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Afghanistan Update

Afghan President Hamid Karzai urged Canada on September 18th not to withdraw its troops from the country after February 2009, when the Canadian mission's mandate will expire. Speaking to all Canadian journalists and reporters working in Afghanistan Karzai stressed that withdrawing troops will bring the country back under the Taliban and that the Canadian presence is needed in Afghanistan until the country is able to defend itself.

Canadian top officials have reaffirmed the country's commitment to its mission in Afghanistan on many occasions recently. Prime Minister Harper, who attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit earlier this month in Sydney, Australia, said that Canada has to finish its job in Afghanistan. Speaking at a meeting of all ambassadors to Canada in St. Andrews, NB, on the eve of 9/11 attacks' 6th anniversary, Defense Minister Peter MacKay said the world risks more attacks if peace and stability aren't restored in Afghanistan. "The price of failure is too high for nations like Canada to consider abandoning Afghanistan before it is ready to defend itself against the forces of terrorism." During his recent visit to Washington, MacKay said that there is a "pressing need" for more troops and that that Afghanistan is a "no-fail mission"; it requires more help from NATO countries to prevent the export of terror. In an [op-ed](#) published in the National Post on September 24 Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier discussed the significant contribution made by Canada and the great need for continued Canadian support.

Earlier this month, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, while in Germany for a public panel organized by NATO's Public Diplomacy Division in Berlin, urged German officials to help in Afghanistan's southern regions by providing more assistance to train the Afghan national army.

The country, which has more than 3,000 military personnel in mostly peaceful northern Afghanistan, has been criticized by British and Dutch lawmakers for keeping its forces out of Taliban strongholds in southern and eastern parts of the country, leaving the U.S., Britain, Canada and the Netherlands to do the bulk of the fighting.

German officials including Chancellor Angela Merkel urged the parliament to keep the troops and six reconnaissance jets in Afghanistan for another year, arguing that a pullout now would endanger progress made since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier

said it would be a mistake to pull out: "Anyone who demands withdrawal of the troops from Afghanistan puts at risk everything that we have built up in the last six years," he said.

The German Cabinet has finally approved a one-year extension of the country's role in the NATO mission in Afghanistan, which has become increasingly unpopular with the German population. The current mandate expires on October 13.

Prime Minister Harper has vowed that Canada's mission will be extended only if there is political consensus. Liberals are pressing to have the soldiers take on a safer, non-combatant role when the current commitment expires in 2009, and the New Democrats want the troops back home immediately.

Afghanistan President Karzai has also recently signaled increased interest in negotiating with the Taliban and reiterated his long-held willingness to engage the Taliban diplomatically.

According to a recent report of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, which draws legislators from 42 countries, the NATO force in Afghanistan does not have enough troops or equipment to secure advances made against Taliban insurgents and to guarantee a successful end to its mission.

"The NATO mission still suffers from a lack of personnel and assets," the assembly's Defense and Security Committee concluded after a six-day tour of allied operations. However, the report did not recommend how many reinforcements were needed on top of the 40,000 troops currently under NATO and U.S. command. The most pressing needs included more helicopters, intelligence and reconnaissance assets and trainers to build up the Afghan security forces, the report said.

On September 20th, the UN Security Council approved the extension of the ISAF mandate for another year. The UN resolution extends the mission mandate under Chapter VII of the UN Charter (Action with respect to threats to the peace, breaches of the peace, and acts of aggression) until October 13, 2008. The resolution called for the coalition members to "sustain their efforts to train and empower the National Police and other Afghan forces."

NATO Secretary General urges closer ties with Russia

Speaking in Geneva at the Global Strategic Review 2007 event, Managing Global Security and Risk earlier this month, Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said the relationship between Russia and the 26-nation Western defense alliance remained vulnerable, but that closer ties were worth the effort.

This statement comes in the wake of a recent interception of Russian military planes flying in airspace patrolled by NATO. On September 6, UK's Royal Air Force launched fighter jets to intercept eight Russian bombers that stayed inside international air space during the maneuvers, which some described as a statement of Russia's growing military prowess.

"If we look at Russia's recent behavior, we see that even after a decade of steady progress the NATO-Russia relationship remains vulnerable to Cold War stereotypes. We have to get beyond this state of affairs. We must not allow short-term tactical considerations to put at risk a long-term strategic partnership," De Hoop Scheffer said.

NATO chief said Russia should "clarify" its relationship with the Alliance. Despite tensions, the organization attached great importance to partnership with the country. "For us, a solid, trustful NATO-Russia relationship remains a long term investment in European, and indeed global, security," de Hoop Scheffer said at the Geneva security gathering.

U.S., Russia, and the missile defense

Following a first-time visit by American military experts to Azerbaijan's Gabala radar station, Russia and the United States have announced that they are ready for political negotiations about the possible joint use of the facility.

This visit comes amid persistent tension over U.S. plans to install elements of a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, former Soviet satellites that are now NATO members. Russian officials think that Washington is trying to weaken their country and upset the strategic balance in the region. Instead of countering Iranian ballistic missiles, U.S. missile-defense elements aim to reduce the counterforce potential of Russian strategic nuclear forces, the Russians say.

The Gabala station seems to be too old for the purpose of defending against a potential threat from Iran - Washington's main argument for building the European system. While Washington estimates Iran could become capable of launching an intercontinental missile by about 2015, Russia believes Iran is decades away.

The Gabala radar station, which sits between Russia and Iran, was built in the 1980s and was able to perform the functions it was designed to by the Russians, so the Americans will have to evaluate "how that would fit in with a mutually beneficial cooperative way ahead".

A high ranking Russian official, Maj. Gen. Alexander Yakushin, first deputy chief of staff of Russia's Space Forces, told RIA News Agency that "The most important task now is to react adequately to threats that really exist to the south (of Russia), and not future hypothetical threats of 2020-25".

The surprise offer to share the Gabala radar station for missile defense purposes was made by Russian President Vladimir Putin at the G8 summit in June. The Bush administration expressed interest in Gabala, but as an addition to the system planned in Central Europe as the Gabala station is not designed in a way that it could perform the same functions planned for the Czech Republic. The U.S.-built radar would track a missile after it had been detected by other means. The missile defense system also would need other radars to detect launches. While the U.S. has some of those capabilities, the Gabala facility's proximity to Iran — just south of Azerbaijan — could help identify missile trajectories earlier.

New bomb tested in Russia

Russia tested the most powerful bomb — a thermobaric bomb, an explosive device that unleashes a destructive shockwave with the power of a nuclear weapon. According to Alexander Rukshin, the deputy chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, the thermobaric bomb, known as the vacuum bomb, uses fuel-air explosive and can create overpressures equal to an atomic bomb. Officials claim that the bomb is environmentally friendly as opposed to a nuclear bomb and will enable Russia to fight international terrorism "in any part of the globe and in any situation."

The new bomb nicknamed the "dad of all bombs" is four times more powerful than the U.S. Massive Ordnance Air Blast, nicknamed the Mother Of All Bombs, Russian Channel One says. The U.S. bomb is a large-yield satellite-guided, air-delivered bomb described as the most powerful non-nuclear weapon in history.

The TV channel said the Russian bomb contains 7.8 tons of high explosives compared to more than 8 tons of explosives in the U.S. bomb; it's four times more powerful because it uses a new, highly efficient type of explosives that the TV report didn't identify.

The bomb is the latest in a series of new Russian weapons and policy moves unveiled as President Vladimir Putin tries to reassert Moscow's role on the international stage.

Tougher sanctions for Iran

As the U.S. and its European allies continue discussing a third round of UN Security Council sanctions against Iran over its refusal to suspend uranium enrichment, the Iranian President, who is in New York to address the US General Assembly, warned that no threats and economic sanctions will stop Iran's technological progress. A large military parade of missiles and other weapons aimed at showing off the country's military might, marking the 27th anniversary of the Iraqi invasion of Iran that sparked the bloody 1980-88 war, took place in Tehran. The parade featured a new plane, which is the new home-grown fighter jet that the country says could "blind the eyes" of its enemies.

On September 21, the U.S. hosted a meeting of six major powers working to resolve the controversy surrounding Iran's nuclear program. Top officials from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany discussed introducing new punitive measures following Tehran's failure to suspend uranium enrichment. The fuel cycle can be used to produce both peaceful energy and the world's deadliest weapon. The IAEA introduced two sets of sanctions on the country in 2006 and 2007.

Earlier in August, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) agreed on a plan with Iran, which commits the country to answer longstanding, five-year-old questions about its nuclear activities over a rough timeline of a few months.

In early September Iran declared that it had reached a key target in its nuclear program and now has 3,000 centrifuges enriching uranium. This is seen by Iran as a key medium-term goal for its program. According to a recent International Institute for Strategic Studies report, if Iran could operate 3,000 centrifuges smoothly, one bomb could be produced within nine to 11 months.

Despite the increasing tensions and the threat of tougher UN sanctions, Iran's President Mahmud Ahmadinejad said Iran will not suspend uranium enrichment. He claims Tehran is not trying to develop nuclear weapons, as suspected by the U.S. and its allies. The country, he says, has a legal right to develop civilian nuclear technologies and reiterated that Iran had no desire to build a nuclear bomb, which he said would not be in its political interests.

The U.S. and its key allies France and Britain face an uphill struggle, however, in winning Security Council approval: Russia said it opposed additional sanctions and China has repeatedly urged diplomatic solution to the nuclear dispute, but it faces pressure from Washington and Brussels to back new punitive measures.

Current UN sanctions call on all countries to stop supplying Iran with nuclear-related technology and freeze assets of many people and groups related to the program. Iranian arms exports are banned. Iran has responded to the sanctions by expanding enrichment.

Iran has declared more than once that it could itself provide fuel for the nuclear power plant which Russia is helping it to build in Bushehr. The Russian RIA news agency said that Iran does not have such

specialized and high-tech production capacities, and is not likely to have them in the near future. Its "nuclear experience" is too small, and its technological, industrial and manpower potential is not mature enough to build national nuclear plant projects. For the time being, its nuclear energy industry is limited to the incomplete Bushehr site; but even when the plant is finished, Russia will be the one to supply it with fuel and take the waste back.

Following a recent statement from French President Nicolas Sarkozy who said that a diplomatic push by the world's powers was the only alternative to "an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran", French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said in an interview that his country had to prepare for the possibility of war against Iran over its nuclear program, but added that he did not believe any such action was imminent. French officials also suggested introducing European Union sanctions against Iran apart from those imposed by the IAEA.

The United States is "determined to use diplomacy" to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis. "I am hopeful that Iran will comply with the UN Security Council resolutions and we continue to press them to do this. That is ultimately the answer to all of this," U.S. Secretary of Energy Samuel Bodman said. His position was reaffirmed by the U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates who said that the United States will stick to diplomatic and economic pressure to force Iran to halt its nuclear drive, but did not rule out other options that are on the table.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will once again taunt his adversary President George Bush -- this time on US soil -- during his visit to the UN General Assembly at a moment of high tensions between the two countries.

Note: An Iran country profile with a comprehensive overview of Iranian chemical, biological, nuclear and missile capabilities is available at http://www.nti.org/e_research/profiles/Iran/index.html.

Albania eliminates its chemical weapons

Albania is the first nation to certify to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) that it completely eliminated its chemical weapons stockpile. The U.S. Department of State assisted the country to meet the Chemical Weapons Convention mandate by conducting chemical weapon destruction operations.

The destruction of approximately 16 metric tons of bulk chemical agents began in February 2007 and was completed July 10, 2007. A special destruction facility was built to destroy the agents. This was financed under the legislation introduced in 1991 by U.S. Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana and former Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia and is known as the Nunn-Lugar Act or the Cooperative Threat Reduction program.

Canada accepts name Macedonia

Canada confirmed last Friday it would use the disputed name Republic of Macedonia in dealing with the former Yugoslav republic, dismissing concerns that this would damage relations with Greece which has rejected the name for the past 16 years. However, within the United Nations and other international bodies Ottawa would respect the established agreement, favored by Greece, of using the title Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. "Canada does not wish to be limited in its relations with either the Republic of Macedonia or any other country because of their dispute over its name," a spokesman for Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier said. "We have therefore decided to take a pragmatic approach and to refer, in our bilateral relations with the Republic of Macedonia, to the name by which the country calls

itself in its constitution and within its own borders." The name Macedonia is one of the most emotive foreign policy issues in Greece. Macedonia is also the name of Greece's northern province, birthplace of Alexander the Great, and Athens objects to the use of the name as a sign of territorial ambitions.

Armenian Embassy in Ottawa a historic place

The Armenian Embassy in Ottawa was included in the list of historical and cultural heritage buildings of Canada's capital. The City Council approved the designation of the Embassy of the Republic of Armenia in Canada under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act. The house is an excellent example of the work of prominent Ottawa architect W.E. Noffke in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, one of a wide range of styles he worked in during his long career. The cultural heritage value of the Armenian Embassy is enhanced by its location along the Queen Elizabeth Driveway, a major recreational pathway and a scenic entry route into downtown Ottawa. Its prominent location and unusual architectural style combine to make it a landmark in the city. "Heritage designation recognizes the cultural heritage value of the building and will convey its importance to the people of Ottawa", Mayor Larry O'Brien said. "After being included on the heritage list of the Canadian capital, it will also appear in Ottawa's tourist guides and brochures as an important landmark in the city," said Arman Akopyan, the Armenian Chargé d'Affaires. "The Embassy plans to hold open door days for the public, which will also become a good opportunity to introduce Canadians and foreign tourists to our country, to Armenian history and culture", Mr. Akopyan said.

Sources: Reuters, Canadian Press, Toronto Star, www.canoe.ca, www.nato.int, www.un.org, Bloomberg, BBC News, AP, AFP, RIA News Agency, Interfax News Agency, Eurasia Insight www.eurasianet.org, Washington Post, Guardian Unlimited, DPA, People's Daily, Xinhua, www.usinfo.state.gov, www.ottawastart.com, www.armembassycanada.ca

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