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Gates rejects reports of NATO criticism

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On the heels of recommending a new U.S. troop deployment to support NATO operations in Afghanistan, Defense Secretary Robert Gates is "disturbed" that a news story published Wednesday made it seem like he was criticizing America's NATO partners in Afghanistan for lacking essential counterinsurgency skills, a Pentagon spokesman told reporters today.

The story, published in the Los Angeles Times, drew immediate criticism from NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

"I'm surprised because I have no indication — and neither has the military chain of command — that any country or countries are not exercising their tasks to the highest levels," de Hoop Scheffer told Reuters. "I think there is no reason not to conclude that all nations, including the ones in the south, are performing very well."

The 43,000-member International Security Assistance Force is currently commanded by U.S. Army Gen. Dan McNeil; current major troop contributors include Canada, the Netherlands, Denmark, Estonia, Romania and the U.S., which has 14,000 troops assigned to the force.

The story begins: "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."

The story was based on a Jan. 7 interview, Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell said. That was four days before Gates was briefed on the proposal, since approved by President Bush, to send 3,200 Marines to Afghanistan to help fend off what is expected to be an attempt at a spring offensive by Taliban insurgents.

Morrell said Gates did not take exception to any of the quoted material in the story. But "the totality of the piece leaves the impression that the secretary is disturbed with the performance of individual countries in Afghanistan. He is not. He has never expressed such concerns, publicly, to anyone," Morrell said.

"His criticism ... is exactly what he told the Alliance" in December and repeated to the newspaper in January, Morrell said. "And that is that we as an Alliance have to adjust better to the new reality we find ourselves in — which is not preparing to fight the Soviet army coming through the Fulda Gap, but to fight what may be a persistent threat in the future."

The Alliance, he said, is "having to make up for those failings," he said.

Gates is specifically concerned, Morrell said, that NATO is sending to Afghanistan improperly trained 16- to 20-member operational mentoring and liaison teams, known as OMLTs, to conduct training for Afghani army and police forces.

De Hoop Scheffer told Reuters that while he had not verified Gates' comments, he did not recall Gates having raised the issue of counterinsurgency capability with him or at NATO meetings.

Gates has publicly and repeatedly expressed concern that other NATO countries have not contributed enough combat forces and other capabilities to the coalition effort in Afghanistan — which, he said during a Dec. 19 news conference, "remains threatened by ruthless extremists and destructive narcotics trade."

Gates has said the International Security Assistance Force is short about 3,500 trainers, and a total of 7,500 additional troops would be needed to meet every command requirement.

Gates expressed no concern during that news conference over any lack of capability in any member nation's troops.


Gates renewed his manpower concerns at a December meeting of NATO defense ministers in Scotland but acknowledged that "political realities" make it difficult, if not impossible, for some members to increase their commitments of troops. He said he would look for more "creative" solutions, such as an increase in funding for specific needs, like helicopter maintenance.

The NATO effort to rebuild and secure Afghanistan, Gates said Dec. 19, "must be sustained and expanded into next year and beyond."

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