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From the Los Angeles Times

Gates faults NATO force in southern Afghanistan

The U.S. Defense secretary says he thinks the soldiers from Canada, Britain and the Netherlands do not know how to fight a guerrilla insurgency.

By Peter Spiegel

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WASHINGTON — In an unusual public criticism, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said he believes NATO forces currently deployed in southern Afghanistan do not know how to combat a guerrilla insurgency, a deficiency that could be contributing to the rising violence in the fight against the Taliban.

"I'm worried we're deploying [military advisors] that are not properly trained and I'm worried we have some military forces that don't know how to do counterinsurgency operations," Gates said in an interview.

Gates' criticism comes as the Bush administration has decided to send 3,200 U.S. Marines to southern Afghanistan on a temporary mission to help quell the rising number of attacks. It also comes amid growing friction among allied commanders over the Afghan security situation.

But coming from an administration castigated for its conduct of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, such U.S. criticism of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is controversial. Many NATO officials blame inadequate U.S. troop numbers earlier in the war in part for a Taliban resurgence.

"It's been very, very difficult to apply the classic counterinsurgency doctrine because you've had to stabilize the situation sufficiently to start even applying it," said one European NATO official, who discussed the issue on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak for the alliance. "Even in the classic counterinsurgency doctrine, you've still got to get the fighting down to a level where you can apply the rest of the doctrine."

Gates' views, however, reflect those expressed recently by senior U.S. military officials with responsibility for Afghanistan. Some have said that an overreliance on heavy weaponry, including airstrikes, by NATO forces in the south may unwittingly be contributing to rising violence there.

"Execution of tasks, in my view, has not been appropriate," said one top U.S. officer directly involved in the Afghan campaign who discussed internal assessments on condition of anonymity. "It's not the way to do business, in my opinion. We've got to wean them of this. If they won't change then we're going to have another solution."

Gates has publicly criticized European allies in the past for failing to send adequate numbers of troops and helicopters to the Afghan mission. But concerns about strategy and tactics are usually contained within military and diplomatic channels.

In the interview, Gates compared the troubled experience of the NATO forces in the south -- primarily troops from the closest U.S. allies, Britain and Canada, as well as the Netherlands -- with progress made by American troops in the eastern part of Afghanistan. He traced the failing in part to a Cold War orientation.

"Most of the European forces, NATO forces, are not trained in counterinsurgency; they were trained for the Fulda Gap," Gates said, referring to the German region where a Soviet invasion of Western Europe was deemed most likely.

Gates said he raised his concerns last month in Scotland at a meeting of NATO countries with troops in southern Afghanistan and suggested additional training.

But he added that his concerns did not appear to be shared by the NATO allies. "No one at the table stood up and said: 'I agree with that.'"

The NATO forces are led by a U.S. commander, Army Gen. Dan McNeill, who has called for greater contributions by NATO countries. Some member nations are reluctant to deepen their involvement.

NATO officials bristled at suggestions that non-U.S. forces have been ineffective in implementing a counterinsurgency campaign. They argued that the south, home to Afghanistan's Pashtun tribal heartland that produced the Taliban movement, has long been the most militarily contested region of the country.

The European NATO official, who is directly involved in Afghan planning, angrily denounced the American claims, saying much of the violence is a result of the small number of U.S. troops who had patrolled the region before NATO's takeover in mid-2006, a strategy that allowed the Taliban to reconstitute in the region.

"The reason there is more fighting now is because we've uncovered a very big rock and lots of things are scurrying out," the NATO official said.

Pentagon concerns have risen as violence in the south has steadily increased, even as other parts of Afghanistan have begun to stabilize.

Last year was the deadliest for both U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan since the 2001 invasion, according to the website icasualties.org.

But both U.S. and NATO officials have expressed optimism that eastern Afghanistan, which is under the control of U.S. forces led by Army Maj. Gen. David Rodriguez, has substantially improved in recent months.

Rodriguez implemented a campaign that incorporated many of the same tactics being used in Iraq by Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, the U.S. commander in Baghdad who co-wrote the military's new counterinsurgency field manual.

"If you believe all the things you hear about Afghanistan, this ought to be real hot," Navy Adm. William J. Fallon, commander of U.S. troops in the Middle East and Central Asia, said of eastern Afghanistan. "More than half the border is Pakistan, it's a rough area, historically it's been a hotbed of insurgent activity. It's remarkable in its improvement."

At the same time, violence has continued to rise in the south, which is controlled by a 11,700-soldier NATO force largely made up of the British, Canadian and Dutch forces. Britain saw 42 soldiers killed last year, almost all in southern Afghanistan, its highest annual fatality count of the war; Canada lost 31, close to the 36 from that country killed in 2006. American forces lost 117 troops in 2007, up from 98 in 2006, but U.S. forces are spread more widely across Afghanistan.

"Our guys in the east, under Gen. Rodriguez, are doing a terrific job. They've got the [counterinsurgency] thing down pat," Gates said. "But I think our allies over there, this is not something they have any experience with."

Some U.S. counterinsurgency experts have argued that the backsliding is not the fault of NATO forces alone.

Some have argued that an effective counterinsurgency campaign implemented by Army Lt. Gen. David W. Barno and Zalmay Khalilzad, who were the U.S. commander in and ambassador to Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005, was largely abandoned by officials who came later.

Barno retired from the military and heads the Near East South Asia Center at the National Defense University. In an article in the influential Army journal *Military Review* last fall, he blamed both NATO and U.S. commanders for moving away from the counterinsurgency plan since 2006.

Barno accused NATO and U.S. forces of ignoring the cornerstone of a counterinsurgency campaign -- protecting the local population -- and said they instead focused on killing enemy forces.

"We had a fundamentally well-structured, integrated U.S. Embassy and U.S. military unified counterinsurgency campaign plan which we put in place in late '03 that took us all the way through about the middle of 2005," Barno said in an interview. "And then it was really, in many ways, changed very dramatically."

Currently serving American officers, however, have singled out non-U.S. NATO forces for the bulk of their criticism. Among the concerns is that NATO forces do not actively include Afghan troops in military operations.

As a result, local forces in the south are now less capable than those in the east, which operate very closely with their American counterparts.

"Every time you see our guys in the field, you don't have to look very far and you'll see them," said the senior U.S. officer involved in the Afghan campaign. "Getting the Brits to do this and the others is a little more of a problem."

In addition, U.S. military officials said NATO forces in the south are too quick to rely on high-caliber firepower, such as airstrikes, a practice which alienates the local population.

"The wide view there, which I hear from Americans, is that the NATO military forces are taking on a Soviet mentality," said one senior U.S. military veteran of Afghanistan. "They're staying in their bases in the south, they're doing very little patrolling, they're trying to avoid casualties, and they're using air power as a substitute for ground infantry operations, because they have so little ground infantry."

The European NATO official said, however, that alliance data show that all countries, including the U.S., use air power in similar amounts when their troops come in contact with enemy forces.

"Everyone is grateful for the Americans . . . but this kind of constant denigration of what other people are doing isn't helpful," the official said. "It also makes the situation look worse than it is."

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