

NATO sees Iraq, Balkans, Central America as Afghan model

By [David Brunnstrom](#)

Global Research, December 07, 2009

[Reuters](#) 7 December 2009

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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BRUSSELS - Afghanistan could look like Iraq, the Balkans or Central America if NATO succeeds in its mission there, the alliance's top commander said on Monday.

"It will be a world in which there is a central government, there are elections, there is reasonable control in the security sector, there's still some terrorist incidents . . . it's not perfect, but it's a functioning democracy," U.S. Admiral James Stavridis said.

"There are tensions, there are problems but it's vastly improved over where it was five or 10 years ago . . . It's got elections, but it's not finding 10-20,000 killed a year in civil activity. It's a sense of progress, a sense of movement . . . corruption is reduced, there is a sense of governance in the majority of the country."

Stavridis was replying to a questioner at a seminar in Brussels who asked how he would define success in Afghanistan, where U.S. President Barack Obama is sending 30,000 more U.S. troops to tackle a widening Taliban insurgency.

"I think that's achievable. I think we can succeed in that regard," he said.

NATO said after a meeting of alliance foreign ministers last Friday that 25 countries had promised to send around 7,000 more troops to back the extra Americans.

Stavridis called this a major contribution and said he expected a "significant proportion" of the extra troops to be trainers with which NATO is seeking to build up Afghan forces so Western troops can eventually withdraw.

"We are really emphasizing training as the success strategy, so we are talking to each of the allies and asking them what training capabilities they can offer up. We are getting a very good response on that," he told reporters.

Despite the headline figure of 7,000 extra non-U.S. forces, the commitments fall short of the 10,000 troops Pentagon officials had originally hoped for.

A breakdown of the numbers from NATO sources also shows pledges for only 5,500 troops, with 1,500 more to be confirmed later, after a Jan. 28 international conference on Afghanistan.

And at least 1,500 of the pledges are troops sent to reinforce 2009 elections which will not now be withdrawn. The overall number must be set against Dutch and Canadian plans to

withdraw 4,900 soldiers from the field in 2010 and 2011.

Stavridis declined to comment about the Dutch and Canadian plans, except to say: "We are encouraging everyone to stay and be part of this and we are encouraging everyone to be very focused on the training capabilities."

Michele Flournoy, U.S. undersecretary of defense for policy, told a Washington conference the United States hoped the extra allied troops could be deployed in the first half of 2010.

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