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# Afghanistan: now you see me?: NATO strategy - building the comprehensive approach

## Report

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## NATO Strategy - Building the Comprehensive Approach

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**W**hether or not one believes that NATO's future is dependent upon the success of its ISAF mission in Afghanistan, it is clear that NATO's overwhelming priority in 2009 is to obtain more and better results from the massive effort in manpower and money that it has made in that country since 2003. Nothing succeeds like success but this is several years off in Afghanistan, given that this country is in a far worse state of destruction and dilapidation than anything the Alliance ever encountered in the Balkans. It has to be built, rather than rebuilt, and virtually from scratch. As the Allies already experienced in intervening in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, a real and lasting impact is only achieved when NATO leaders realise that there is no cheap, quick-fix solution and resolve to put the resources at NATO's disposal to do the job properly.



An early conclusion is that nothing happens without security and that it is difficult to do both security and reconstruction simultaneously in the hope that the one will have a positive impact on the other. In truth, as ISAF's experience has shown, security has to be countrywide and felt very much at the local level before any major and lasting reconstruction can go ahead. The local Afghans tend to prefer to sit on the fence and wait to see who will emerge as the clear winner. Although it will be unpalatable for those Allies who have branded their contribution to ISAF essentially in terms of reconstruction and development to acknowledge that the operation is increasingly concentrating on counter-insurgency and preventing Taliban infiltration from Pakistan, there really seems to be little choice if Kabul and the international community are to preserve all the progress of recent years in education, democracy building, women's rights and infrastructure refurbishment. Those nationalist Taliban elements who are not beholden to Al Qaeda will not give up the fight unless they are convinced they cannot succeed and the Afghan government is able to negotiate from a position of strength.

No one can contest that Afghanistan needs a civilian surge to help with governance, police reform, alternative livelihoods to poppy production and the like. Ultimate success, as elsewhere, depends on the military focus of peace building progressively giving way to civilian reconstruction and Afghan ownership of residual security tasks. But we are obviously far from this stage yet and moving prematurely to the civilian surge at the expense of deploying more US and NATO troops would be prejudicial to NATO's ultimate success. At this stage, it would not be fair to say that troop levels are adequate or that a civilian contribution has, pro rata, the equivalent value of an additional manoeuvre battalion, medivac helicopter or OMLT (the operational mentoring and liaison teams that train the Afghan National Army). Counter-insurgency experts frequently point out that NATO has far fewer forces in Afghanistan per head of the population than it ever had in the Balkans (the international aid per capita is also a fraction of the Balkans level). Moreover, around a hundred "caveats" or operational restrictions imposed by contributing nations limit the use to which the troops that are sent can be put, further fuelling debates about burden sharing and prompting the US Secretary

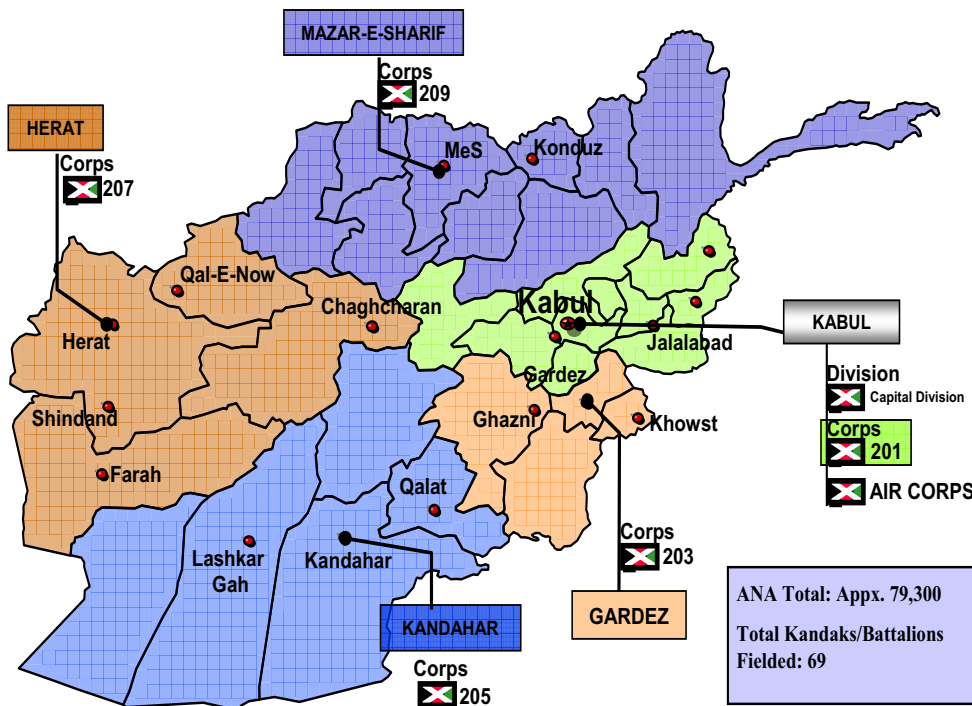


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of Defense Gates to warn of a “two tier Alliance”. At a time when the incoming Obama Administration is reviewing the overall Alliance strategy in Afghanistan and pledging to increase US troop levels by some 30,000 in 2009 alone, it will be difficult for the European Allies not to match this effort through additional force contributions of their own. The problem, in this regard, is that many Europeans, such as the UK, France and Poland, already surged their forces in 2008 under the Bush Administration, thereby not leaving them with much room for manoeuvre in 2009.

The problem in the long run for NATO is not, however, essentially one of military deployment, no matter how useful it would be for Allies to lift their caveats, find more enablers such as helicopters and engineering units and reorganize ISAF to be more of a theatre-wide task force and less an amalgam of national units more or less concentrated on their provincial bases of operations. The real problem is that success in Afghanistan is largely outside NATO’s control, even if it runs a text book military operation. Achieving security especially in the south will only be feasible if the other major institutions, such as the UN, the EU and the World Bank, accord Afghanistan the same priority as NATO currently does; and are ready and able to push ahead with governance and reconstruction as soon as the Alliance has stabilized the security environment. In the past it has proved easier for these other institutions to obtain contributions from NATO (for instance for the UN in Kashmir, or the EU in Bosnia for its EUFOR deployment) than vice-versa.

The “comprehensive approach” of major institutions and civilian and military players working closely together is now NATO’s official doctrine for all non-Article 5 missions, but contrary to NATO’s past experience with transformation, it has proved easier to postulate in theory than to implement in practice. Organizations prefer to coordinate than to be coordinated. The Afghan aid effort has been described by Richard Holbrooke as the most wasteful, duplicated and uncoordinated effort



**Afghan Army Forces - NATO expects total personnel to number 134,000 by the end of 2011.**

Source: [www.nato.int/isaf](http://www.nato.int/isaf), current as of 13/2/09

he has witnessed in a lifetime of dealing with internal conflicts. Moreover, the military and civilian cultures are still far apart, making coordination on the ground difficult. The experience of Afghanistan will undoubtedly lead over time to the US and other Allies investing more in civilian reconstruction expertise and rapid response civilian capabilities able to operate for long periods in dangerous areas. But this will take time as well as resources, leaving the comprehensive approach as a work in progress as far as the ISAF mission in Afghanistan is concerned. One of the most useful things that Barack Obama can do for NATO is not only to increase US forces in southern and eastern Afghanistan but also to use some of his international political capital to persuade Afghanistan and Pakistan to cooperate more closely on cross-border security and the UN, EU, World Bank and other actors to put Afghanistan higher up their priority list. This said, the willingness of the Allies to come together on Afghanistan in 2009 and to develop an effective counter-insurgency strategy together with Pakistan will go some way towards calming the internal situation within the Alliance.

### Major ISAF Force Contributors

United States	24,900
United Kingdom	8,300
Germany	3,460
Canada	2,830
France	2,780
Italy	2,350
Netherlands	1,770
Poland	1,590
Australia	1,090

Source: [www.nato.int/isaf](http://www.nato.int/isaf)

Of equal importance will be the willingness of the Allies to contribute extra forces on a temporary basis to secure the Afghan elections in August which are needed not only to lock in the democratic gains of 2003-4 but also to reinvigorate the political process in Afghanistan. Additional funds and equipment as well as trainers are also needed if NATO is to meet its goal of forming a robust Afghan National Army able to take over major security responsibilities within six years. Naturally it is not easy for Allies to countenance extra spending on two fronts at the same time – for more NATO troops as well as a larger ANA Trust Fund and training programme. But, as so often in the past, the willingness to spend more for a short period is the key to recouping savings and force reductions in the medium term.

Afghanistan will be a long and winding road but the urgent need is for the Allies to break the sense of deadlock and stalemate in the fight against the Taliban in the south, even if, as General Petraeus has pointed out, the security situation may get worse before it gets better. NATO publics will not stay the course unless they sense that NATO has turned the strategic corner against the Taliban. A clear publicly articulated strategy based on realistic and attainable objectives and a clearly articulated political framework to reconcile Afghans will be key to this objective. The US in particular will need to hear from the Europeans that they are in Afghanistan because preventing the re-emergence of Al Qaeda's training camps is in their fundamental security interest as well. Too frequently the Europeans imply that they are in Afghanistan first and foremost to prove their loyalty to NATO and the Americans. Solidarity is a fine thing, but NATO operations that are based more on a sense of mutual obligation rather than on shared threats and security interests are unlikely to be successful.