



In Focus Transatlantic News Digest

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NATO launches military exercises in Croatia

On October 1, NATO began its largest ever exercise in Croatia to train NATO's year-old elite Response Force and to test the ex-Yugoslav country's readiness to join the alliance. A 12-day operation "Noble Midas" involves 8000 troops including 250 Croatian soldiers, 40 ships, 6 submarines, 40 aircraft, and 23 helicopters on the country's central and southern Adriatic coastline. Troops from 12 of NATO's 26 members, including the United States, France, Germany, Britain, Turkey and some others, are taking part in the exercises aimed at training the Response Force units for worldwide peacekeeping missions.

A small group of demonstrators protested against the military exercise, saying it would damage the environment and ruin Croatia's image as a tourist destination. About 30 protesters wearing bathing suits held banners saying: "We want tourists not terrorists."

The government is struggling to get popular support for its drive to make Croatia a part of NATO. Those against NATO membership claim it would result in NATO's building bases on the coast, forcing Croatia to send troops to wars abroad, and making the country a potential target for terrorists.

The Croatian army's deputy chief-of-staff, Slavko Baric, said the exercise is "the last test" for Croatia's accession to NATO. Croatia, which gained independence in 1992, is eager to join NATO and the European Union, and be recognized as part of the West. The country joined NATO's Partnership for Peace Program (PfP), seen as the first step towards membership in the alliance, in 2000. It expects to receive an invitation to the club at NATO's summit next spring in Bucharest, Romania.

The NATO Response Force was declared fully operational in Nov. 2006. Composed of 25,000 NATO nations' elite troops, it is meant to be on standby for NATO operations, from humanitarian to combat roles.

NATO, not Dutch, must secure southern Afghanistan

The Dutch government, under pressure to keep its troops in volatile southern Afghanistan, wants NATO to take responsibility for the region's security after its mandate expires at the end of August 2008. The Dutch have failed to respond to appeals from NATO to stay on longer and are even contemplating a pull-out amid international debates about how best to take on responsibility for security in the country.

According to Dutch Defense Minister Eimert van Middelkoop, discussions with NATO are underway, however, all options, including the withdrawal, are open. The issue will be discussed later this month, on October 24-25, in the Netherlands. Between 1,500 and 1,700 Dutch troops are serving in Afghanistan, and public pressure to withdraw is growing, as is concern about whether NATO allies are pulling their weight. 80 extra Dutch soldiers were recently sent to Afghanistan to help deal with intensifying fighting with Taliban insurgents.

European Nations Agree to Share Arms Testing Facilities

The European Defense Agency (EDA) adopted a scheme for EU nations to share and coordinate their investments in new arms testing and evaluation. The new code of conduct is designed "to avoid duplication and encourage the sharing of these expensive facilities" in Europe, the Agency's statement says.

Under the code of conduct, which will come into effect in January, EU nations will inform each other on a voluntary basis of planned defense testing investment worth more than one million Euros. Such exchanges of information will enable the EU states to invest in a coordinated manner in new testing installations, as they will be able to use facilities already existing in a fellow EU member country.

The Agency would put in place necessary precautions to ensure that results of test programs carried out by one country in another are not subject to spying.

The EDA, created in 2004, brings together the national armaments directors from 26 of the 27 EU nations; Denmark is not involved.

France considers rejoining NATO's military command

France is willing to consider full NATO membership, which reflects a policy shift toward warmer relations with the United States. Defense Minister Hervé Morin said that European defense would fail to advance, absent a change in French political behavior. Although France is a big contributor to finances and forces, its approach gives the impression Paris wants to hinder NATO's transformation. Morin would like the country to draw full benefits in influence and command positions from its NATO investment.

French President Sarkozy and his defense advisers form a new generation free from the Gaule's worldview of the Cold War. They constitute a "political phenomenon," looking to break with the past, particularly in social matters. That allows them to contemplate full NATO integration without the ideological baggage of the older generation, including that of former President Jacques Chirac, who grew up in the shadow of de Gaule. "We are at a turning point in French doctrine," says a French expert in defense issues.

The French rapprochement with the United States comes as tension mounted with Iran, with open speculation that Washington is weighing a military strike on Iranian facilities if Tehran pursues uranium enrichment.

President Charles de Gaule withdrew from NATO's integrated military command in 1966 to preserve French sovereignty and reject American dominance of the Atlantic Alliance. But the country continued to take part in NATO operations and holds a seat in the Atlantic Council, the decision-making body. 130 French officers are attached to NATO; some officers hold command posts in NATO-led operations. French forces are certified to take part in NATO rapid reaction forces, and the French Army has headquarters at Lille, in northern France, dedicated to NATO operations. Several thousand French troops are stationed in Kabul and Kosovo.

Some analysts believe that chances of Paris rejoining NATO's military wing are better than they have been for years. "I think there is a real possibility. It is not something that is going to happen overnight. But I think there is a real possibility that this could happen over the course of the next few years," said Christopher Chivvis, a Transatlantic Fellow at the French Institute of International Relations in Paris.

"If France wants to have a greater say in the strategic direction of the Alliance, one way to do so is to have a military presence at all levels where it can insert its voice," said Leo Michel, an analyst at the National Defense University in Washington, DC. "It is not credible to sit back and criticize the Alliance for being too dominated by Americans when you, as a country, are playing with one hand tied behind your back."

Announcements of France's rejoining are not new. They were made by ex-President Jacques Chirac, but never realized. He later rejected a role for NATO in Iraq and Lebanon and championed an independent European defense policy - denying criticism it would undermine the Atlantic Alliance.

"France has definitely come closer to the United States since the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as president," French analyst Dominique Moisi said. "There is a new tone, there is a new style, there is a return of confidence. And of course, that does translate itself in the relationship between France and NATO."

Kosovo Update

On September 28, representatives of Serbia and the Kosovo Albanians opened the first face-to-face talks in New York under the mediation of the six-power Contact Group (United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia) on the future of the breakaway Serbian province. December 10th was set as a deadline for the conflicting parties to reach an agreement on the final status of the province, which has been under the UN administration since 1999, when NATO waged an air campaign to drive out Serbian forces and stop ethnic cleansing against the Albanians in Kosovo.

The United States and the European Union say the solution should be based on a [plan](#) by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, who advocated EU-supervised independence, with broad autonomy for the Kosovo Serbs.

An independent status for Kosovo is unacceptable for Belgrade. Serbia, backed by Russia with its UN veto power, is willing to offer broad autonomy in line with the European norms – a position the West calls unrealistic and Kosovo's 2 million Albanians (90% of the population) reject.

U.S. officials say they expect the United States and the vast majority of the 27 EU member states to recognize Kosovo if the Balkan province declares independence from Serbia in early December if the negotiations fail despite diplomatic efforts of the Contact Group mediators. The mediators are Wolfgang Ischinger of Germany for the EU, Frank Wisner of the United States and Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko of Russia.

About 120,000 Serbs still live in Kosovo, roughly half of them in isolated enclaves protected by a NATO peacekeeping force of 16,000 and the rest in a northern triangle that is closely tied to the Serbian hinterland.

Some European countries are concerned about a future possible independence of Kosovo. Romania and Slovakia, fearful that ethnic Hungarians in their countries could seek greater autonomy, are expected to come under heavy pressure from Washington to accept the EU position. Greece, a close ally of Serbia, is concerned that its neighbor Macedonia could become unstable because the ethnic Albanians in the former Yugoslav republic might call for independence. Cyprus, divided between the Turkish north and the Greek Cypriot south, fears the Kosovo example might be used by the Turkish Cypriots.

Russia wants the issue kept inside the UN and has opposed independence. As a member of the UN Security Council, Russia can veto or block any resolution calling for Kosovo's independence. Russian diplomats have repeatedly asserted that independence without Serbia's approval could set off a chain reaction in other regions that are seeking independence, particularly Abkhazia and North Ossetia in Georgia and Transdnistria in Moldova - which are supported by Russia.

Kosovo is one of the last unresolved disputes left from the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

North Korean Nuclear Talks

On October 2, the United States and 5 other countries involved in negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program approved an agreement in Beijing, under which North Korea will declare and disable its nuclear arsenal in return for energy aid and diplomatic and security guarantees. The plan aims at disabling all of North Korea's nuclear facilities by the end of this year setting out the steps to be taken in the denuclearization process for the rest of the year.

The six parties - North Korea, China, the U.S., South Korea, Japan and Russia - reached a [basic agreement](#) to negotiate in February, the largest step forward in four years of confrontation over the North Korean nuclear program, and under which the countries agreed to provide North Korea with 1 million fuel oil, or the monetary equivalent in other aid and assistance. The country also wants to be removed from a U.S. list of countries that sponsor terrorism.

Under the first phase of the February disarmament deal, the North shut down its main nuclear reactor at Yongbyon and four other related facilities in July, and allowed inspectors from the United Nations' atomic watchdog back into the country.

The [joint statement](#) released in Beijing and approved by the United States on October 2 provides the details of the second and more complex phase, in which North Korea will declare and disable its nuclear program. The statement said the United States agreed to work to improve bilateral relations with North Korea, "moving towards a full diplomatic relationship." Washington also committed to work towards removing the North from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, but only if Pyongyang continues pushing ahead with disarmament.

Pyongyang was tasked with improving its troubled relations with Japan and resolving issues left over from an "unfortunate past" -- Japan's wartime occupation of the Korean peninsula and the kidnapping of Japanese nationals by Pyongyang.

The country is expected to declare a full list of its nuclear facilities before December 31, 2007. The U.S. wants a dismantling process that would prevent a nuclear facility from being made operational for at least 12 months.

The complex six-party negotiations began in 2003. In October 2006, the North successfully tested a nuclear bomb that disturbed the stability in the region and led to a dramatic turnaround in a previously hard line U.S. policy.

South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun was in North Korea for a three-day summit to meet with Kim Jong-Il to try to push the nuclear issue forward. This summit is only the second time leaders of the North and South have met since the Korean peninsula was divided after World War II.

The reclusive North has spent decades developing its nuclear program and no one outside the country knows for sure how much atomic material it has produced, or whether there are any other facilities it has yet to declare. While Yongbyon produced plutonium, the United States had previously accused the North of also running a secret program to develop highly enriched uranium.

The third and final disarmament phase to be implemented in early 2008 would require North Korea to surrender all its fissile material and nuclear weapons, which experts see as an ambitious task.

Canadians observing elections in Ukraine face harassment

Politician Gerard Kennedy, the former Ontario education minister, and a group of 18 Canadians in the Ukraine to observe national election got a taste of the country's "seedy underside" when they were shouted down and threatened by local officials after asking questions about inflated voter lists and other irregularities in voting procedures.

The Canadian observers were visiting an election centre in Mariupol, a southeastern coastal city, where ballots were being handed out on September 28 to polling stations in preparation for the September 30 vote.

Canadian observers asked a few questions about apparently 30% more ballots being handed out than necessary and about 8,000 duplicate names on voter lists.

"We did find some problems" with preparations for the vote, Mr. Kennedy said. "We found what we think is evidence of potential fraud, and we suffered some degree of intimidation in our observer duties, we think as a result." "Suddenly, some ... members were shouting at us, saying we had no right to be there," Kennedy told. "We started taking pictures, they started shouting at us even more and then they shut down the distribution of ballots and said that we were wrecking the election process and that they were going to get the police."

"Essentially, they said we were provocateurs and that we were there to disrupt the election. We think that was an overreaction by them because we interrupted them in the middle of some pretty suspicious doings," Kennedy said.

As the observers prepared to leave, two busloads of police arrived at the centre and several armed officers entered the area, in contravention of election rules.

A Ukrainian election expert accompanying the observer group was charged with interfering in an election but not detained. About 3,000 international observers were in the country to monitor its hotly contested election.

The final votes were counted on October 5, with pro-West blocs gathering enough votes to form a coalition government. The bloc led by Yulia Tymoshenko and President Viktor Yushchenko will have slightly more than half the seats in the parliament. Russian-leaning Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich's party won the largest share of the votes and could gain some cabinet posts.

As a result of the elections, five blocs made it to the Supreme Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, with the pro-Russian Party of Regions headed by Yanukovich leading with 34.32%. Its arch-rival, the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc, gained 30.71%, followed by the other Western-leaning bloc, the pro-presidential Our Ukraine - People's Self-Defense bloc, with 14.15%. Voter turnout in the election was 62.38%. Since none of the parties could claim a majority of 226 seats in the new 450-member parliament, consultations were underway to form a coalition government. The Tymoshenko bloc and the Our Ukraine - People's Self-Defense bloc - have confirmed their intentions to form a coalition.

Yushchenko had dismissed the parliament in April and called snap elections, accusing Yanukovich of "usurping power." The long-time political foes agreed on the September 30 elections following months of litigation and street rallies.

Afghanistan: Six Years of War

A peace process involving elements of the Taliban is the alternative to endless war

By Paul Rogers for Open Democracy (05/10/07)

Almost exactly six years ago, on 7 October 2001, the United States started the war to terminate the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. By mid-November the regime had disappeared from Kabul, and victory over an enemy which had harbored the al-Qaida movement responsible for the 11 September 2001 atrocities seemed complete.

Read more [here](#)...

Sources: Defense News, AP, Xinhua, ISN Security Watch, The Canadian Press, CBC News, AFP, Reuters, National Post, International Herald Tribune, Voice of America, RIA Novosti

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