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## Allies Feel Strain of Afghan War

Troop Levels Among Issues Dividing U.S., NATO Countries

By Karen DeYoung  
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The U.S. plan to send an additional 3,200 Marines to troubled southern [Afghanistan](#) this spring reflects [the Pentagon's](#) belief that if it can't bully its recalcitrant [NATO](#) allies into sending more troops to the Afghan front, perhaps it can shame them into doing so, U.S. officials said.

But the immediate reaction to the proposed deployment from NATO partners fighting alongside U.S. forces was that it was about time the United States stepped up its own effort.

After more than six years of coalition warfare in Afghanistan, NATO is a bundle of frayed nerves and tension over nearly every aspect of the conflict, including troop levels and missions, reconstruction, anti-narcotics efforts, and even counterinsurgency strategy. Stress has grown along with casualties, domestic pressures and a sense that the war is not improving, according to a wide range of senior U.S. and NATO-member officials who agreed to discuss sensitive alliance issues on the condition of anonymity.

While Washington has long called for allies to send more forces, NATO countries involved in some of the fiercest fighting have complained that they are suffering the heaviest losses. The United States supplies about half of the 54,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, they say, but the British, Canadians and Dutch are engaged in regular combat in the volatile south.

"We have one-tenth of the troops and we do more fighting than you do," a Canadian official said of his country's 2,500 troops in [Kandahar province](#). "So do the Dutch." The Canadian death rate, proportional to the overall size of its force, is higher than that of U.S. troops in Afghanistan or [Iraq](#), a Canadian government analysis concluded last year.

British officials note that the eastern region, where most U.S. forces are based, is far quieter than the [Taliban](#)-saturated center of British operations in Helmand, the country's top opium-producing province. The American rejoinder, spoken only in private with references to British operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, is that superior U.S. skills have made it so.

NATO has long been divided between those with fighting forces in Afghanistan and those who have restricted their involvement to noncombat activities. Now, as the United States begins a slow drawdown from Iraq, the attention of even combat partners has turned toward whether more U.S. troops will be free to fight in the "forgotten" war in Afghanistan.

When Canadian Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier visited Washington late last month, he reminded Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) that [Canada's](#) Afghan mandate expires in January 2009. With most of the Canadian public opposed to a continued combat role, he said, it is not certain that [Ottawa](#) can sustain it.

Bernier's message was that his minority government could make a better case at home if the United States

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would boost its own efforts in Afghanistan, according to Canadian and U.S. officials familiar with the conversation.

"I don't think he expected an express commitment that day that they would draw down in Iraq and buttress in Afghanistan," the Canadian official said. "But he certainly registered Canadian interest and that of the allies involved."

According to opinion polls, Canadians feel they have done their bit in Afghanistan. Prime Minister [Stephen Harper](#) last fall named an independent commission to study options -- continuing the combat mission, redeploying to more peaceful regions, or withdrawing in January 2009. The commission report, due this month, will form the basis of an upcoming parliamentary debate.

With a Taliban offensive expected in the spring, along with another record opium poppy crop, the new Marines will deploy to the British area in Helmand and will be available to augment Canadian forces in neighboring [Kandahar](#).

[Both President Bush](#) and [Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates](#) have toned down their public pressure on allies. When German Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#) visited Bush at his [Texas](#) ranch in November, U.S. and German officials said, she told him that while Bonn would step up its contribution in quiet northern Afghanistan, any change in [Germany's](#) noncombat role would spell political disaster for her conservative government.

"It's not an excuse; it's simply reality -- coalition reality and domestic reality," a German official said. Merkel came away with Bush's pledge to praise Germany's efforts and stop criticizing.

Although Gates began a meeting of NATO defense ministers late last year by saying he would not let them "off the hook" for their responsibilities in Afghanistan, he said in a news conference at the end of the session that further public criticism was not productive.

Still, the [Defense Department](#) hopes that increasing its own contribution -- nearly half of an additional 7,500 troops Gates has said are needed in Afghanistan -- will encourage the allies. "As we're considering digging even deeper to make up for the shortfall in Afghanistan," Pentagon spokesman [Geoff Morrell](#) said, "we would expect our allies in the fight to do the same."

Many Europeans believe that the United States committed attention and resources to Iraq at Afghanistan's expense. But U.S. officials say the problems of NATO countries in Afghanistan have roots in not investing sufficiently in their militaries after the Cold War. Canada, U.S. officials say, needs [American military](#) airlift for its troops in Afghanistan because it got rid of a fleet of heavy lift helicopters.

At the same time that they want more from their partners, however, U.S. defense officials often disdain their abilities. No one, they insist, is as good at counterinsurgency as the U.S. military.

U.S. and British forces have long derided each other's counterinsurgency tactics. In Iraq, British commanders touted their successful "hearts and minds" efforts in [Northern Ireland](#), tried to replicate them in southern Iraq, and criticized more heavy-handed U.S. operations in the north. Their U.S. counterparts say they are tired of hearing about Northern Ireland and point out that British troops largely did not quell sectarian violence in the south.

The same tensions have emerged in Afghanistan, where U.S. officials criticized what one called a "colonial" attitude that kept the British from retaining control over areas wrested from the Taliban. Disagreement leaked out publicly early last year when British troops withdrew from the [Musa Qala](#) district of Helmand after striking a deal with local tribal leaders. The tribal chiefs quickly relinquished control to the Taliban.

[Britain](#), with a higher percentage of its forces deployed worldwide than the United States, is stretched thin in Afghanistan. Not only did the British have insufficient force strength to hold conquered territory, but the reconstruction and development assistance that was supposed to consolidate military gains did not arrive.

"It's worth reminding the Americans that the entire British army is smaller than the [U.S. Marine Corps](#)," said one sympathetic former U.S. commander in Afghanistan.

After 10 months of Taliban control, Musa Qala was retaken in December in combat involving British, Afghan and U.S. forces. The new Marine deployments will supplement British troops, and both sides insist they have calmed their differences. "Whatever may or may not have been said between the two in the past," said one British official, ". . . we are now in the same place."

Now, he said, "the much more interesting question is where do we go from here, and can we sustain a cautiously positive picture in Musa Qala" and elsewhere.

British officials hope that new deployments and stepped-up Afghan security training by the Marines will address one of Helmand's biggest problems -- the expansion of the opium crop. Opium provides income for the Taliban and is a major source of corruption within the Afghan police and government, yet the allies are divided on how to stop its production.

U.S. officials in Afghanistan, led by Ambassador William B. Wood, have insisted that the current strategy of manually destroying opium fields is ineffective and have pressed to begin aerial spraying of herbicide. Wood is a former ambassador to [Colombia](#), where the United States funds and operates the world's largest aerial effort to eradicate coca.

The British, in charge of NATO's anti-narcotics program in Afghanistan, strongly oppose spraying, as does Afghan President [Hamid Karzai](#), who last month formally ruled it out over U.S. objections. But the government's preferred method of manual eradication -- sending Afghan troops and police to pull poppy plants out of the ground -- has faltered because of poor security.

More important, programs to provide rural Afghans with alternative income sources remain underfunded and poorly coordinated. Each of NATO's regional Afghan commands operates its own provincial reconstruction teams, and scores of nongovernmental organizations work in the country. But with few exceptions -- such as Khost province under U.S. command in the east, where military and reconstruction resources are meshed -- they share no overriding strategy or operational rules.

The United States has pressed U.N. Secretary General [Ban Ki-moon](#) to appoint a high-level representative to coordinate non-military activities in Afghanistan. Karzai has resisted, and Ban is said to be worried about taking responsibility for what he sees as a worsening situation.

*Staff writers Thomas E. Ricks and Colum Lynch contributed to this report.*

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