

European powers refuse to send more troops to Afghanistan

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Bitterness and general rancour characterise the relations within NATO one week after its senior military commander called for 2,500 reinforcements to be urgently dispatched to assist the 8,000 British, Canadian and Dutch troops caught up in savage combat in Afghanistan's southern provinces. In the face of dire warnings that the NATO-led occupation risks losing ground before a resurgence of support for the former Taliban regime, the major European members of the alliance have refused to send a single soldier.

As a top-level meeting on Wednesday at the NATO headquarters in the Belgian city of Mons, the US made clear that it expected countries such as Germany, France, Italy and Spain to provide the extra troops.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, on a visit to Canada, lectured NATO on Tuesday that an "Afghanistan that does not complete its democratic evolution and become a stable terror-fighting state is going to come back to haunt us. It will haunt our successors and their successors". The US ambassador to NATO, Victoria Nuland, declared that "the issue here is the fighting capacity and the fighting willingness of all allies".

As far as the Bush administration is concerned, subduing the Afghan people and propping up a pro-US regime in Kabul is now the problem of its European allies, and the price they must pay for good relations with Washington. The US military is stretched to the limit by the number of personnel it has been forced to keep in Iraq and the preparations it has been ordered to make for action against Iran.

In July, the US ceded responsibility for all southern Afghanistan to the NATO-led International Stabilisation Assistance Force (ISAF), which, until now, has largely performed policing operations in relatively stable parts of the country. While the US retains control over key strategic locations such as the airbase at Bagram, there are now only 19,000 American troops in Afghanistan and the number will be reduced to just 16,000 by the end of the year.

The Blair government, in exchange for an agreement with Washington to steadily reduce its troop numbers in Iraq, volunteered to provide 5,400 British troops and the core combat component for an expanded 20,000-strong NATO-ISAF force.

The fighting in Afghanistan, however, has proven far worse than the British military anticipated. An officer serving in

Helmand province told the British *Independent*: "We did not expect the ferocity of the engagements. We also expected the Taliban to carry out hit-and-run raids. Instead, we have often been fighting toe-to-toe, endless close-quarter combat. We have greater firepower so we tend to win [but] you also have to think that each time we kill one, how many more enemies we are creating."

Another soldier said: "We are flattening places we have already flattened but the attacks keep coming. We have killed them by the dozens, but more keep coming... Almost any movement on the ground gets ambushed. We need an entire battle group to move things."

While the British forces urgently require reinforcements, sending them from Britain is both logistically and politically difficult. Some 7,000 British troops are still in Iraq. The casualties suffered in Afghanistan over the past several months, including 14 killed in a plane crash on September 2, have fueled the intense domestic opposition that exists toward both neo-colonial operations and added to the ructions within the ruling Labour Party against Blair. A BBC poll this week revealed that 52 percent of respondents wanted all British forces withdrawn from Afghanistan as well as Iraq.

Speaking to journalists in London on Tuesday, Blair made a desperate appeal for the other European powers to come to his aid. It was important, he declared, "that the whole of NATO regard this [Afghanistan] as their responsibility. NATO is looking at what further requirements there are and NATO countries have got a duty to respond to that". Reflecting the pressure coming from Washington and London, NATO secretary-general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer publicly begged on the eve of the NATO conference for "alliance solidarity because some nations are carrying more of the burden than others".

The response in Europe was the diplomatic equivalent of a closed fist and extended middle finger. Following hours of talks on Wednesday, a stony-faced NATO spokesman, James Appathurai, told a press conference that "no formal offers [of troops] were made at the table".

Spain bluntly declared that the 690 troops it had in the country were "more than sufficient". France, Germany, Italy and Turkey said their commitment of forces to the UN operation in southern Lebanon meant they had no troops

available. Germany, which has a military of over 200,000, also refused to redeploy any of the 2,900 German soldiers stationed in Kabul to the fighting in southern Afghanistan. Like Blair, all the European leaders fear the political consequences at home of mounting casualties in Afghanistan.

The desperation produced by the impasse at the NATO conference is reflected in efforts to find additional troops from eastern European states. On Thursday, the Polish government announced it would send 900, but not until February and only for operations in the US-controlled eastern provinces of the country.

According to the *Financial Times*, NATO officials even approached Serbia, which was subjected to a massive NATO bombardment just seven years ago. The calculations were obviously that the Serbian government could be bullied into providing cannon fodder for Afghanistan in exchange for talks on entry into the European Union. Belgrade, however, announced that its contribution would consist of just five specialists in airport security.

NATO spokesman James Appathurai sought to put the best possible face on the disarray within the alliance by declaring that a major offensive to destroy Taliban forces in Kandahar province, Operation Medusa, was “going well” and had achieved “two-thirds of the objective”. An ISAF press statement on Wednesday reported that over 500 Taliban had been slaughtered and a number of towns and villages brought back under the control of the occupation forces.

A report was also leaked to the Australian media claiming that Australian Special Air Service troops had killed over 150 Taliban in a nine-day operation during July in the nearby Uruzgan province. British forces claim to have killed hundreds in Helmand as well.

The use of such body counts to measure success, however, simply underscores one of the main condemnations that the European think tank Senlis made of US and NATO policies in Afghanistan in a report this month. Based on research and interviews in Afghanistan, Senlis found that the “heavy-handed tactics the international military forces have utilised... have led to severe disillusionment with the international community, and a widespread and deepening distrust of the western world.”

Afghans, Senlis noted, “describe the initial promises of stability, reconstruction and development as lies” and “believe their everyday lives have become worse since the arrival of the international military coalitions in the country”. Five years of brutal counter-insurgency operations against ethnic Pashtun towns and villages in southern and eastern Afghanistan have created a mass resistance movement, which is able to use safe-havens across the border in Pakistan.

Far from the mass killing of Taliban fighters weakening the resistance, there is every reason to anticipate that the fighting will intensify in the coming period. Over the next month, the harsh Afghan winter will begin to set in, making US and NATO operations in the mountainous border regions difficult,

if not impossible. The Taliban will have time to regroup, resupply and recruit. They will be assisted by the truce that has been announced between the Pakistani government and the Pakistani Pashtun border tribes who have been assisting the Taliban. Five years of a virtual civil war in the border regions has cost the Pakistani military 375 dead and generated mass discontent against the regime of Pervez Musharraf. Under the terms of a ceasefire, which would more accurately be described as a surrender by the Pakistani government, all 70,000 Pakistani troops that have been attempting to stop the cross-border movement of Afghan fighters are being withdrawn from the region.

With their refusal to send troops, the European powers have sent a signal to the Bush administration that they are not prepared to become further embroiled in an escalating and increasingly bloody guerilla war from which they will gain nothing. The invasion of Afghanistan was, from the outset, intended to position the US to exert its geo-political dominance over the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, which sit on top of some of the largest oil reserves outside the Middle East. The US military presence in Afghanistan has been used by Washington as a strategic counterweight to the influence of other powers in the region, such as Russia, China and the EU itself.

The potential for a rift over Afghanistan to provoke open tensions between the US and Europe is already being discussed. The *Financial Times* editorialised today that “NATO’s credibility rides on success” in Afghanistan. “Should the alliance fail,” the newspaper warned, “the US is likely to turn instead to ‘coalitions of the willing’ for future endeavours”. In the long-term, the survival of the NATO alliance itself is in question.



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