

# Panetta: NATO ministers agree Afghan transition on track

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By Karen Parrish, American Forces Press Service



*U.S. Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta greets Georgian Defense Minister Bachana Akhalaia at a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels, Feb. 2, 2012. DOD photo by U.S. Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Chad J. McNeeley - [Download Hi-Res](#)*

BRUSSELS -- NATO defense ministers meeting here all agreed on a clear message: as the transition to Afghan security lead proceeds, the process "reflects what Lisbon was all about," Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta said Feb. 2.

Panetta was referring to the way forward in Afghanistan as agreed upon by President Barack Obama and NATO's other heads of state and government at the alliance's November 2010 summit in Lisbon, Portugal.

"As an alliance, obviously, we are all fully committed to the Lisbon framework – in together, out together – [and] we're committed to a transition to Afghan control," Panetta said. "As the president has said, by 2014 this process of transition will be complete, and the Afghan people will be responsible for their own security."

Consultations are evolving among the NATO and non-NATO nations contributing to the International Security Assistance Force effort – 50 in all – about how best to continue transferring parts of Afghanistan to Afghan security force-led operations, the secretary added, with announcements of more transfers likely at the May 20-21 NATO summit in Chicago.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai announced in November 2009 his wish to see Afghan army and police forces take lead security responsibility across Afghanistan by the end of 2014. The Joint Afghan-NATO Inteqal [Dari and Pashtu for "transition"] Board, or JANIB, was established at the July 2010 Kabul conference to assess districts and provinces for transition.

Afghan and NATO leaders agreed to the proposed transition process in Lisbon. Karzai announced the first round, or "tranche," of transition areas in March, and the second in November.

The pace of transition remains conditions-based, Panetta said. "When you're in war, when you're in combat, every step is conditions-based," he added.

Officials have stressed since the process was announced that transition must be sustainable and irreversible. The secretary said yesterday that when the current, second tranche is complete, more than half of the Afghan people will live under their nation's governance and security lead.

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"We hope that the [Afghan} forces will be ready to take the combat lead in all of Afghanistan sometime in 2013," Panetta said. "Obviously, we will have to continue consultation with our allies and our Afghan partners about the best way to accomplish that goal."

The secretary noted these discussions demonstrate the strategy is working and progress is happening. Clearly, however, ISAF forces will remain combat-ready and engage in combat operations as necessary throughout the transition, he said.

As Afghan forces take over operational control in more areas - leading patrols, setting tactics, and identifying enemy targets - ISAF troops will be at their side to support and advise them on those efforts, and continue to train and build their capabilities, Panetta said.

Defense ministers today agreed the coalition is "headed in the right direction" in Afghanistan, Panetta said. Talks will continue, he added, on the right level of funding for and size of Afghan forces to sustain their nation's security long-term.

"There's much hard fighting ahead here," the secretary said. "We need to keep the momentum up, and we need to keep the enemy on its heels."

A strong partnership with NATO is a pillar of U.S. defense strategy, Panetta said. More defense consultations will take place tomorrow, framing discussion for decisions to be taken at the Chicago summit, he added.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said today Afghanistan is NATO's top operational priority. After today's session, he told reporters, "Transition is a road that ISAF and the Afghan forces will walk together - every step of the way."

Afghanistan is a serious issue for NATO and the entire international community, Rasmussen said, "because we all have an interest in making sure Afghanistan is stable and secure."

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