

France considers sending more troops to Afghanistan

Kumaran Ira
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On February 26, French daily *Le Monde* published a report suggesting that Paris is considering the deployment of hundreds of additional troops outside Kabul in Afghanistan.

According to *Le Monde*, the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy is developing a new French policy on Afghanistan. “Deployment of troops would be to zones of potentially fierce fighting, preferably the eastern region of Afghanistan close to the tribal areas of Pakistan, to combat Al Qaeda militants,” the paper reported. Sarkozy’s spokesman David Martinon declined to confirm or deny the report. He told Reuters, “The president has not made a decision. We are in discussion with our partners inside NATO, but not exclusively.”

Sarkozy’s decision to dispatch more troops, especially to the areas where anti-occupation fighting is the fiercest, would represent a significant shift in French foreign policy. During his one-day visit to Afghanistan on December 22 of last year, Sarkozy did not commit himself to more involvement of French troops, though he emphasised France’s long-term political and military presence there. The report coincides with demands by the US government, which has intensified pressure on European allies to send more troops to the volatile southern regions of Afghanistan and has criticised its allies for failing to support the Afghan mission.

Since the US-led occupation began in 2001, US and NATO forces have been facing growing popular opposition. The growing insurgency against occupation forces has intensified especially in the south. The occupation forces have been suffering the heaviest losses of the war recently. So far, the US, Canada, Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark and Romania have deployed troops in the southern region. These countries

have asked other European allies to send more troops into this region or to allow their forces in the relatively safer northern and western areas of Afghanistan to be moved south.

In early February, Canada—which has 2,500 troops in Afghanistan’s volatile southern Kandahar province—warned NATO that it would bring its troops home at the end of their current mandate in February 2009, unless NATO allies deployed more troops to the areas where the fighting is the fiercest. Meantime, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper contacted Sarkozy to request reinforcements of soldiers and materiel if Canada is to remain in Afghanistan. “The deployment of additional French troops to eastern Afghanistan would permit American troops there to move to Kandahar province to fight alongside the Canadians,” *Le Monde* noted.

At a NATO defence ministers’ meeting in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, in early February, the US and other nations with troops in the Afghan south called for other NATO countries to send more troops to that region. At the end of January, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates sent a letter to NATO allies, particularly Germany and France, demanding more commitment of troop deployment and military equipment to southern Afghanistan.

Germany, which has some 3,200 soldiers deployed in relatively peaceful northern Afghanistan, has been reluctant to do so, because two thirds of the German population oppose the German military mission in Afghanistan. France has not yet committed itself to more deployment of troops, reacting in the same fashion as Germany.

France currently has about 1,600 troops in Afghanistan as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), most of them

deployed around the capital Kabul. In the wake of 9/11, France offered its military resources and capabilities to support the US-led military campaign, Operation Enduring Freedom. French fighter aircraft regularly offer close air support to ISAF ground troops.

France participates in the operational training of the Afghan National Army. In eastern Afghanistan, France deployed four teams of special French Military instructors (Operational Mentoring Liaison Teams, OMLT), each consisting of 50 soldiers inserted into units of the Afghan army. France has also sent more combat aircraft to Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. Last month, two multi-purpose Rafale fighter jets returned to Kandahar Air Base to support ISAF troops against insurgents.

At the NATO defence ministers' meeting, French Defence Minister Hervé Morin confirmed that Paris is considering a greater role in Afghanistan. He declined to give details but suggested that President Sarkozy could announce a change in French policy at an April NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania.

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer met for the first time in Paris with Sarkozy on February 1. Scheffer told a press conference: "I can't say that [Sarkozy] gave me definite assurances, but the impression I had after the talks...and the indications I received suggest that France might well take on more responsibilities in Afghanistan, but of course it's the French government's decision."

France is taking over the rotating presidency of the European Union in July. The US has urged France to use its presidency to boost Europe's defences by increasing military spending and investment in hardware and troop levels, so that the US's EU allies can play a greater military role in the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq.

French imperialism has considerable interests in Southwest Asia. Its energy firms play a major role in regional pipeline politics, and its corporations are pursuing lucrative defence and infrastructure contracts. While it is to a certain extent in competition with the US, a US defeat in Iraq and Afghanistan would unleash social forces that would threaten its own interests in the area.

Since his election in May, Sarkozy has taken a more pro-American stance on a range of international issues. He has pledged his support to the US-led occupation

both in Afghanistan and Iraq and the "war on terror." He has adopted the tough US line against Iran's nuclear programme. During his visit to the US last November, Sarkozy pledged that France "will remain engaged in Afghanistan for as long as it takes, because what is at stake in that country is the very future of our values and that of the Atlantic alliance."

In a September 2007 interview with the *New York Times*, Sarkozy said that France was ready to rejoin NATO's military command structure—from which it had been absent since President Charles de Gaulle's 1966 decision to leave NATO, as part of his plan for France to adopt an independent defence policy. Sarkozy's decision was warmly welcomed by the US.

Sarkozy has lined up behind the Bush administration's claim that Iran represents a nuclear menace that must be countered by tougher sanctions and the possible use of military force. Bernard Kouchner, the French foreign minister, came out last fall in favour of a military attack on Iran "if negotiations fail."

Early this year, France announced the establishment of its first-ever permanent military base close to Iran's coastline, which will be set up by 2009 in the Persian Gulf region. The French military has just conducted a two-week joint military exercise—Gulf Shield 01—along with United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar troops. The exercises took place on UAE territory and in international waters near the Strait of Hormuz, through which more than a third of global oil shipments pass. The exercises involved 1,500 French, 2,500 UAE, and 1,300 Qatari troops operating on land, at sea, and in the air. Around half a dozen warships, 40 aircraft, and dozens of armoured vehicles were involved.

The base will give France its first permanent presence in this region and is a further provocative action against Tehran. Iran criticised the establishment of a French base as an unfriendly move. "We believe such a presence is not conducive to peace and security in the region," said Mohammad Ali Hosseini, the Iranian foreign ministry spokesman.



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