

## Security Challenges

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With a planned presidential election nearing in Afghanistan, attention is turning to security amid stepped-up violence in the volatile Central Asian nation. The fledgling local police force and army are seen as not up to the task. But United States military planners say they are discussing the possible deployment of between 5,000 and 10,000 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) troops during voter registration, the electoral campaign and polling day in June—a period of about six weeks between May 1 and June 15. The United Nations says it wants to set up 4,200 registration and polling stations if there is adequate security. In rural areas, voters would register and cast their ballot at the same time. "What concerns us now is the viability of domestic and international forces on a scale large enough to cover the 4,200 polling stations around the country," says Jean Arnault, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative to Afghanistan. If Nato agrees, its troops could link up with 12 Provincial Reconstruction Teams, or PRTs, already in place. These comprise between 60 and 100 soldiers and civilian aid workers. The Americans operate nine PRTs, while Britain and New Zealand each operate one under U.S. command. Nato commands only one PRT in the northern town of Kunduz, drawn from German troops.

By the summer there will be four more U.S.-led PRTs in the Taliban-infested south. In August when Nato took over command of the 5,600-strong International Security Assistance Force in Kabul, it pledged to take over leadership of all the PRTs, but it is far from doing so. Initially established to provide security to reconstruction efforts, the PRTs had a very limited mandate, provided no security to the Afghan population and were harshly criticized by the aid agencies. However their mandate has steadily expanded. The British PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif has been instrumental in defusing ethnic tensions in northern Afghanistan, while U.S. PRTs in eastern Afghanistan are focusing more on providing security for relief work in villages. Most significantly, the U.S.-led PRTs have become involved since January in interdicting heroin trafficking, which the U.S. military had refused to take on because it was seen as a domestic issue. Now PRTs provide the intelligence that enables special-forces troops to destroy heroin-production facilities. However, with their present numbers and geographical distribution, the PRTs are still not up to the task of providing security for the population during the elections.