



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Troops in Afghanistan

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### Summary

The UK is to send an additional 85 personnel to the 500 troops currently deployed in Afghanistan. The increase comes amid reports of deteriorating security and calls from US commanders for more soldiers to break the 'stalemate'. NATO defence ministers agreed on 29 June 2017 to increase the number of troops deployed to Afghanistan. Their mission is to train, assist and support Afghan security forces. It is not a combat mission – the NATO-led combat operation ended in December 2014. Over 13,500 troops from 39 countries support NATO's Resolute Support Mission. The Trump administration is currently reviewing its Afghanistan strategy.

### NATO in Afghanistan

Between August 2003 and December 2014 NATO led the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. On 1 January 2015 NATO transitioned to a new, non-combat mission called Resolute Support. This is based on a Status of Forces Agreement concluded with the Government of Afghanistan in November 2014.

[Resolute Support](#) is designed to train, advise and assist the Afghanistan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and institutions. As of [May 2017](#) Resolute Support consists of:

- 39 contribution nations
- 13,576 troops

The US is by far the largest contributor. Other contributors of significant numbers include Italy, Germany, Georgia, Turkey, Romania and the UK.

Further resources: [chronology](#) of NATO's presence in Afghanistan; [current and previous troop levels](#).

### A 'challenging' security situation

Senior UN, US and UK officials have described the security situation in Afghanistan as deteriorating or challenging.

In March the Taliban captured [Sangin](#), scene of over 100 British deaths a decade ago. The BBC [reported](#) that the Taliban controlled "more territory than at any point since the US-

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led invasion in 2001 which toppled its regime". A Taliban attack on an Afghan army base in Mazar e-Sharif in April killed over 100 Afghan soldiers in April. While 150 people are estimated to have been [killed](#) in the suicide bomb attack on the diplomatic enclave in Kabul on 31 May.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office described the security situation as "challenging" in April 2017.<sup>1</sup> The UN Special Representative for Afghanistan has described a "deteriorating security situation" and an insurgency "that seems to be gaining ground" in his June [briefing](#) to the UN Security Council. The United States assessed that, as of mid-February 2017, around 60% of the country's districts are under Afghan Government control or influence, 29% are contested and 11% of districts are under insurgent control or influence.<sup>2</sup>

Since early 2017 US commanders have repeatedly described the situation in Afghanistan as a "stalemate" and have called for additional forces to help train Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF).<sup>3</sup> In June, Jim Mattis, the US Defense Secretary, [warned](#) "we are not winning in Afghanistan right now" and the [Pentagon](#) described Afghanistan as at a "critical point in the fight against the insurgency".

NATO's mission is to support the ANDSF and therefore that is NATO allies are focusing their attention. A US [report to Congress](#) described casualties suffered by the ANDSF as "shockingly high". Over 800 ANDSF personnel were killed and over 1,300 wounded between 1 January and 24 February 2017.<sup>4</sup> US Commanders have previously identified poor leadership, tactics, training and corruption to blame for high losses among Afghan forces.<sup>5</sup> Michael Fallon, the Secretary of State for Defence, has said "the ANDSF are improving but the rate of their development is affected by a range of complex challenges, not least the nature and strength of a determined insurgency."<sup>6</sup>

### **NATO asks for more troops....**

NATO put out a request for additional troops in late spring 2017. At least 15 countries, including the UK, [pledged](#) to increase their troop levels at the NATO defence ministers meeting on 29 June 2017. Specific numbers have yet to be defined. Jane's Defence Weekly suggested European allies are "being coy about pledging any new troops for 'Resolute Support' until Washington indicates its own numbers" suggesting "the enthusiasm is not there in Europe".<sup>7</sup>

### **... but this is not a return to combat**

[Jens Stoltenberg](#), NATO's Secretary-General, has made it clear this does not signal a return to NATO-led combat operations: "what we are aiming at now is to not go back to a combat operation but to adjust, strengthen the existing train, assist and advise mission".

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<sup>1</sup> [PQ70346](#), 20 April 2017

<sup>2</sup> "[Quarterly report to United States Congress](#)", Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 30 April 2017, p87

<sup>3</sup> "[US Commander in Afghanistan requests several thousand new troops](#)", The Guardian, 9 February 2017; See also testimony by US Commanders: [Statement by General John Nicholson](#), Commander US Forces in Afghanistan, Senate Armed Forces Committee, 9 February 2017; [testimony to House Armed Services Committee by Commander of US Central Command](#), 29 March 2017

<sup>4</sup> "Pentagon could brief new strategy for Afghanistan in July", Jane's Defence Weekly, 13 June 2017. The Pentagon report does not give a figure for ANDSF casualties and says only "The number of ANDSF casualties suffered while conducting local patrols and checkpoint operations has steadily increased since 2015." Information on ANDSF casualties is only provided in the classified annex.

<sup>5</sup> [Statement by General John Nicholson](#), Commander US Forces in Afghanistan, Senate Armed Forces Committee, 9 February 2017

<sup>6</sup> [HCWS16](#), 29 June 2017

<sup>7</sup> "European allies and Washington tiptoe around new troops for 'Resolute Support'", Jane's Defence Weekly, 30 June 2017

Stoltenberg identified [three areas](#) that NATO intends to strengthen the support for the Afghans:

1. special operation forces
2. air forces - more planes and helicopters for close air support and medivac
3. better leadership - strengthen military academies.

On 29 June NATO defence ministers [agreed](#) to continue Resolute Support beyond 2017.

## UK contribution

UK combat operations in Afghanistan ended in late 2014. However the UK is participating in NATO's Resolute Support mission and until late 2016 deployed around 450 personnel. This number [increased](#) to 500 in early 2017 to reflect the commitment made at NATO's Warsaw summit in July 2016 to provide additional troops.

The Ministry of Defence announced a further increase in UK personnel levels on 29 June 2017 in a written statement: [HCWS16](#). The UK will send an additional 85 personnel in direct response to NATO's request for more troops:

The Government has carefully considered the NATO request and we have decided to increase the UK's troop contribution to the RS mission by around 85 personnel. These troops will serve in non-combat roles to support directly the implementation of the NATO strategy. We will increase the number of mentors advising the Afghan Army and Police, the Afghan Air Force, and provide further support to ANDSF training and leadership development. This deployment will add to the significant contribution the UK is already making to the RS mission. We have around 500 troops based in Kabul serving in roles focused on improving the capability of the Afghan security institutions, developing the Afghan National Army Officer Academy and providing vital force protection for NATO advisors through our leadership of the Kabul Security Force. Through helping to achieve progress in Afghanistan, our troops have helped to reduce the terrorist threat to the UK from this region.

Fallon had previously signalled a likely increase in troop numbers when he said in early June the MOD was considering a NATO request to increase its troop numbers.<sup>8</sup>

## US forces

The US is by far the largest contributor to NATO's Resolute Support mission with nearly 7,000 troops.

However the US has around 2,000 more troops working on counter-terrorism operations against al-Qaeda and other such groups, such as ISIS-affiliate ISIS-Khorasan, under Operation 'Freedom's Sentinel'.

US commanders have been calling for additional soldiers to support the ANDSF and to break a 'stalemate' in combat against insurgent groups.<sup>9</sup> In June In June President Trump [delegated](#) authority to the Pentagon to set troop levels in Afghanistan (see also DOD [press release](#)). The decision was interpreted by [some](#) as the President delegating his responsibilities to set troop levels.

The Trump administration has yet to set out its strategy for Afghanistan and US media have reported differences between the White House and the Pentagon as being behind the delay in outlining a strategy.<sup>10</sup> A detailed assessment of US policy and troop numbers

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<sup>8</sup> "[UK to send more troops to Afghanistan](#)", Plymouth Herald, 1 June 2017

<sup>9</sup> "[Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, security and US policy](#)", Congressional Research Service, 19 May 2017

<sup>10</sup> See for example: "[The new, old war in Afghanistan](#)", Foreign Policy, 15 June 2017; "[Trump aides recruited businessmen to devise options for Afghanistan](#)", the New York Times, 10 July 2017

can be found in Congressional Research Service briefing paper [Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, security and US policy](#) (RL30588).

### The debate over ending combat operations in 2014

The merits of and conduct during the Afghan war will continue to be long debated. Of note is the public disagreement between NATO leadership and the US over the withdrawal of troops in 2014 that emerged during the NATO defence ministers meeting in June 2017.

The US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis said the withdrawal was too quick: “looking back on it, it’s pretty much a consensus that we may have pulled our troops out too rapidly, reduced the numbers a little too rapidly.”<sup>11</sup> Mattis made similar remarks to Senators in mid-June when he said part of the reason for the resurgence of violence was the reduction of international support: “we pulled out our forces, at a time ... when the violence was lower... But we pulled them out on a timeline, rather than consistent with the maturation of the government and the security forces”.<sup>12</sup>

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg offered a different view, suggesting NATO should have moved from a combat operation to a training Afghan forces mission sooner:

We should have started earlier to train the Afghans, earlier to enable them to take full responsibility for their own security. So it was not a wrong decision to end the NATO combat operation and to move into a train, assist and advise mission because I strongly believe that in the long run it is much more sustainable to enable the Afghans themselves to take care of their own security, to fight Taliban and terrorist groups themselves instead of having a large number of German, UK, Norwegian, other troops from NATO allied countries fighting in Afghanistan. So I strongly believe that it’s better to enable local forces to stabilize their own country instead of NATO combat troops doing that job in many different countries. So if anything we should have done it before, so gone from a combat operation to a train, assist and advise operation.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> [“US allies withdrew from Afghanistan too fast – US Defence chief”](#), Reuters, 29 June 2017

<sup>12</sup> [“President gives Mattis authority to set US troop strength in Afghanistan”](#), DOD news, 14 June 2017

<sup>13</sup> [Press conference](#), NATO HQ, 29 June 2017

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