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Slipping in Afghanistan

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As the violence worsens, NATO struggles to raise troops.

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THE UNITED STATES and its [NATO](#) allies are engaged in a regular ritual: blaming each other for the deteriorating security situation in [Afghanistan](#). This week, [Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates](#) forcefully criticized European governments for failing to meet commitments to supply troops and equipment for Afghan operations; he even threatened that the United States might withdraw its troops from [Kosovo](#) -- a European preoccupation -- if Afghanistan were not better supplied. At a meeting of defense ministers, [the Netherlands](#) again complained that it -- along with the United States, [Britain](#) and [Canada](#) -- bears the brunt of the fighting against the [Taliban](#), while [Germany](#), [Italy](#), [Spain](#) and most other NATO members restrict their soldiers to the safer parts of Afghanistan or ban them from combat. In reply the German defense minister suggested that NATO's aggressive military strategy in the south does more harm than good.

Loud disputes such as this have always been part of NATO and tend to disguise its successes -- such as the facts that all 26 of the alliance members have troops in Afghanistan, that all have increased their commitment in the past year and that NATO forces continue to rout the Taliban wherever it is encountered. Yet there are real problems, both in the fighting and in the supply and distribution of forces, and they are worsening. According to the [United Nations](#) and independent monitoring groups, violence has increased significantly in Afghanistan for the second straight year, spreading from the southeast to areas close to [Kabul](#). Coalition deaths, including 94 U.S. soldiers killed, already exceed the full-year total for 2006.

The disparity of effort among NATO members continues to be significant. The United States contributes 15,100 troops to the 41,000-member NATO-led international force, known as ISAF, and deploys another 13,000 in counterterrorism operations. Britain has 7,700 troops in the country, meaning that Britain and the United States together account for more than half of ISAF's strength. Meanwhile, [France](#) and Germany together deploy 4,200 soldiers, or 10 percent of ISAF -- and none serve in the areas where most of the fighting takes place. Among other nations only Canada and the Netherlands, with 1,700 and 1,500 troops, are contributing substantially to anti-Taliban operations.

The defense ministers' meeting produced some small promises of additional forces: Germany promised to send 200 more trainers for the Afghan army, and France chipped in 50. But the bottom line is that 2007 is looking like another year in which the Western alliance will lose as much as it gains in Afghanistan. Unless the trend is arrested -- which would require more troops, more resources and more willingness to put soldiers at risk -- it will lead both NATO and Afghanistan to failure.

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