

Petraeus Pushes NATO Allies to Step Up Afghan Fight

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The U.S. pushed European NATO allies to send more troops to Afghanistan. ...

U.S. Army General David Petraeus said the security situation has "deteriorated markedly" since 2007 and appealed for more troops and war-fighting equipment to bolster stability as nationwide elections test Afghanistan's ability to govern itself.

"I would be remiss if I did not ask individual countries to examine very closely what forces and other contributions they can provide," Petraeus, commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East and Central Asia, told the Munich Security Conference today.

President Barack Obama will send as many as 30,000 additional troops, putting European governments under pressure to step up their commitment as the war ...drags into its eighth year.

Vice President Joe Biden yesterday promised a "new tone" in U.S. engagement with European allies, while making clear that the U.S. now has higher expectations.

"America will do more: that's the good news," Biden said in a keynote speech in Munich. "The bad news is America will ask for more from our partners as well."

Troop Numbers

North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies have fielded 55,000 troops in Afghanistan, led by a 23,000-strong U.S. contingent. Another force of roughly 10,000 U.S. troops conducts counterterrorism missions independently of NATO command.

Britain, the largest European contributor, has sent 8,900. Germany has kept its 3,400 troops, the third-largest force, out of the hotly fought south and east of the country.

U.K. Defence Secretary John Hutton, during a panel discussion with Petraeus, said there's an urgent need for "stronger force levels" in Afghanistan. "We need to do more on every level to support the leadership that the United States is showing," he said.

Afghanistan postponed this year's presidential election from May 22 to Aug. 20 due to security concerns and the inability to set up polling stations in as many as nine provinces that will be snow covered until late spring.

The delay raises questions about whether President Hamid Karzai, who has enjoyed the support of the U.S. and NATO, will stay in power on an interim basis after his constitutional five-year term ends in May. American criticism of some European governments erupted last year when Defense Secretary Robert Gates — a Bush administration appointee who Obama kept on — warned that NATO risked degenerating into a “two-tiered alliance” of countries that fight and those that don't.

France last year sent a battalion to eastern Afghanistan, belatedly joining the U.S., U.K., Canada, Denmark and the Netherlands as one of the principle contributors of frontline troops. Petraeus ticked off a list of needs for Afghanistan including more special operations forces, transport and attack helicopters, fixed-wing warplanes, medical evacuation units, military police, engineering units and trainers for the Afghan army and police. “It's going to be much tougher than Iraq,” Richard Holbrooke, who heads to the region tomorrow as Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, told the panel.

Insurgent Activity

Insurgent activity in Afghanistan rose last year to the highest level since 2001, partly coming from across the border in Pakistan. Insurgents are using Pakistan's mountainous tribal areas as a staging base, operating from the same territory as the U.S.-armed rebels who fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

During last year's presidential campaign, Obama said the U.S. would attack terrorist camps in the tribal areas without consulting the Pakistani government if it had actionable intelligence. “I will push Pakistan very hard,” Obama said in July.

That threat didn't come up in today's panel discussion.

Pakistan “takes seriously its responsibility along the western border,” Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said. “Our sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected.”

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