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As Concerns Rise, U.S. Is Reviewing Afghan Mission

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WASHINGTON — Deeply concerned about the prospect of failure in [Afghanistan](#), the Bush administration and [NATO](#) have begun three top-to-bottom reviews of the entire mission, from security and counterterrorism to political consolidation and economic development, according to American and alliance officials.

The reviews are an acknowledgment of the need for greater coordination in fighting the [Taliban](#) and [Al Qaeda](#) in Afghanistan, halting the rising opium production and trafficking that finances the insurgency and helping the Kabul government extend its legitimacy and control.

Taken together, these efforts reflect a growing apprehension that one of the administration's most important legacies — the routing of Taliban and Qaeda forces in Afghanistan after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 — may slip away, according to senior administration officials.

Unlike the administration's sweeping review of Iraq policy a year ago, which was announced with great fanfare and ultimately resulted in a large increase in troops, the American reviews of the Afghan strategy have not been announced and are not expected to result in a similar infusion of combat forces, mostly because there are no American troops readily available.

The administration is now committed to finding an international coordinator, described as a "super envoy," to synchronize the full range of efforts in Afghanistan, and to continue pressing for more NATO troops to fight an insurgency that made this the most violent year since the Taliban and Al Qaeda were routed in December 2001.

"We are looking for ways to gain greater strategic coherence," said a senior administration official involved in the review process.

One assessment is being conducted within the United States military. Adm. William J. Fallon, commander of American forces in the Middle East, has ordered a full review of the mission, including the covert hunt for Taliban and Qaeda leaders.

"It's an assessment of our current strategy and how we are doing," said a senior military officer. "It's looking at whether we've done enough or need to do more in terms of expanding governance and economic development, as well as wrestling with the difficult security issues that we have been dealing with in Afghanistan."

Senior State Department officials also said that R. Nicholas Burns, the under secretary of state for political affairs, was coordinating another internal assessment of diplomatic efforts and economic aid — the sorts of "soft power" assistance beyond combat force that officials agree are required for success.

A third review, one that has previously been part of the public discussion, involves the strategy of NATO, which last year assumed control of the security operation in Afghanistan and has since been criticized by American officials and lawmakers for not being aggressive enough.

At an alliance meeting in Scotland on Friday, Secretary of Defense [Robert M. Gates](#) successfully gained a commitment from NATO to produce what senior Pentagon officials called an "integrated plan" for Afghanistan.

"The intent is to get people to look beyond 2008 and realize this is a longer-term endeavor," said Geoff Morrell, the Pentagon press secretary, who was with Mr. Gates in Scotland. He said the plan would "start off by acknowledging the success we're having in terms of reconstruction and education and governance and so forth, but it also will state where we want to be in three to five years, and how we get there."

The NATO assessment is to be completed for a meeting of alliance heads of state in Bucharest, Romania, next spring. The other reviews are due early next year.

Publicly, administration officials have expressed optimism that the war in Afghanistan can be won, but Mr. Gates told Congress this week that his optimism was "tempered by caution."

In recent months, though, Mr. Bush's senior advisers have expressed a growing unease.

While there is a sense that this year's troop buildup in Iraq has turned around a dire situation, the effort in Afghanistan has begun to drift, at best, officials said. That prompted Mr. Bush's national security adviser, [Stephen J. Hadley](#), to oversee internal deliberations that resulted in the push for the new reviews.

The NATO-led security assistance mission in Afghanistan has about 40,000 troops; of those, 14,000 are American. Separately, the United States military has 12,000 other troops in Afghanistan conducting specialized counterterrorism missions.

Mr. Gates has declined to name specific allies that have not fulfilled pledges for combat troops, security trainers and helicopters for Afghanistan, or whose governments have placed restrictions on their combat forces. But he has noted that Britain, Canada and Australia had met their commitments and carry their full combat load.

Some members of Congress have not been so diplomatic.

"The Germans, the Spanish, the Italians don't send any troops to the south except for 250 troops by Germany," said Representative Joe Sestak, Democrat of Pennsylvania. A retired three-star admiral who worked on the staff of the [National Security Council](#) in the 1990s, Mr. Sestak complained that some allies "refuse to do combat ops at night and some don't fly when the first snowflake falls."

As part of the NATO review, alliance diplomats and military officers are closely watching the actions of Britain, which may be able to commit additional troops to Afghanistan as it reduces its deployments in Iraq.

To that end, Britain has opened its own "strategic review" of the Afghan mission, especially in the turbulent southern provinces, which will shape the alliance's assessment, according to a senior diplomat of a NATO nation.

"Essentially what's driving it is that a year ago, we were regarding Afghanistan as an outstanding success — we established democracy, we were in control of many parts of the country," the NATO diplomat said. "Now we have significant issues with certain areas producing opium and the Taliban coming back in certain parts of the country, as well."

The Democratic chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Representative Ike Skelton of Missouri, was more direct in assessing possible failure in Afghanistan.

"I have a real concern that given our preoccupation in Iraq, we've not devoted sufficient troops and funding to Afghanistan to ensure success in that mission," Mr. Skelton said. "Afghanistan has been the forgotten war."

Strained by commitments in Iraq, the American military has few troops available to expand its forces in Afghanistan. "It is simply a matter of resources, of capacity," Adm. [Mike Mullen](#), chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#), told Congress this week. "In Afghanistan, we do what we can. In Iraq, we do what we must."

Both Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) and Mr. Gates have urged [Hamid Karzai](#), the Afghan president, to consider proposals for eradicating poppy fields by aerial spraying to halt the rapid increase in opium production. But the Afghan president has thus far rejected the idea, and even American officials admit that vastly increased eradication efforts would be counterproductive unless alternative livelihoods were immediately available to the poppy farmers.

The Karzai government also is said to be reluctant to endorse having an international coordinator with expanded powers, fearing its own legitimacy and credibility could be undermined.

Julianne Smith, director of the Europe Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the mission in Afghanistan was at risk of failure, as political support in European capitals strained NATO's ability to sustain, let alone expand its effort there.

"The mission in Afghanistan has been suffering from neglect on all sides," she said.

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