

Afghanistan: Upping the Ante

By Jim Lobe | February 1, 2007

While most national and international observers focus their attention on plans by the Bush administration to increase the number of U.S. troops in Iraq, President George W. Bush is also calling for a sharp increase in Washington's economic and military commitment to Afghanistan.

At a ministerial meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Brussels last Friday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that Bush will ask Congress to approve \$10.6 billion in aid for Afghanistan over the next two years, most of it in military assistance and training.

That compares to a total of some \$14 billion that Washington has spent on economic and military aid in Afghanistan since it led the military campaign that ousted the Taliban regime in late 2001 more than five years ago.

In addition, the administration has decided to officially boost U.S. forces in Afghanistan to a record 24,000 troops by delaying the departure of a 3,500-unit combat brigade that had been scheduled to return home next week. Of the 24,000, about half operate as part of a 34,000-troop NATO peacekeeping force; the rest operate under separate U.S. command.

The increased commitment, which was confirmed just one week after Washington's new defense secretary, Robert Gates, made his first trip to Afghanistan, comes as Washington and its NATO allies are bracing for what is expected to be a major offensive in Afghanistan's predominantly Pashtun south and southeast by as many as 15,000 Taliban insurgents this spring.

It also reflects growing concern about increasing disillusionment with the government of President Hamid Karzai, both with respect to corruption and the failure so far to promote economic reconstruction, particularly in the Pashtun regions.

While Karzai himself remains quite popular throughout Afghanistan, as the resurgent Taliban has created a sense of insecurity, pessimism regarding the country's future has risen sharply over the last year, according to recent public opinion polls. "In Kabul today, most Afghans, from illiterate cooks to well-educated civil servants, take it for granted that the Taliban are coming back to power,"

wrote Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist and veteran Afghanistan observer in the January issue of *Current History*.

"Afghans speak of yet another American betrayal, trading theories on why the United States and the international community have not been serious about combating the Taliban insurgency, stemming the flow of jihadists out of Pakistan, or devoting money and resources sufficient to rebuild the country," he wrote.

Last Friday's announcement appeared designed in part to counter that impression. "This is a major strategic step by the United States to, in a very dramatic way, increase our assistance to Afghanistan, to show support for President Karzai and the Afghan people," Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns told reporters in Washington. "We are doing this because we want to win in Afghanistan and we intend to win. And we believe that the endeavor there is one that requires a greater effort by the United States and its NATO allies."

Indeed, the announcement appeared designed not only to reassure Karzai and the Afghans that Washington's commitment to their country remains solid, but also to shame its NATO allies into boosting their own commitments—both militarily and financially.

While the U.S. troops have been joined by their counterparts from the Netherlands, Denmark, Canada, and Britain—which is also reportedly preparing to boost its presence in Afghanistan—in taking offensive action against the Taliban in the Pashtun regions where the insurgency is strongest, the governments of most other NATO countries, notably Germany, France, Italy, and Spain, have attached "caveats" that limit their peacekeeping participation to non-combat roles.

Washington has been pressing those governments, largely without success, for more than a year to eliminate those caveats so that the 20,000-troop NATO force could

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be both more coherent and more flexible. It also wants NATO members to contribute more troops.

As Rice reminded her fellow ministers last Friday, NATO is still about 15% short of the troop and equipment levels—particularly aircraft—that had been pledged by its members a year ago. Though France, for example, has committed itself to providing more helicopters, it also recently announced that it will withdraw some 200 of its Special Forces units.

“It’s a continuing battle for us,” said Burns regarding the U.S. effort to persuade NATO allies to increase their commitments in Afghanistan. He said Washington regards the problem as an “existential issue for NATO.”

U.S. military officials and independent experts believe—and indeed Taliban leaders have boasted—that the insurgent group, which appears to enjoy safe haven in tribal areas on the Pakistani side of the border, is preparing a major new offensive for this spring, even as the number of cross-border attacks has reportedly tripled since last summer.

NATO forces have carried out several recent attacks against Taliban forces alleged to be infiltrating from North and South Waziristan in the past few weeks in what is widely considered to be a prelude to what Burns called a “high level of intensity of fighting” as the snow begins melting.

Even while voicing steadfast support for Pakistan’s President Gen. Pervez Musharraf, NATO and the Bush administration intend to exert greater pressure on

Islamabad to crack down on the Taliban, both in the Waziristans, from which the Pakistani Army has largely withdrawn after taking heavy casualties from tribal militias—and in Baluchistan, where the group’s top leadership is believed to operate under the protection of the Pakistani military’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Islamist political parties close to the government. Karzai has long complained about Pakistani support for the Taliban, but Musharraf repeatedly rejected such claims.

Unlike the case of Iraq, where Bush’s plans to increase troops levels are meeting strong opposition from Democrats and a growing number of fellow-Republicans, his request for increased aid to Afghanistan is likely to prove relatively uncontroversial. Just last week, for example, the leading contender for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY), who has become increasingly critical of Bush’s Iraq policy, traveled to Afghanistan, where she called on the administration to increase troops and assistance.

In its December report, the bipartisan Iraq Study Group (ISG), which was co-chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-IN) and included the new Defense Secretary Robert Gates, also suggested that some combat troops currently deployed in Iraq be redeployed to Afghanistan.

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