

NATO: An Arc of Aggression

Rae Street

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Back in the 1990s, we in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and allies across the world had campaigned vigorously against NATO expansion. In those days, the chairman of the Expand NATO Committee in the US was one Bruce P. Jackson. He was also technical director of Lockheed Martin. It was a neat and massively profitable arrangement.

New members of the NATO club had to throw out their old Soviet military hardware and buy mainly US military hardware. All member states are required to have interoperability, so their pilots have to be able to handle the same warplanes and know how to fire the same bombs, including nuclear weapons.

While he was pushing for the expansion of NATO, Jackson, apparently a man of limitless energy, was also overseeing the work of the Project on Transitional Democracies and sat on the board of the Project for the New American Century. For the uninitiated, the latter advocated the expansion of the global US empire, backed by its vast military, which currently has bases in nearly every country in the world. NATO acts as a military arm of the US empire and, after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, it reinvented itself and it too became hell-bent on expansion. It succeeded in Europe thanks to a string of compliant governments. But the expansion of this 'North Atlantic' bloc isn't confined to Europe.

Joint exercises are carried out with Israel and alliances are being forged with Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Troops have been deployed in Afghanistan under the NATO banner.

The bloc also still holds a policy of so-called 'minimum' nuclear deterrence and first use of nuclear weapons.

Former defence secretary Geoff Hoon stated clearly in a parliamentary answer that Britain has a nuclear first-use policy because of its obligations to NATO.

NATO may claim a policy of 'minimum' nuclear deterrence, but this is pure spin. Britain's Trident nuclear-armed fleet is 'integrated' into NATO. Its four submarines based at Faslane, Scotland, wield over 1,000 times the killing power of the bomb at Hiroshima. The US Trident base at Bangor, just 20 miles from Seattle, was recently rebuilt to deploy the Trident D-5 missile system. Each of the 24 D-5 missiles on a US Trident submarine is capable of carrying eight 100 kiloton W-76 warheads or eight larger W-88 warheads, each of which has about 30 times the explosive force of the Hiroshima bomb.

But, for NATO, this isn't enough. Five US nuclear-armed bases form an arc sweeping from Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands to Incirlik in Turkey.

Meanwhile, the US missile defence project is already well under way. Washington has already planted "offence" bases at Fylingdales and Menwith Hill in Yorkshire. Now, it is busy pushing eastwards towards Russia, with bases in Poland and one planned for the Czech Republic, if the government can be bullied into submission.

All these developments were sanctioned by NATO this year at its Bucharest summit in April.

It is against this backdrop that the recent hostilities between Russia and Georgia have taken place. One could even cynically speculate whether the US hawks wanted anti-Russian feeling stirred in central Europe.

Worryingly, Foreign Secretary David Miliband has shown even stronger support for NATO and its expansion than his predecessors. He has already pledged to help Georgia and the Ukraine become NATO members and to help Georgia with 'interoperability'. This would mean that nuclear-ready NATO states would stretch right up to Russia's southern border.

It was said that Miliband's recent visit to the region was in order to build a 'coalition against Russian aggression'.

He has warned Russia about 'starting a new cold war'. Put into context, the reality is somewhat different.

Next April is the 60th anniversary of the founding of NATO. Its supremos are going to be celebrating, but peace activists from across Europe and north America are going to be uniting in opposition. Anti-NATO meetings have been held at the European Social Forum at Malmö, Sweden, in September.

Resistance is growing.



A child victim of NATO aggression, a 'presumed taleban', Emergency Hospital, Lashkar Gah, 2006.

The children don't moan when the tweezers remove the burnt skin from their bodies... their eyes follow the faces of nurses and doctors around them and they are looked after with real care. The editorial staff of Peacereporter in Milan let me know that there is no news about this attack in the 'civilised world'.

Every day, 'presumed talebans' from far away countries and settlements arrive... and nobody knows about them. It doesn't exist the counting of the dead. They don't get the NATO honours and apologies. They are regarded as 'accidents'. They are concealed in a criminal way by 'the big circus of information' which sends its correspondents to follow the tracks of this and that accidental vanished person, but doesn't make a move or even turn its face to report what happens every day in Afghanistan: dozens, hundreds of children... burnt alive by our humanitarian operation.

Maso Notarianni

What on earth is WRASSG?

Genny Bove interviews WRASSG Development Officer Peter Jones to find out more about the important work of this Wrexham voluntary organisation.

Background

Margaret Duggan writes in the *Church Times*:

When Wrexham... was designated one of the accommodation centres for asylum-seekers waiting to know if they would be permitted to stay in the UK, the local authority was reluctant to offer them support because of the comparatively few numbers in that town. So, six years ago, the Wrexham Refugee and Asylum Seekers Support Group (WRASSG) was set up... The volunteers were mostly drawn from the local churches and two drop-in centres were established. At any one time... there have been 60-80 asylum seekers living in the town who have been drawing a small government allowance which WRASSG has supplemented with food, clothes, and furniture.

Wrexham Refugee and Asylum Seekers Support Group does exactly what it says on the box – the group offers a range of informal support services to asylum seekers and refugees who find themselves in Wrexham, helping them settle, deal with the bureaucratic maze, and integrate with the local community.

Development Officer Peter Jones has been working part time at WRASSG for a year, his post funded by a grant from the Local Authority. A college lecturer and trade union activist with a background in race and equalities work, Peter spends much of his time raising awareness about the realities of life in Britain for asylum seekers and refugees, and exploding the myths which abound and which are encouraged by ignorant and bigoted media coverage.

When an asylum seeker first arrives in this country and asks for sanctuary here, they are typically sent to a detention centre on day 1, may be sent on to Cardiff on day 2 and could arrive here in Wrexham as early as the third day after their arrival in Britain. From the moment asylum seekers register with the authorities, they have little choice about what

happens to them. They are told where they must live – in private rented accommodation provided by the government – and they are not allowed to work, but can do some voluntary work. They are given a weekly allowance (£46 for a single person) which is just 70% of income support. They will remain in this situation until their case for asylum is heard, which can take years.

If an asylum seeker's case is successful, they will be granted refugee status, at which point they will immediately lose their accommodation. They get no extra points on council or housing association lists for being refugees; there is no queue-jumping; there are no free cars, taxis, shopping vouchers or mobile phones. Refugees, along with those who have failed asylum claims but who have been given leave to stay, can access education at college as 'home students', but there is a nationwide shortage of places on ESOL (English as a Second or Other Language) courses. Unlike asylum seekers, refugees are entitled to claim benefits. After years of enforced unemployment, most are keen to find work immediately, but often find themselves in a Catch 22 situation - they need a National Insurance number to get a job, but can't get one until a job is offered.

WRASSG will refer or signpost refugees and asylum seekers to statutory services as needed, and supports people informally in many different ways. WRASSG workers attend the weekly drop-in support sessions where, with funding provided by the Local Health Board, asylum seekers and refugees are also given fresh fruit and vegetables. Callers are welcome at the WRASSG office, where they are offered refreshments and an informal chat, and the opportunity to seek help with, well, almost anything. WRASSG staff and volunteers might accompany people to medical, legal or benefit appointments, assist with form-filling, look into the availability of college courses, advise people about other services, cover transport costs to solicitor appointments in other towns where

necessary (as there are no specialist immigration solicitors in Wrexham). The list goes on. When asylum seekers gain refugee status and have to find their own accommodation, the group can provide some really basic items of furniture, like a bed, and household essentials, such as a kettle. Funding has been earmarked to buy swimming tickets at the local baths – unable to work and with no spare money to pay for recreational activities, many asylum seekers find it difficult to keep occupied and keep fit.

WRASSG also works to identify new sources of help which could benefit numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in the area. College places are now accessible to more refugees and asylum seekers through an agreement with the organisation *Displaced Persons in Action*, which has recently agreed to cover course fees.

WRASSG offers briefings, training sessions and workshops to schools, organisations and businesses; these aim to inform, raise awareness, dispel myths and build community cohesion. This important part of the group's work is currently being developed in conjunction with other local organisations supporting migrant workers and gypsies.

I asked Peter what members of the local community could do to support the work of WRASSG.

We are always looking for volunteers to offer support in the office: to greet, chat with our visitors and make tea, to answer queries, help with phone calls and letters; also to help on trips out, at the drop-ins; to accompany refugees and asylum seekers to various appointments. An English conversation group has recently started at Wrexham Library on a Saturday afternoon, and volunteers are needed to help with this. We can offer training and expenses for volunteers. If you would like to find out more, please get in touch.

WRASSG can be contacted at:

**Trinity House, Trinity Street,
Wrexham LL11 1NL
Tel: 01978 357826
Email: wrasg@btconnect.com**