NATO's role in Afghanistan

NATO's main role in Afghanistan is to assist the Afghan Government in exercising and extending its authority and influence across the country, paving the way for reconstruction and effective governance. It does this predominately through its UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force.

Since NATO took command of ISAF in 2003, the Alliance has gradually expanded the reach of its mission, originally limited to Kabul, to cover Afghanistan’s whole territory. The number of ISAF troops has grown accordingly from the initial 5,000 to around 70,000 troops coming from 43 countries, including all 28 NATO members.

- ISAF missions
- ISAF Mandate
- The evolution of ISAF

ISAF missions

ISAF is a key component of the international community’s engagement in Afghanistan, assisting the Afghan authorities in providing security and stability and creating the conditions for reconstruction and development.

Security

In accordance with all the relevant Security Council Resolutions, ISAF’s main role is to assist the Afghan government in the establishment of a secure and stable environment. To this end, ISAF forces are conducting security and stability operations throughout the country together with the Afghan National Security Forces and are directly involved in the development of the Afghan National Army through mentoring, training and equipping.

- Conducting security and stability operations

ISAF is conducting security and stability operations across Afghanistan, in conjunction with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). A large and increasing proportion of these operations are ANSF-led.

- Supporting the Afghan National Army

In addition, ISAF is helping to bring the Afghan National Army (ANA) up to operating capability in support of the United States which is sponsoring the overall ANA training and equipping programme through its Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan (CSTC-A).

In concrete terms, ISAF is leading a number of Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLTs) which are embedded in ANA Battalions (Kandaks), Brigades, & Corps HQs, to support training and deploy on operations in an advisory role. OMLTs join ANA units after the latter have received initial training at the Afghan-led Kabul Military Training Centre (KMTC).

OMLTs also play a key liaison role between ANA units and nearby ISAF forces, coordinating the planning of operations and ensuring that the ANA units receive enabling support. ISAF personnel deploy for periods of at least 6 months in order to build enduring relationships with...
the ANA and maximise the mentoring effect.

In addition to training and mentoring the ANA, NATO-ISAF nations provide donations to help equip the Afghan army. Equipment donations include individual equipment such as small arms, ammunition, and uniform items as well as larger equipment to include tanks and helicopters.

Under the NATO Equipment Donation Programme, Allied Command Operations (ACO), with its headquarters in Mons Belgium, coordinates equipment donations on behalf of ISAF contributing nations. The determination of requirements and the validation process is further coordinated with the United States.

An ANA Trust Fund has also been established to cover the transportation and installation costs of the equipment donations, the purchase of equipment, the purchase of services for engineering and construction projects, and in/out-of-country training.

- **Supporting the Afghan National Police**

  Providing support to the Afghan National Police (ANP) within means and capabilities is one of ISAF’s key supporting tasks. In this sphere, ISAF works in coordination with and in support of the United States as well as the European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL) which was launched in June 2007.

  The Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan (CSTC-A) officially assumes the lead role in terms of police training on behalf of the US Government in the reformation of the ANP.

  ISAF assists the ANP, primarily at the tactical level, with military support to operations, advice, shared information and informal mentoring and guidance. Local support involves both niche training of non-police specific skills provided by ISAF units, and indirect support, mentoring, and joint patrolling. Much of this assistance is delivered through the medium of security committees and coordination centres.

  The Afghan Compact, a five-year plan between the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and the international community, established a framework for security sector reform and included the overall goals for and objectives for the ANP. This agreement established the original goal to develop a 62,000 professional police service committed to the rule of law. This was later modified by the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and subsequent decisions made by the Government of Afghanistan which set the new goal at 82,000 police officers.

- **Disarming illegally armed groups (DIAG)** ISAF is collecting illegal weapons, ordnance and ammunitions from armed groups and individual persons. Weapons are then catalogued and safely destroyed so they no longer represent a threat to the local population, Afghan National Security Forces or ISAF personnel.

- **Facilitating ammunition depots managements**

  NATO administrates a Trust Fund Project aimed at enhancing physical security at the ANA ammunitions depots and at supporting the development of the ANA’s ammunition stockpile management capabilities. The project has been agreed by the Afghan government, ISAF contributing nations (including three lead nations, namely Belgium, Canada and Luxemburg) and NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency (NAMSA) in 2008.

- **Providing post-operation assistance**

  An ISAF Post-Operations Humanitarian Relief Fund (POHRF) has been established since 2006 to provide quick humanitarian assistance in the immediate aftermath of significant ISAF military operations. Assistance includes the provision of food, shelter and medicines as well as the repair of buildings or key infrastructure. Such assistance is provided on a short-term basis and responsibility is handed over to civilian actors as soon as circumstances permit.
The fund, established under the auspices of the Commander of ISAF, consists entirely of voluntary donations from ISAF troop-contributing nations. The North Atlantic Council is regularly updated on its use through NATO’s Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan.

Reconstruction and development

Through its Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), ISAF is supporting reconstruction and development (R&D) in Afghanistan, securing areas in which reconstruction work is conducted by other national and international actors.

Where appropriate, and in close cooperation and coordination with GIROA and UNAMA representatives on the ground, ISAF is also providing practical support for R&D efforts, as well as support for humanitarian assistance efforts conducted by Afghan government organizations, international organizations, and NGOs.

- Providing security to permit reconstruction

Provincial Reconstruction Teams are at the leading edge of the Alliance’s commitment to R&D efforts in Afghanistan.

They consist of teams of civilian and military personnel working together to help extend the authority of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) throughout the country by providing area security and supporting the R&D activities of Afghan, international, national and non-governmental actors in the provinces.

In addition to provide area security, PRTS also use their diplomatic and economic capabilities in supporting security sector reform, encouraging good governance and enabling reconstruction and development.

While PRTs’ civilian components lead on political, economic, humanitarian and social aspects of PRTs’ work, in support of the GIROA’s national development priorities, military components focus on increasing security and stability in the area and building security sector capacity. PRTs’ military components are also in charge of directing assistance to the civilian elements, in particular at the levels of transport, medical assistance and engineering.

Overall, various kinds of projects are underway, facilitated by the NATO-ISAF PRTs: schools are being rebuilt with the mentoring or assistance of ISAF engineers, allowing children to resume their education; irrigation ditches, pipelines, reservoirs and wells are being constructed to bring water to the local population and farmers; infrastructure is being repaired and/or built to facilitate mobility and communication; and local people are provided with greater access to medical assistance.

Currently, there are 26 PRTs operating throughout the country. Some consist of military forces and civilian personnel from a single nation; others are multinational with contributions from several different countries. They are all led by individual ISAF nations. However, their military components come under the ISAF command and are coordinated by the relevant Regional Command.

- Humanitarian Assistance

Upon request, ISAF PRTs are assisting the Afghan government and international actors with humanitarian relief. In particular, ISAF soldiers have launched several relief missions, distributing medication, food and winter supplies to help villagers cope with severe weather conditions in different parts of the country.

Governance

ISAF, through its Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTS), is helping the Afghan Authorities
strengthen the institutions required to fully establish good governance and rule of law and to promote human rights. PRTs’ principal mission in this respect consists of building capacity, supporting the growth of governance structures and promoting an environment within which governance can improve.

**Counter-narcotics**

In May 2003, the Afghan government adopted a National Drug Control Strategy aimed at reducing the production of illicit drugs by 70 per cent by 2007 and at eliminating all productions by 2012. A Counter-Narcotics Directorate is embedded in the Interior Ministry and a fully-fledged counter-narcotics minister is presently one of the central actors of the Afghan Government.

Afghan capabilities in fighting narcotics and properly implementing its Drug Control Strategy however remain largely dependent on international assistance. Against this background, supporting the Afghan government counter-narcotics programmes is an ISAF key supporting task.

Accordingly, when requested by the Afghan Government, ISAF supports counter narcotics efforts by sharing information, conducting an efficient public information campaign, and providing in-extremis support to the Afghan National Security Forces’ counter-narcotics operations.

ISAF also assists the training of Afghan National Security Forces in counter-narcotics related activities and provides logistic support, when requested, for the delivery of alternative livelihood programmes.

As reflected in recent assessments by the United Nations and NATO’s own military commanders, there is also a growing nexus between the narcotics industry and the insurgency in some parts of the country. As a result, the Afghan Government formally requested that NATO-ISAF provide greater support in counter-narcotics efforts which Allies agreed to do at the NATO Defence Ministers’ Meeting in Budapest on 10 October 2008.

This enhanced support by ISAF includes the destruction of processing facilities and action against narcotic producers if there is a clearly established link with the insurgency. Such action by ISAF forces can be taken only upon request of the Afghan Government and with the consent of the national authorities of the forces involved.

**ISAF Mandate**

ISAF has been deployed since 2001 under the authority of the UN Security Council (UNSC) which authorised the establishment of the force to assist the Afghan government “in the maintenance of security in Kabul and its surrounding areas, so that the Afghan Interim Authority as well as the personnel of the United Nations can operate in a secure environment.”

ISAF is a coalition of the willing - not a UN force properly speaking - which has a peace-enforcement mandate under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.


NATO took command of ISAF in August 2003 upon request of the UN and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and soon after, the UN gave ISAF a mandate to expand outside of Kabul.

**The evolution of ISAF**

**Origin of ISAF**
ISAF was created in accordance with the Bonn Conference in December 2001. Afghan opposition leaders attending the conference began the process of reconstructing their country by setting up a new government structure, namely the Afghan Transitional Authority. The concept of a UN-mandated international force to assist the newly established Afghan Transitional Authority was also launched at this occasion to create a secure environment in and around Kabul and support the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

These agreements paved the way for the creation of a three-way partnership between the Afghan Transitional Authority, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and ISAF.

**NATO takes on ISAF command**

On 11 August 2003 NATO assumed leadership of the ISAF operation, turning the six-month national rotations to an end. The Alliance became responsible for the command, coordination and planning of the force, including the provision of a force commander and headquarters on the ground in Afghanistan.

This new leadership overcame the problem of a continual search to find new nations to lead the mission and the difficulties of setting up a new headquarters every six months in a complex environment. A continuing NATO headquarters also enables small countries, less likely to take over leadership responsibility, to play a strong role within a multinational headquarters.

**Expansion of ISAF’s presence in Afghanistan**

ISAF’s mandate was initially limited to providing security in and around Kabul. In October 2003, the United Nations extended ISAF’s mandate to cover the whole of Afghanistan (UNSCR 1510), paving the way for an expansion of the mission across the country.

- **Stage 1: to the north**

  In December 2003, the North Atlantic Council authorised the Supreme Allied Commander, General James Jones, to initiate the expansion of ISAF by taking over command of the German-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kunduz. The other eight PRTs operating in Afghanistan in 2003 remained under the command of Operation Enduring Freedom, the continuing US-led military operation in Afghanistan.

  On 31 December 2003, the military component of the Kunduz PRT was placed under ISAF command as a pilot project and first step in the expansion of the mission.

  Six months later, on 28 June 2004, at the Summit meeting of the NATO Heads of State and Government in Istanbul, NATO announced that it would establish four other provincial reconstruction teams in the north of the country: in Mazar-e-Sharif, Meymana, Feyzabad and Baghlan.

  This process was completed on 1 October 2004, marking the completion of the first phase of ISAF’s expansion. ISAF’s area of operations then covered some 3,600 square kilometres in the north and the mission was able to influence security in nine Northern provinces of the country.

- **Stage 2: to the west**

  On 10 February 2005, NATO announced that ISAF would be further expanded, into the west of Afghanistan.

  This process began on 31 May 2006, when ISAF took on command of two additional PRTs, in the provinces of Herat and Farah and of a Forward Support Base (a logistic base) in Herat.

  At the beginning of September, two further ISAF-led PRTs in the west became operational, one in Chaghcharan, capital of Ghor province, and one in Qala-e-Naw, capital of Baghdis province, completing ISAF’s expansion into the west.
The extended ISAF mission led a total of nine PRTs, in the north and the west, providing security assistance in 50% of Afghanistan’s territory. The Alliance continued to make preparations to further expand ISAF, to the south of the country.

In September 2005, the Alliance also temporarily deployed 2,000 additional troops to Afghanistan to support the 18 September provincial and parliamentary elections.

- **Stage 3: to the south**

  On 8 December 2005, meeting at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, the Allied Foreign Ministers endorsed a plan that paved the way for an expanded ISAF role and presence in Afghanistan. The first element of this plan was the expansion of ISAF to the south in 2006, also known as Stage 3.

  This was implemented on 31 July 2006, when ISAF assumed command of the southern region of Afghanistan from US-led Coalition forces, expanding its area of operations to cover an additional six provinces – Day Kundi, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimroz, Uruzgan and Zabul – and taking on command of four additional PRTs.

  The expanded ISAF led a total of 13 PRTs in the north, west and south, covering some three-quarters of Afghanistan’s territory.

  The number of ISAF forces in the country also increased significantly, from about 10,000 prior to the expansion to about 20,000 after.

- **Stage 4: ISAF expands to the east, takes responsibility for entire country**

  On 5 October 2006, ISAF implemented the final stage of its expansion, by taking on command of the international military forces in eastern Afghanistan from the US-led Coalition.

  In addition to expanding the Alliance’s area of operations, the revised operational plan also paved the way for a greater ISAF role in the country. This includes the deployment of ISAF OMLTs to Afghan National Army units at various levels of command.