NATO celebrates 60th anniversary by expanding Central Asian war

Stefan Steinberg
3 April 2009

Discussions at the NATO summit that takes place Friday and Saturday will be dominated by the occupation of Afghanistan—the most protracted war carried out by the military alliance in its 60-year history. A polarisation is taking place between the US and Britain on the one side and leading European countries on the other over how best to prosecute the war.

Both sides are ready to intensify the conflict at enormous cost to the Afghan and Pakistani populations. Increasingly, however, European countries, with France and Germany at the fore, are demanding that their own contributions be rewarded by increased influence over imperialist decision-making bodies, including NATO.

While Afghanistan is at the top of the NATO agenda, the summit will also discuss NATO relations with Russia, the role of France in the alliance and the preparation of a new strategic concept. The summit is being held just two weeks after the decision by the French parliament to fully reintegrate France into the structures of NATO.

The NATO summit follows the G20 conference in London, where Germany and France presented a united front in opposition to US and British proposals to deal with the economic crisis.

It is unlikely that differences between the US and leading European countries on major foreign policy issues will be publicly aired at the NATO summit—the first to be attended by the new American president. There is a long tradition of masking tensions within the alliance with public declarations of unity.

Nevertheless, just as the G20 summit revealed profound fault lines between the Atlantic partners over economic policy, the list of contentious foreign policy issues between the US-Britain and leading European nations is growing.

From its foundation in April 1949 until the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in July 1991, the role of NATO was dictated by the confrontation with the Soviet Union. The United States functioned as a protective umbrella for Western Europe and played the leading role inside the alliance. This situation was accepted by European governments, notwithstanding France's decision to quit leading NATO bodies in 1966.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the European requirement for American protection fell away, and the tasks and aims of NATO were up for renewed definition. In principle, two paths were possible: The construction of an independent European military alliance leading in the direction of the dissolution of NATO, or the transformation of NATO into a global intervention force, retaining the dominant role of America.

At the Rome conference held in November 1991, the agenda was set in favour of the second option. In the wake of US President George Bush senior's declaration of a "new world order," the strategy paper at the 1991 NATO summit struck the Soviet Union from the list of threats in favour of new "risks" and "dangers," such as international terrorism, "failing states" and threats to the imperialist powers' access to energy and raw materials. The 1991 summit signaled the transformation of NATO from a largely defensive military alliance into an aggressive intervention force for the purpose of imposing the economic, political and geo-strategic interests of its members on a world scale.

In line with the new doctrine, NATO has carried out a series of military interventions since 1991—notably in the Balkans and Afghanistan. These interventions were supported by NATO partners on both sides of the Atlantic.

At NATO's 50th anniversary summit in 1999, the US once again used its influence to ensure that the alliance expanded its parameters for military operations by undermining clause V of the NATO Treaty, which allows military action only to defend NATO member countries from attack. The new doctrine allowed "out of area" operations against other countries or regions and allowed NATO to carry out aggressive military operations without the sanction of the United Nations Security Council.

Over the same period, at the behest of Washington, NATO conducted a systematic policy of encirclement of Russia. Following the 40-year post-World War II standoff with the Soviet Union and its allies, the US government used NATO as an instrument to increase its influence in a number of Eastern European countries and to isolate Russia.

The consequences of this policy exploded to the surface last year following the Georgian invasion of South Ossetia, which led to a dramatic heightening of tensions between Russia and America, which had given the green light for the invasion.

For their part, leading Western European nations have shown no scruples about waging wars "out of area." They have sent troops to Africa, participated in policing the Middle East and deployed troops to Afghanistan. At the same time, the European ruling elites have watched with mounting alarm as the US transformed the alliance into an increasingly aggressive military instrument for advancing American interests across the globe. In particular, the growth of tensions between the US and Russia cut across the close

© World Socialist Web Site

relations desired by European Union nations heavily dependent on Russian energy supplies.

In response, the European Union has undertaken some initial steps to develop a rival military intervention force. It has established a 25,000-strong NATO Response Force (operational since 2006) and the EU Rapid Defence Force comprising 60,000 soldiers.

Nevertheless, European nations continue to confront enormous financial and political obstacles in their attempts to create a pan-European military capacity. US expenditure on its military (around $600 billion) is still more than double the military expenditure of all EU states combined. At the same time, European governments confront broad public opposition to their military engagements abroad.

Unable to compete directly with the US militarily, European nations have shifted the struggle to the ground of NATO itself. Under conditions where 21 of the current 28 members of NATO are members of the EU, the European ruling elites are demanding more say in NATO decisions. This is a crucial aspect of the recent decision by the French government to fully rejoin the alliance.

The strategy that is now being followed by the French government was spelt out in a contribution in *Le Monde* published to correspond with the 50th anniversary of NATO. In April 1999, French defence expert François Heisbourg declared: "For France to play a leading role in the buildup of European defence, it must once again be fully integrated into NATO. On the one hand, because it finds itself in the reprehensible situation where its pilots, and perhaps tomorrow its soldiers, must endure risks arising from commands worked out at a military level in which France does not participate. On the other hand, because a NATO in which the Europeans form their own block offers the possibility of braking the growing tendency of the Americans to acting single-handedly, such as they did in Iraq with ‘Operation Desert Fox.' It is advisable at the same time to Europeanise NATO while ‘Natoising' America. That can only be done when France is present at all levels"

Such efforts to Europeanise NATO have increased significantly in recent weeks, as the foreign policy and military priorities of the Obama administration have become clear.

In November 2008, the US National Intelligence Council presented a report analysing the future role of the US on the world stage. The report concluded that the existing unipolar world dominated by the US would be replaced by a multipolar world dominated by several regional powers. This report, which predicted a significant loss of US power and influence, was studied closely in Europe.

Citing the US report in its latest edition, the German *Blatter für deutsche und internationale Politik* asks: "The big question for the coming year is therefore: Will the US with its new president, Barack Obama, accept such a relative decline, or will it seek to further escalate the use of force?"

The magazine warns that the recent US military escalation in Afghanistan and Pakistan points to the latter conclusion. The decision to increase its troop presence in Afghanistan was taken by the administration in Washington without any consultation with its European allies.

Both the French president and the German chancellor have rejected sending more troops to Afghanistan. In a major policy speech one week before the NATO summit, German Chancellor Angela Merkel ruled out sending additional German soldiers. In the same speech, she made clear her opposition to the parameters for "out of area" global interventions dictated to NATO in 1999.

In his only media interview before the G20 meeting and the NATO summit, French President Nicolas Sarkozy declared, "There will be no military reinforcements" from his country to Afghanistan. In the same interview, Sarkozy made the case for an increased role for France in NATO. French presidents had sent French troops into battle under NATO command, but France was not a member of the military planning committee that prepared such operations. "Is that reasonable? I don't think so," Sarkozy said.

Sarkozy and Merkel have always regarded the war in Afghanistan as a means to further their own interests and neither leader has criticised the increase of troops ordered by Obama. Merkel, in particular, has argued for more civilian aid as an adjunct to the presence of troops, precisely the course now being followed by Obama. Nevertheless, the shift that has taken place in US foreign and military policy has been registered in Paris and Berlin.

While maintaining large numbers of combat troops in Iraq, Obama has moved the centre of US military operations from Arab countries and the Middle East to Central Asia—a region of strategic importance to Europe and crucial for the continent's energy reserves.

The economic and financial crisis is redrawing the geo-strategical map. Tensions between the great powers that have simmered over a long period are beginning to erupt. This is the significance of the joint front presented by Merkel and Sarkozy at the G20 summit against Washington on economic issues. It is only a matter of time before such submerged conflicts surface in the sphere of military policy.

Sarkozy and Merkel are still seeking to Europeanise NATO, but in a manner that increasingly brings them into conflict with the Obama administration. The *Blatter für deutsche und internationale Politik* reminds its readers that NATO was, in the final analysis, an outcome of the economic breakdown of capitalism in the 1930s.

The current economic crisis is fuelling conflicts between the great powers that threaten to break the NATO alliance apart and raise the spectre of a new world war.

Stefan Steinberg

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site