

Rice and Miliband visit Afghanistan as US demands more European troops

Harvey Thompson
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US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and British Foreign Secretary David Miliband arrived in Afghanistan February 7 on an unannounced visit aimed at publicizing the military support of the two main occupation powers for the regime of President Hamid Karzai.

The visit comes after Rice, Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Miliband met in London in a public show of support aimed at applying pressure on NATO countries—especially Germany and France—to send more combat troops to the volatile southern regions of Afghanistan. Speaking after the meeting, Rice said, “I do think the alliance is facing a real test here. Our populations need to understand this is not a peacekeeping mission.... This is a different fight from what NATO was structured to do.”

The backdrop to these events was an announcement by Britain that it would be sending 600 additional troops to Afghanistan, bringing the total number of UK troops there to around 7,800. Defence officials have reported that all three regular battalions of the UK Parachute Regiment will provide the main support of the 16 Air Assault Brigade when it takes over in April from the existing UK infantry brigade currently based in Helmand province, Southern Afghanistan. Pressure on the army has meant the brigade has had to scavenge troops from other regiments to fill manpower gaps. It is believed to be the first time so many paratroopers have been sent on a joint combat mission since World War II.

A significant contingent of the newly deployed British troops could be sent to the town of Musa Qala in Helmand province, which was recaptured from the Taliban in December but remains in a precarious position.

The Rice-Miliband visit to Afghanistan coincided with a meeting of NATO defence ministers in Vilnius, Lithuania, which was dominated by the mounting crisis in Afghanistan.

Against a background of transatlantic recrimination over

troop contributions to Afghanistan and where to deploy them, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, speaking during a Senate hearing on Pentagon spending plans, said, “I worry a great deal about the alliance evolving into a two-tiered alliance, in which you have some allies willing to fight and die to protect people’s security, and others who are not.... And I think that it puts a cloud over the future of the alliance, if this is to endure and perhaps even get worse. There are allies that are doing their part and are doing well. The Canadians, the British, the Australians, the Dutch, the Danes are really out there on the line and fighting, but there are a number of others that are not.”

Gates had earlier said that he had yet to receive any replies from a letter he had sent to all defence ministers in NATO asking them to contribute more troops and equipment to Afghanistan. “I’ve been working this problem pretty steadfastly for many months at this point, and I would say that I am not particularly optimistic,” Gates told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

These and other comments indicate a number of serious fault lines opening up in the military alliance over Afghanistan, as the US, aided in particular by its junior partner Britain, seeks to push the other European powers further into the Afghan quagmire than they wish to go.

In the past few weeks; the Dutch government called in the US ambassador for a dressing down after Gates bluntly said the Europeans were no good at counterinsurgency. Gates seemed to have retreated, but then wrote a stern letter to Berlin demanding that German soldiers put their lives on the line in combat in the dangerous South instead of enjoying the relatively comfortable conditions of the North.

An angry German response followed. German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Germany’s limited mandate was “not up for discussion.” The former German foreign minister and leading member of the Green Party, Joschka Fischer, however, signalled a warmer response

amongst official opinion that also includes two former *Bundeswehr* generals.

Meanwhile, Canada warned NATO that it might pull out of Afghanistan by 2009 unless other countries deployed more troops to the areas experiencing the heaviest fighting.

There have also been criticisms of British military policy in Afghanistan by at least two US generals. Britain's role in Afghanistan was also openly criticised for the first time by Karzai, just before he vetoed the expected appointment of the former British MP and paratrooper, Lord Paddy Ashdown, to the position of UN envoy to Afghanistan. Some commentators have pointed out that this may be part electioneering, as Karzai needs to shrug off his image as a Western puppet before elections due next year.

Writing in the *Guardian* newspaper ("The war that can bring neither peace nor freedom"), Seumas Milne offered this analysis on Karzai's present position: "Karzai was, after all, installed by the US after the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 and subsequently confirmed in bogus US-orchestrated elections three years later. If even someone regarded as a US-British stooge, whose writ famously barely runs outside Kabul, is reduced to protesting in public that his western protectors are doing more harm than good, that not only makes a mockery of the idea that Afghanistan is an independent state. It also strongly suggests this is a man who recognises that the occupation forces may not be around indefinitely—and he may have to come to more serious terms with the local forces that will."

A senior NATO diplomat said in Vilnius, "Events in Afghanistan have become a motor for the transformation of the alliance."

Victoria Nuland, the US ambassador to NATO, commenting on the recent Pentagon decision to send a further 3,200 US Marines to Afghanistan, said, "We will again challenge our allies to match us soldier for soldier, euro for dollar."

Daniel Korski of the European Council on Foreign Relations, said, "The Anglo-American strategy in Afghanistan has hit an absolute low mark. If European countries are unwilling to send more troops, trainers and civilians to the Afghan mission, then the US needs to do so itself. To halt a spring offensive by the Taliban, more than 10,000 extra troops would be needed. It's now a question of surge or succumb."

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said the failure of NATO's mission in Afghanistan could

result in terror attacks in Western countries. Speaking ahead of the Vilnius meeting, and echoing comments made earlier by Rice, he told the BBC, "This is the front line in the fight against terrorism, and what is happening in the Hindu Kush matters, because if terrorism is not dealt with in Afghanistan, the consequences will be felt not just in Afghanistan and the region, but also in London, Brussels and Amsterdam."

US President George Bush is to meet with Scheffer on February 29.

Despite the joint photo-shoots and public shows of unity over the past few days, it is clear that there is a growing swell of tensions threatening to erupt amongst the major powers over Afghanistan. The worsening situation for the occupation forces is the main driving force behind these tensions. To give just one indication of the changes since the initial US-led invasion, between 2001 and 2005 there were just five suicide bombings across Afghanistan; in 2007 there were 140.

In the period immediately following the 2001 US-led invasion, the faked pretext of redressing the atrocities perpetrated in New York on September 11 of that year and the rapid overthrow of the universally discredited Taliban regime served to mask the differences between the imperialist powers occupying Afghanistan. Rice sought again to revive this deception during her recent visit to London, declaring, "A failed state of Afghanistan brought us the worst terrorist attack in the United States in our history."

Today it is a changed situation. The invasion of Afghanistan by the US was always about the assertion of America's geopolitical interests in the central Asian region and its strategic control of land and resources. A share of that control was also the reason for the participation of the lesser powers such as Britain.

The major European powers, however, are not simply prepared to bow to demands to rush to the Bush administration's aid as a result of the failure of its efforts to stabilise Afghanistan and secure its control without gaining influence for themselves. It is based on such calculations that France is reportedly considering sending troops to fight in Southern Afghanistan's Kandahar province.



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