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How Afghanistan Became a War for NATO

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The official line of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the NATO command in Afghanistan, is that the war against Afghan insurgents is vital to the security of all the countries providing troops there.

In fact, however, NATO was given a central role in Afghanistan because of the influence of U.S. officials concerned with the alliance, according to a U.S. military officer who was in a position to observe the decision-making process.

“NATO’s role in Afghanistan is more about NATO than it is about Afghanistan,” the officer, who insisted on anonymity because of the political sensitivity of the subject, told IPS in an interview.

The alliance would never have been given such a prominent role in Afghanistan but for the fact that the George W. Bush administration wanted no significant U.S. military role there that could interfere with their plans to take control of Iraq.

That reality gave U.S. officials working on NATO an opening.

Gen. James Jones, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) from 2003 to 2005, pushed aggressively for giving NATO the primary security role in Afghanistan, according to the officer.

“Jones sold [Defense Secretary Donald] Rumsfeld on turning Afghanistan over to NATO,” said the officer, adding that he did so with the full support of Pentagon officials with responsibilities for NATO. “You have to understand that the NATO lobbyists are very prominent in the Pentagon – both in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and on the Joint Staff,” said the officer.

Jones admitted in an October 2005 interview with American Forces Press Service that NATO had struggled to avoid becoming irrelevant after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. “NATO was in limbo for a bit,” he said.

But the 9/11 attacks had offered a new opportunity for NATO to demonstrate its relevance.

The NATO allies were opposed to the U.S. war in Iraq, but they wanted to demonstrate their support for stabilizing and reconstructing Afghanistan. Jones prodded NATO member countries to provide troops for Afghanistan and to extend NATO operations from the north into the west and eventually to the east and south, where U.S. troops were concentrated.

That position coincided with the interests of NATO’s military and civilian bureaucrats and those of the military establishments in the member countries.

But there was one major problem: public opinion in NATO member countries was running heavily against military involvement in Afghanistan.

To get NATO allies to increase their troop presence in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005, Jones assured member states that they would only be mopping up after the U.S. military had defeated the Taliban. On a visit to Afghanistan in August 2004, Jones said, “[W]e should not even think that there is going to be an insurrection of the type that we see in Iraq here. It’s just not going to happen.”

Reassured by Washington and by Jones, in September 2005, NATO defense ministers agreed formally that NATO would assume command of southern Afghanistan in 2006.

But conflicts immediately arose between the U.S. and NATO member countries over the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Britain, Germany, Canada, and the Netherlands had all sold the NATO mission to their publics as “peacekeeping” or “reconstruction” as distinct from counterinsurgency war.

When the Bush administration sought to merge the U.S. and NATO commands in Afghanistan, key allies pushed back, arguing the two commands had different missions. The French, meanwhile, were convinced the Bush administration was using NATO troops to fill the gap left by shifting U.S. troops from Afghanistan to Iraq – a war they strongly opposed.

The result was that one NATO member state after another adopted “caveats” that ruled out or severely limited their troops from actually carrying out combat in Afghanistan.

Even as the Bush administration was assuring its NATO allies that they would not have to face a major Taliban uprising, U.S. intelligence was reporting that the insurgency was growing and would intensify in spring 2006.

Gen. Karl Eikenberry, who had just arrived as commander of all U.S. troops in Afghanistan in 2005, and newly appointed U.S. Ambassador Ronald E. Neumann were warning Washington that the well-publicized domestic debates in NATO member states over troop commitments were “generating a perception of NATO political weakness,” as Neumann recalls in his memoirs on Afghanistan published in 2009.

Neumann wrote that both he and Eikenberry believed “the insurgents would see ISAF’s expansion and the U.S. contraction as the moment to rekindle the war.”

But Eikenberry assured the news media that the insurgency was under control. In a Dec. 8, 2005, press briefing at the Pentagon, Eikenberry asserted that the more aggressive Taliban tactics were “very much a sign of weakness.”

Asked if he wasn’t concerned that the situation in Afghanistan was “sliding towards an Iraqi scenario,” Eikenberry replied, “[W]e see no indications that such is the case....”

A few weeks later the Taliban launched the biggest offensive since its regime was ousted in 2001, seizing control of much of Helmand, Kandahar and several other southern provinces.

Eikenberry, clearly under orders from Rumsfeld, continued to carry out the policy of turning the south over to NATO in mid-2006. He was rewarded in early 2007 by being sent to Brussels as deputy chairman of NATO’s Military Committee.

Eikenberry acknowledged in testimony before Congress in February 2007 that the policy of turning Afghanistan over to NATO was really about the future of NATO rather than about Afghanistan. He noted the argument that failure in Afghanistan could “break” NATO, while hailing the new NATO role in Afghanistan as one that could “make” the alliance.

“The long view of the Afghanistan campaign,” said Eikenberry, “is that it is a means to continue the transformation of the alliance.”

The Afghanistan mission, Eikenberry said, “could mark the beginning of sustained NATO efforts to overhaul alliance operational practices in every domain.” Specifically, he suggested that NATO could use Afghan deployments to press some member nations to carry out “military modernization.”

But Canadian Gen. Rick Hillier, who commanded NATO forces in Afghanistan from February to August 2004 and was later chief of staff of Canadian armed forces from 2005 to 2008, wrote in his memoir *A Soldier First*, published in 2009, that NATO was an unmitigated disaster in Afghanistan.

He recalled that when it formally accepted responsibility for Afghanistan in 2003, NATO had “no strategy, no clear articulation of what it wanted to achieve” and that its performance was “abysmal.”

Hillier said the situation “remains unchanged” after several years of NATO responsibility for Afghanistan. NATO had “started down a road that destroyed much of its credibility and in the end eroded support for the mission in every nation in the alliance,” Hillier wrote.

“Afghanistan has revealed,” wrote Hiller, “that NATO has reached the stage where it is a corpse decomposing....”