

NATO Reluctance to Send More Troops to Afghanistan Should Be No Surprise

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Last week, NATO's top commander, General James L. Jones asked NATO allies to send an additional 2,500 troops to combat Taliban forces in southern Afghanistan. Other than Poland – which promised to send more troops early next year – Jones' call was met with a deafening silence across Europe. Given Europe's continuing struggle to match its ambitions with capabilities, many countries' resistance to participating in high-intensity combat operations, and growing fatigue with the U.S.-led war on terror, Europe's reaction should not come as a surprise.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, European countries at both the national level and inside international organizations such as NATO and the EU have issued dozens of strategy documents outlining the need for enhanced capabilities to combat terrorism and the proliferation of WMD, deal with failed or failing states, contend with regional conflicts as well as respond to humanitarian crises or other challenges. Transformation from static Cold War militaries into leaner forces has also been a priority for NATO countries. Despite these goals, defense spending in most European countries remains flat or in decline with few signs of increased funding in the next five years.

The reasons for this are clear. First, defense spending remains in fierce competition with growing social spending requirements. Second, European investments in new capabilities are constrained by the fragmented nature of European defense demands. The thicket of rules and regulations that govern European defense trade and industrial capabilities are focused largely on legacy platforms and job creation rather than transformation. Some progress has been made in recent years with the creation of a European Defense Agency, but it remains to be seen if national militaries will offer up substantial projects for open competition. Finally, conscription or universal service requirements in some European countries require substantial personnel and benefit outlays on troops, which often detract from research and development investments.

With some countries spending as little as 1.4 percent of GDP on defense (despite NATO's target of at least 2 percent), Europe's progress on creating forces prepared for expeditionary operations such as the NATO mission in Afghanistan has been slow. Only a small percentage of Europe's roughly 2 million troops are deployable. Estimates range from 3 to 5 percent, and this does not account for parliamentary or constitutional restrictions.

Those European troops that are deployable are often tasked with peacekeeping or stabilization missions because they are simply not equipped and trained for high-intensity combat. In other cases, particularly in Germany, the decision not to send troops into combat in southern Afghanistan is rooted more in politics than preparedness. German political elites believe that the public will not stomach soldiers coming back in body bags, but will rally behind more benign and safe humanitarian deployments. (It is important to note that Germany is undertaking several such operations around the world at the moment, another reason presented for not sending more troops to Afghanistan.)

Finally, European reluctance to commit substantial troops to combat operations in Afghanistan is understandable given the current mood in Europe toward the war on terror. The widespread perception that the United States abandoned Afghanistan to pursue the unpopular Iraq war makes the prospect of casualties in Afghanistan doubly daunting for

European governments. There is an undercurrent of resentment among European leaders who feel they are being repeatedly asked to clean up a problem that the Iraq war in part created. It is also worth noting that NATO has been ringing the alarm bells about its under-supported ISAF mission and the credibility of the alliance since 2003. Some European politicians may be desensitized to these pleas at precisely the worst time and when NATO needs their support most.

Events in Afghanistan are reaching a critical juncture, and European politics and perceptions, as well as United States commitments in Iraq, may prevent NATO from getting the assets necessary to ensure victory. The resurgence of the Taliban and weakness of the central government in Afghanistan will continue to threaten global security without aggressive support from the West, particularly NATO. Afghanistan is far from a lost cause, but the substantial progress and promise envisioned after the fall of Kabul is slowly being reversed. The unwillingness or inability to raise the necessary forces that General Jones called for is not surprising, but failure to meet this commitment will have drastic consequences both for Afghanistan and for NATO itself.

Justin Wiseman assisted with the writing of this piece.

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