



In brief: Afghanistan – timetable to 2014

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NATO assumed command of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in August 2003. At its Lisbon summit in November 2010, NATO agreed gradually to handover security responsibilities to Afghan National Security Forces. The goal is for Afghan forces to be fully responsible for security in Afghanistan by the end of 2014, at which point international forces, including the UK, will end their combat role.

Recent statements by NATO members suggest Afghan security forces will have “lead responsibility” by mid to late 2013 and take on “full responsibility” by the end of 2014. This has implications for the role of combat troops and when ISAF troops can expect to begin shifting from a combat to training and supportive role. At the February 2012 defence ministers meeting a French [proposal](#) to hand over full responsibility in 2013 was discussed but viewed as ‘premature’ by other members.

The next NATO heads of state and government meeting is on 20-21 May 2012 in Chicago. The summit is expected to map out the next phase of the transition to Afghan forces and the transition of ISAF forces from a combat role to a training and assistance one.

Transition to Afghan National Security Forces

The transition process began in early 2011. Seven districts and provinces were handed over to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in the first phase, completed in July 2011. The second phase was announced in November 2011 and could take up to 24 months to complete. Once completed, Afghan security forces will be responsible for the security of 50% of the Afghan population. NATO says the transition will be “conditions-based, not calendar-driven”.

NATO forces are involved in training, mentoring and operating alongside the Afghan security forces in preparation for the full handover of responsibility. David Cameron [told](#) the House on 7 March 2012:

Our task is simple: to equip the Afghan Government and the forces of Afghanistan with the capability and capacity to take care of their own national security without the need for foreign troops on their soil. That is our aim. We are making progress. The Afghan national army stands at 184,000, on target for 195,000 by the end of this year. The Afghan national police, standing at 145,000, are on target for 157,000 at the end of this year. We are making progress.

End of combat operations: 2014

The end of 2014 marks the end of combat operations for ISAF forces. Each contributing nation sets its own timetable for withdrawal. There are currently over 130,000 ISAF troops in Afghanistan from 50 nations.

William Hague [told](#) the House on 9 February 2012:

We are firmly on track for the ANSF to have lead security responsibility by mid to late 2013. The ANSF will have full security responsibility across Afghanistan by the end of 2014. This means that plans for British combat troop draw-down by the end of 2014 also remain on track. The Prime Minister has indicated that there will be a steady and measured draw-down between now and then, and that British forces will be reduced by 500 to 9,000 by the end of this year. The rate of reduction will be determined by the progress of transition on the ground.

President Obama set out his plans for withdrawal in an address to the nation on 22 June 2011. The troop surge of 33,000 personnel deployed in early 2010 is to be withdrawn by September 2012. The White House [confirmed](#) on 13 March the pace of withdrawal of the remaining 68,000 troops left after September "has not been decided".

US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said on 1 February 2012 he hopes to make a transition from a combat role to a training, advice and assistance role by the middle or end of 2013. His comments sparked a flurry of media commentary questioning whether this meant an accelerated pullout. In an article entitled "US officials debate speeding Afghan pullout" on 13 March, *The New York Times* said the administration is considering three options but quoted aides saying the President "will not announce the next troop reduction at the NATO meeting".

President Sarkozy of France [announced](#) in late January 2012 plans to withdraw French combat troops in 2013, one year earlier than planned. Sarkozy said 1,000 of France's 3,600 troops will leave by the end of 2012. Socialist Presidential candidate Francois Hollande says he intends to withdraw French personnel by the end of 2012 if elected President.

Foreign Secretary William Hague, [commenting](#) on the French withdrawal, said:

No other ISAF partner, among the 50 nations, has announced accelerated withdrawal plans. The clear consensus at the NATO Defence Ministers' meeting on 2 and 3 February was that we should stick to the Lisbon time lines, with staged troop draw-down up to the end of 2014

Spain is delaying the start of its withdrawal. Defence Minister Pedro Morenés announced, in January 2012, troops will not be withdrawn until October 2012, after the summer fighting season. Some personnel were to have been withdrawn in January 2012. Under current plans, 10% of Spanish forces will withdraw in October 2011, a further 40% in 2013 and the remainder in 2014.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has cast doubt over withdrawal plans [during](#) a visit to Afghanistan. She said "I cannot say we will manage this by 2013-2014. The will is there, we want to succeed."

Logistics of withdrawal

The MOD is making plans for the withdrawal of troops and equipment from Afghanistan. Bernard Gray, the Chief of Defence Materiel, says "the scale of the task will be immense" and far more complex than the withdrawal from Iraq. David Cameron [announced](#) the purchase of an additional C-17 transport aircraft for the RAF which is expected to be in service by July 2012. The MOD says it will help support the airbridge between the UK and the front line operations.

For more **background**, see the following Library briefings: [Afghanistan: The Timetable for Security Transition](#) (December 2011) [Afghan reconciliation and the Bonn conference](#) (December 2011);