

# NATO Likely to Send More Troops to Afghanistan

By [Viola Gienger](#) and [Tony Capaccio](#)

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Jan. 13 (Bloomberg) — NATO probably will come through with several thousand more troops for the war in Afghanistan after an international conference in London later this month, the alliance's top military commander said.

U.S. Navy Admiral James Stavridis, NATO's supreme allied commander, said he's aiming to bolster the force beyond the 30,000 additional troops President Barack Obama authorized Nov. 30 and 7,000 that allies offered last month.

The commitments fell short of the 40,000 increase that General Stanley McChrystal, the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, had sought for his campaign to turn back a resurgent Taliban, protect civilians and train Afghan forces.

"I'm very confident as we come out of the London conference, we'll add to that," Stavridis, 54, said in an interview today. "The commander has asked for 40,000. My goal is to get him 40,000."

The assurance suggests Germany and France may add to their forces in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led war. The two nations were the largest holdouts at a December meeting in Brussels where allies including Britain, Italy, Poland, Slovakia and non-NATO member Georgia pledged more soldiers.

Germany, which has 4,280 troops in Afghanistan, has said it probably will decide whether to increase the number after the Jan. 28 London conference to coordinate civilian and military assistance. The 43 partner nations fighting the war, including all 28 NATO members, are seeking to stabilize the country and train enough Afghans to begin taking over before Obama's planned July 2011 target for starting a drawdown of forces.

## Civilian Casualties Down

Civilian casualties caused by the U.S. and its allies in Afghanistan have dropped to 15 percent of the total compared with more than 40 percent a year ago, Stavridis said, citing United Nations figures. The Taliban's actions now account for 75 percent of total civilian casualties, he said.

Stavridis predicted the Afghan military and police that now number about 200,000 can grow "in the vicinity" of another 50,000 this year.

"I think that's realistic," he said. "It is challenging. It has got risk associated with it. It will require resources — both dollars and trainers. We are going after that hard."

Expanding the force to the 400,000 McChrystal recommended is “in the ‘under-construction’ category,” Stavridis said. That will have to be coordinated with Afghan leaders.

“Let’s see how we do this year before we start stretching out for the bigger goals,” Stavridis said. “But I think to get to 250,000 in the next 12 months is within our grasp.”

### **Retention a Problem**

While increases in pay have helped recruitment soar in the last two months, one of the biggest risks to the planned expansion is retaining those soldiers and police officers recruited, he said.

Another factor in the improved recruitment was Obama’s speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, on Dec. 1 in which he outlined the planned American troop increase and emphasized the goal of handing over control to the Afghans, said Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin of Michigan.

Levin and fellow Democratic Senator Al Franken of Minnesota are returning from a three-day visit to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Levin said U.S. officials in Afghanistan attributed the recruiting boost in part to a greater understanding among Afghans that the U.S. and its allies wouldn’t be there indefinitely.

### **‘Stunning’ Figures**

“The figures were stunning as to the increase in the number of Afghan recruits that came in immediately after setting of that date by President Obama,” Levin told reporters on a conference call from Dubai, United Arab Emirates, where he was awaiting a flight back to Washington.

He and Stavridis said the spike was so large that some training centers couldn’t handle the numbers signing up.

Republicans who visited Afghanistan and Pakistan during the congressional recess also described a “remarkable” increase in recruits.

Still, they told reporters in Washington yesterday that they heard “confusion” over Obama’s July 2011 target date. Some Pakistanis and Afghans fear the plan means the U.S. won’t continue to help the two nations over the long haul, according to Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky.

### **‘Increase in Optimism’**

Levin said another sign of progress was that more Afghan soldiers are working alongside U.S. troops.

“I was in Afghanistan last September, and I sense a significant increase in optimism about the possibility of success in Afghanistan,” Levin said.

One stumbling block is the shortage of instructors that allies were to provide for an initial

eight-week training course. Levin said allies have provided only 37 percent of the necessary trainers, a figure he called “inexcusable.” Some allies haven’t met their commitments to provide the needed specialists, he said.

“If they’re not going to provide additional combat troops, for heaven’s sake, they surely ought to not only carry out their commitments, but make additional ones so that we don’t have such a shortfall,” Levin said.

*With assistance from James G. Neuger in Brussels and Gopal Ratnam in Washington. Editors: Bill Schmick, Jim Rubin.*

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