

Hollande's pledge to withdraw French troops from Afghanistan is not as significant as it may seem.

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Last month new French President François Hollande announced that French troops in Afghanistan would be withdrawn by the end of 2012, instead of 2013 as was previously planned. [Jocelyn Mawdsley](#) argues that logistics and other commitments mean that France will likely continue to have a presence in Afghanistan, and that despite the decision, any major change in France's relationship with NATO seems unlikely.



President Hollande's confirmation at the NATO Chicago summit last month, that he is to speed up the withdrawal of French troops from Afghanistan in line with his campaign pledge, has been criticised for damaging NATO coherence and solidarity. Some commentators and journalists suggested that it was a sign of a changed French policy towards NATO. The reality is rather different. The French position has softened following the recognition of logistical difficulties and they have stated that they will fulfil their NATO commitments on training Afghan soldiers and police.

France currently has 3,400 troops and 150 gendarmes in Afghanistan mainly based in Kabul, Kapisa, Surobi and at the Kandahar airbase. They represent the fifth largest national contingent. The majority are based in Kapisa and Surobi. The French involvement in Afghanistan became an issue in the presidential election campaign, which was largely fought on domestic and EU issues rather than foreign and security policy, after two incidents in December 2011 and January 2012, when French soldiers were killed by Afghan soldiers. The French withdrawal will pose a particular problem for NATO, if the situation in Kapisa is not stable enough for control to be handed over to the Afghans, as in that case it is likely that US forces would have to step in. There is also the worry that the French action might encourage other states to try and speed up the withdrawal of their forces. However, the Canadians and Dutch have also already withdrawn their forces unilaterally without this domino effect occurring. Hollande's insistence that this was a sovereign decision for France alone to make, irritated some NATO leaders, notably Germany's Angela Merkel, but the NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was quick to downplay the significance of the French decision.



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Rhetoric versus Reality

It is true that in reality the French decision is less significant than it first seemed. Hollande's initial campaign promise to withdraw all troops by the end of 2012, instead of 2013 as planned by Sarkozy in response to growing French disillusionment with the war, was logistically impossible. With the closure to ISAF forces of the major land supply routes out of Afghanistan by Pakistan in November 2011 (following a US attack that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers), NATO has been forced to use a more costly land route to the North. Airlift is also in short supply as the French are not the only country gradually withdrawing troops and equipment, and the

French could not abandon equipment in Afghanistan as some of it is new and militarily important. The campaign pledge has therefore been amended to commit to the withdrawal of all combat troops by the end of 2012, which may not in reality, if (as many expect) the withdrawal is delayed through logistical problems, be much faster than the timetable announced by Sarkozy.

The current plan therefore is to withdraw 2,000 combat troops by the end of 2012, leaving 1,400 to assist with the training of the Afghan police and military and to assist with the logistics of repatriating the French equipment. This compromise has been criticised as dangerous by former Defence Minister Alliot-Marie, among others from the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) political party, as it is not clear who will be protecting these troops, if no further combat missions are to be undertaken. Meanwhile critics on the left claim that the controversial engagement in Afghanistan will continue, contrary to Hollande's promises, as commitments to continued military and police training between 2012 and 2016 were made in the 2012 Franco-Afghan Friendship and Cooperation Treaty, which Hollande intends to honour.

Little change likely to France's relationship with NATO

Does this decision mark a step-change in France's policy towards NATO? The Socialists were initially opposed to Sarkozy's reintegration of France into NATO's military command structure. However, most French commentators think it is unlikely that Hollande will reverse that decision. A report from the Cour de Comptes (Court of Auditors) evaluating the costs and benefits of the French reintegration is expected in mid June, but it is thought unlikely to recommend withdrawal. The French defence minister, Jean-Yves le Drian, has also signaled that the major pillars of current French defence policy are unlikely to change radically although the Hollande government is thought to be more optimistic about reviving the ailing EU Common Security and Defence Policy than their predecessors were.

During the election campaign, it seemed that one area of clear difference between Sarkozy and Hollande was on missile defence, about which Hollande seemed more sceptical. However, at the NATO summit in Chicago in May 2012, he seemed supportive claiming the plans offered opportunities for French business and should not worry anyone. It seems in fact that Hollande may be able to act as a useful mediator between Russia and NATO on the issue. On other NATO key issues such as Smart Defence, Iran and Syria, there is little difference between French and US positions. Nevertheless, Hollande is not an instinctive Atlanticist, unlike Nicolas Sarkozy, and unknowns like the outcome of the US presidential elections will be important in determining how the relationship will develop.

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