

# Britain: Open divisions emerge between army chiefs and Blair government

Chris Marsden  
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Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision that the UK will assume the leadership of a multi-national security force in Afghanistan has sparked an unprecedented public row with British army chiefs.

On December 20, the United Nations agreed the deployment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Afghanistan. The US has overall control of the mission, while Britain has "operational command," with the promise of American assistance in an emergency. An advance force of 50 Royal Marines has already been dispatched to Kabul and will eventually be joined by up to 1,500 British troops.

In total, the force could grow to between 3,000 and 5,000 by January, with troops possibly coming from France, Germany, Spain, Argentina, Italy, New Zealand, Canada, Turkey, Jordan, Malaysia and the Czech Republic. However, major disagreements remain between the US and Europe over who should lead the force, its remit and size, while the Northern Alliance, which heads the Afghanistan interim administration the ISAF is supposed to protect, can barely conceal its hostility towards the presence of any foreign army in the country.

Britain has become the nodal point for these international hostilities, with sections of the British military and political establishment rounding on Blair.

On December 16, the *Sunday Times* cited the warnings made by "senior officers" that Blair may "have to withdraw troops from other trouble-spots, such as Macedonia and Sierra Leone, if he presses ahead with plans to provide the bulk of a 6,000-strong international force in Afghanistan." The paper states that the chiefs of staff, Britain's most senior military commanders, had put forward an alternative proposal, limiting British personnel in Afghanistan to about 1,000.

The *Times* cited an unnamed "high-ranking figure" as saying, "It's made wonderful pictures for the spin people at No 10, with Blair standing in a war zone surrounded by British soldiers, but it's unfair and unnecessary. Someone else could do it and there are plenty of people who would... I

don't doubt that his intentions on the grand scale are honourable, but it smacks of glory-hunting."

According to the *Times*, the chiefs of staff had the support of Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, chief of the defence staff and overall head of the armed forces.

Such overt criticism of Blair by the military top brass is unprecedented. Though there are no constitutional grounds preventing army leaders making political statements, to do so goes against the traditional relationship between an elected government and the military high command, and would normally mean heads having to roll.

Criticism of the government has also come from retired senior military figures in the House of Lords. Former defence chief of staff Lord Guthrie suggested that Britain might be taking on too much by deploying large numbers of troops into the troubled country. Field Marshal Lord Inge, Field Marshal Lord Bramall, and RAF Marshal Lord Craig supported him during a December 17 debate in the Lords.

The dispute is not simply about the army being overstretched. Rather, Blair is under sustained fire because of his pro-US stance, with many sections of the military and political establishment believing that he is sacrificing Britain's independent interests in Central Asia and the oil-rich Middle East, where giant corporations such as British Petroleum and Royal Dutch Shell have massive investments. There are also fears that US military action could threaten regional stability in the Middle East, and that Britain is being cut off from its European allies at a time when powerful sections of the ruling elite are demanding closer integration into the continent's economic and political structures.

On December 13, Admiral Boyce gave a speech to the Royal United Services Institute, London, where he implicitly criticised the government for too closely following US initiatives in Afghanistan.

"The world," he warned, "cannot afford non-states, black-hole states or failed states, because such states breed terrorism. Therefore we have to attack the causes, not the symptoms, of terrorism. Both the UK and US wish to promote regional stability, but our perspectives of global and

regional stability have been distorted by the focus on fighting terrorism. We have to consider whether we wish to follow the US's single-minded aim to finish Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda or to involve ourselves in creating the conditions for nation-building or reconstruction as well. The US sees national assistance for Afghanistan as a general long-term, rather than short-term, goal," Boyce said, contrasting this with the UK's "particular strengths in facilitating the nation-building process" as evinced in its previous efforts in "Malaya and Northern Ireland" to win the battle of "hearts-and-minds".

Divisions are apparent even within Blair's cabinet. International Development Secretary Claire Short and former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, who is now Leader of the House, are both critical of the government. They were joined last week by Mark Seddon, Labour National Executive Committee member and editor of *Tribune*, who wrote a December 18 op-ed column for the *Guardian* urging Blair not to continue "Clearing up America's Mess".

He complained, "In the Middle East, any notion of a separate British interest has been subordinated to unquestioning support for US actions in Afghanistan". With the Pentagon eyeing "potential new targets in Somalia and Iraq", he insisted, "Now should be the time to put down a marker against the Washington hawks."

Blair hoped that by being the foremost supporter of President Bush's war on terrorism, he could win the ear of Washington and use this to Britain's advantage in the Middle East and Europe. The problem is, however, that the US insists that it alone dictates events in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Whereas Blair tries to portray himself as America's strategic ally, he is only tolerated to the extent that he toes the US line and imposes Washington's dictates on the increasingly fractious European allies.

British Major-General John McColl may be the first ISAF commander in Kabul, and the UK will provide much of the initial headquarters and staff elements, but US General Tommy Franks, who heads the US Central Command, is in overall charge.

At last weekend's European Union (EU) summit in Laeken, Belgium, the European powers again tried to assert their independence from the US. Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel claimed the ISAF was a European force and represented "a turning point in the history of the EU."

Blair rubbished this suggestion, insisting the ISAF was under overall US command. He also quashed a bid by his EU partners to warn the US against extending the Afghan war, insisting on changes to a draft declaration that cautioned the US to seek the "approval of the international community... prior to any geographical extension of those [Afghan] operations."

As late as December 20, Germany was still opposing US command and control of the ISAF and objecting to Britain's proposal to link the UN operation with the continuing US military campaign. At a NATO meeting in Brussels, German Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping said that there had to be a strict separation of the two operations. Senior government sources said that Germany might not take part in the ISAF unless it was satisfied with the command arrangements. Peter Struck of the ruling Social Democrats, bluntly told German TV, "We don't want the German troops to come under the command of the Americans."

In the end, Blair won the day; with agreement that the ISAF—which will be lightly armed, and will need US backup if it gets into trouble or needs to evacuate rapidly—would be subordinate to the US politically and militarily.

In the process, Blair has conflicted with the other European powers and has angered his own party and the army chiefs. Britain is now leading an operation on the ground that could prove to be a disaster and result in major casualties. The UN resolution called upon the Northern Alliance to withdraw its troops from Kabul, but Afghanistan's Interim Defence Minister Mohammed Fahim has refused to do so. Opposing the powers granted by the UN mandate to the ISAF, Fahim said that foreign troops would have no authority to disarm belligerents, interfere in Afghan affairs or use force, and should be limited to 1,000 personnel. "They are here because they want to be, but they are here as a symbol," he warned. Afghanistan's new leader, Hamid Karzai, said the international force should leave "as soon as we have the protection of our borders, of our country and a government chosen by the Afghan people."



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