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Pentagon Plans to Add Forces to Afghanistan to Make Up for Shortfall by NATO

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WASHINGTON — The Pentagon is considering sending as many as 7,000 more American troops to [Afghanistan](#) next year to make up for a shortfall in contributions from [NATO](#) allies, senior Bush administration officials said.

They said the step would push the number of American forces there to roughly 40,000, the highest level since the war began, and would require at least a modest reduction in troops from Iraq.

The planning began in recent weeks, reflecting a growing resignation to the fact that NATO is unable or unwilling to contribute more troops despite public pledges of an intensified effort in Afghanistan from the presidents and prime ministers who attended an alliance summit meeting in Bucharest, Romania, last month.

The shortfalls in troop commitments have cast doubt on claims by President Bush and his aides that NATO was stepping up to provide more help in Afghanistan, where the government of President [Hamid Karzai](#) faces a resurgent threat from the [Taliban](#) and remnants of [Al Qaeda](#).

The increasing proportion of United States troops, from about half to about two-thirds of the foreign troops in Afghanistan, would be likely to result in what one senior administration official described as “the re-Americanization” of the war.

“There are simply going to be more American forces than we’ve ever had there,” the official said, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was discussing future military planning.

A dozen NATO countries have pledged a total of about 2,000 troops, according to senior NATO officials, who provided the information on condition of anonymity according to standard diplomatic rules. Senior alliance commanders in Afghanistan have said they need about 10,000 new forces.

Only one country so far has actually begun preparing more troops to deploy: France, which is sending 700 troops to Afghanistan, NATO officials said.

Few of the additional troops are expected to materialize any time soon, the officials added.

Officials stressed that no formal new American deployment plans for Afghanistan had been presented to the Pentagon or the White House, and that the decision could be left to the next president, though they would not rule out the prospect that Mr. Bush would order a troop increase.

Mr. Bush has long faced criticism that the Iraq war distracted the country from confronting the Qaeda threat in Afghanistan, and Democrats as well as Republicans have expressed general support for shifting more attention to Afghanistan.

There are about 62,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, about 34,000 of them American, up from just 25,000 American troops in 2005. The American troops are divided into a force of 16,000 who operate under NATO command and 18,000 who are there conducting counterterrorism and other missions under American command outside the NATO structure, according to Pentagon statistics. The initial planning under way would send about two additional brigades of American forces, or about 7,000 troops, to Afghanistan next year. That would meet two-thirds of what commanders have portrayed in recent months as a shortfall of three brigades, or about 10,000 troops, including combat forces, trainers, intelligence officers and crews for added helicopters and troop carriers.

Bush administration officials initially argued that NATO should fill that void, because the American military was overextended in Iraq. And publicly, the administration has remained mostly supportive of the alliance effort, with the national security adviser, [Stephen J. Hadley](#), declaring at the NATO meeting last month that in addressing the problems in Afghanistan, "NATO's answer today is help is on the way."

The weeks leading up to the meeting included intense lobbying to increase troop commitments and lift some restrictions on how national troops operate and where. Over a private dinner in Bucharest, Mr. Bush and other leaders listened to their counterparts make their pledges. Only France announced its pledge publicly.

According to an accounting of the pledges compiled by NATO officials at the end of the meeting, Georgia, whose application for a fast track to membership was rebuffed, pledged 500 troops. Poland pledged 400 more troops to the 1,000 there now to operate and maintain eight helicopters. The Czech Republic pledged 120 special operations forces.

Italy, Romania and Greece made promises for military or police training teams. Azerbaijan, not a member of NATO, offered to more than double its current force, adding 45 troops. New Zealand offered "a modest increase" to support a civil provincial reconstruction team. Two other nations promised to consider contributions but asked NATO leaders not to disclose their pledges because of their

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The results of the NATO session disappointed commanders in Afghanistan. A NATO military spokesman issued a diplomatically worded statement this week. "In the run-up to and during the Bucharest meeting, nations added extra contributions," the statement from Kabul said. "However, shortfalls still exist."

Julianne Smith, director of the Europe Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a nonpartisan policy institute, said the meeting did not live up to the expectations or the public celebration during the session.

"If you look at what the NATO commanders got, it's hard to see the silver lining," she said.

As with previous shortfalls in NATO commitments, Secretary of Defense [Robert M. Gates](#) could be prompted to fill the void, perhaps deploying other American forces to replace the 3,200 marines who arrived over recent weeks in what was described as a one-time, seven-month stop-gap deployment.

Mr. Gates did say publicly last month that the United States was prepared to commit additional forces to Afghanistan in 2009, but he put no number on the anticipated American troop increase.

A senior Pentagon official said Mr. Gates made the announcement after consulting with Mr. Bush, arguing for a public statement that would prove to NATO allies that the United States remained wholly committed to the Afghan mission despite strains of the war in Iraq.

Senior officials said the 7,000 troops were about the most the American military could add to Afghanistan in 2009.

After the offensive to rout Al Qaeda and its Taliban sponsors in Afghanistan following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, American forces steadily rose to about 5,000 by March of 2002, according to government statistics. American deployments increased to 16,000 by March of 2003, and then dropped for a year during the initial phase of combat in Iraq. The American commitment to Afghanistan rose again, to about 25,000, in 2005.

Officials said preliminary discussions were under way within the Pentagon as to whether, and how, the command structure in Afghanistan might be altered to fit the new reality of a greater American presence. But officials stressed that these talks were also in their initial stages.

Representative Adam Smith, a Democrat from Washington who recently toured Afghanistan, complained that NATO's commitment was "still not what it should be." But he praised the deployment of the 3,200 marines, who have been operating in volatile areas near Kandahar. "That is potentially a game changer," he said in an interview.

Mr. Bush, at a Rose Garden news conference this week, appeared to be laying the groundwork for a long-term mission in Afghanistan.

"I wish we had completely eliminated the radicals who kill innocent people to achieve objectives, but that hasn't happened yet," he said Tuesday. "And so I think it's very much in our interests to continue helping the young democracy. And we will."

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