghanistan gives the US access to traditional areas of Russian influence such as the Caucasus, ex-Soviet Central Asia, as well as Iran. It also threatens China's main ally in the Indian sub-continent, Pakistan.

To this end Obama has announced an Iraq-style military “surge” ahead of the Afghan presidential elections in August. The US is to send 21,000 additional troops, and Obama is considering a further deployment of 10,000. America already has 38,000 troops out of the total of 70,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, and its forces make up a considerably larger proportion of those engaged in a combat role.

Fully 12,000 US troops operate separately from NATO.

By bringing America's military presence to over 60,000, Obama hopes to reinforce US control of this strategic territory. But he still wants a substantial increase of European logistical and military backing to offset spiralling costs and to tie Europe firmly to the war.

At a public address in Strasbourg, France, on Friday, Obama emphasized that the war in Afghanistan will continue despite the change in presidencies. While the administration has ceased referring to the “war on terror,” Obama said, “I think that it is important for Europe to understand that even though I’m now president and George Bush is no longer president, Al Qaeda is still a threat.... It is going to be a very difficult challenge”.

In continuing the US occupation of Iraq and escalating attacks on Afghanistan and Pakistan, Obama has adopted the same basic pretexts employed by the Bush administration to justify its neo-colonialist actions—including the supposed threat posed by Al Qaeda. These pretexts have not been challenged by any of the European powers.

The European powers are happy to maintain a foothold in the Afghan operation to avoid it becoming the exclusive province of the US, and they do not want to see it degenerate into a worse debacle than Iraq. But they are also anxious to avoid being sucked into a worsening conflict that is deeply unpopular at home—a situation indicated by the 30,000 protesters gathered at the two-day summit in Kehl, Germany, and then Strasbourg, France.

Obama proclaimed that the NATO partners had agreed to deploy about 5,000 troops and trainers “to advance [Washington's] new strategy”. The White House claimed a total of ten countries had pledged new forces. Outgoing NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer stated, “The bottom line is that when it comes to Afghanistan, this summit, and this alliance, have delivered”.

This is not the case. Even these small numbers are only temporary—up until the presidential elections—and are largely in a non-combat capacity.

Obama's main ally in seeking a troop expansion is British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. The day before the summit, Brown had offered up to 1,000 troops in agreement with Obama, in the hope of pressuring others to follow suit. Britain currently has 8,100 troops in Afghanistan. However, the *Independent* noted that Obama had in fact pressed for 2,000 to 3,000 additional UK troops permanently in the country, but this had met with “stiff opposition within the government, including the Treasury, which blocked the move on cost grounds”.

This smaller temporary deployment ending in October also includes 250 already sent earlier this year.

In any event, Brown's gambit failed. The summit's co-host, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, rejected any additional military commitment from France, only agreeing to 150 military police to help train Afghan civilian police.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel did not shift from an earlier agreement to send another 600 soldiers up to the Afghan election, bringing Germany's troop levels to 4,100. These are operating in a non-combat capacity in the north.

Steve Flanagan, from the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, described the commitments as “the basic minimum.... The hard part of the mission is going to become more

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and more a US-led coalition. You still have the NATO flag, but when you look at the numbers, it's not a great division of labour".

Obama could not hide his disappointment, calling the commitments only a "strong down payment". The *Sunday Times* commented acidly, "He is right, but he may also be optimistic if he expects further payments to follow. If a new American president armed with the most goodwill that he will ever have in office cannot persuade NATO to do more now, he never will".

Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, there has been a consistent demand for a greater and more independent European military role, with a disagreement only over whether this should be within or external to the NATO alliance.

Obama wanted the Strasbourg summit to re-cement US-European ties. He has been championing a new "Declaration on Alliance Security", endorsed at Strasbourg, which states, "NATO recognizes the importance of a stronger and more capable European defence and welcomes the European Union's efforts to strengthen its capabilities and its capacity to address common security challenges.... We are determined to ensure that the NATO-EU relationship is a truly functioning strategic partnership as agreed by NATO and by the EU".

At the public meeting prior to the Strasbourg summit, Obama declared, "We must be honest with ourselves. In recent years we have allowed our alliance to drift. I know there have been honest disagreements over policies, but we also know there has been something more that has crept into our relationship".

Europe has a 25,000-strong NATO Response Force and the EU Rapid Defence Force of 60,000 soldiers. But continued collaboration with NATO comes with a price and is conducted in the European bourgeoisie's own interests—as a means of projecting itself as a military force globally in a way it cannot do alone.

Strasbourg came after Sarkozy had secured the agreement for France to rejoin the command structures of NATO, 43 years after President Charles de Gaulle withdrew and set up an independent nuclear deterrent.

Sarkozy took the decision with the support of Merkel as part of their combined efforts witnessed earlier during the G20 summit to project a stronger and unified European position. At the summit Sarkozy made clear that providing troops to Afghanistan and elsewhere depended on asserting French influence. "We commit the lives of our soldiers, but do not participate in the committee that defines strategy and operations", he said. "The time has come to put an end to this situation".

The growing tensions between the US and Europe notwithstanding, the NATO summit will nevertheless signal a continued resort to colonial-style militarism led by Washington with the blessings and assistance of Paris, Berlin, London and Rome.

The only open conflict over Afghanistan, other than over troop numbers, was Afghan President Hamid Kharzai's endorsing of a law governing family relations for the Shia minority. The United Nation's Fund for Women said the law "legalises rape" within marriage by obligating wives to have sex when this is demanded, states that women should not leave their homes without a husband's permission, gives automatic custody of children to fathers and made provision for marriage between minors. It is now to be reviewed.

Nothing was said in opposition to either the surge in Afghanistan, the US missile attacks on Pakistan's border that have flattened entire villages and left over half a million people officially refugees, or the threat of a full-scale war in the nation of 173 million.

Rather, Obama, Merkel and Sarkozy combined together to make sure that Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen was nominated as the new secretary-general of NATO. Rasmussen was a staunch ally and friend of Bush in the war against Iraq, hailing his defence of "the ideals of liberty and against submission" and supporting the imprisoning without trial carried out at Guantanamo Bay. A leading figure in defending the provocation by the *Jyllands-Posten* daily, when it published cartoons of Mohammed, his nomination is itself provocative if not aggressive in its implications. Turkey's opposition was bought off with various NATO jobs and a promise that its appeal for accession to the EU would move forward.

Even now what still unites the US and Europe is a common desire to face off any challenge from Russia and China to their global influence. Two new eastern European states joined NATO at Strasbourg: Albania and Croatia. The continued integration of former Warsaw pact countries into NATO has angered Russia, leading to sharp conflicts over US plans to establish its so-called Nuclear Missile Shield stationed in Poland and the Czech Republic and over NATO support for Georgia on the ongoing conflict over Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The "Declaration on Alliance Security" combines praise for NATO enlargement as "an historic success in bringing us closer to our vision of a Europe whole and free" and a promise that "NATO's door will remain open to all European democracies" with pledges to maintain a "strong, cooperative partnership between NATO and Russia". And there has even been talk of offering Russia NATO membership.

Moscow, however, knows that it is under threat. During the G20 summit, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev warned of further NATO expansion eastwards. "Before making decisions about expanding the bloc, one must think about the consequences", he said. "I said this frankly to my new comrade, US President Barack Obama. NATO needs to think about preserving its unity and not harming relations with its neighbours".

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