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**Backgrounder:
Senior NATO Logisticians' Conference Helicopter Support Initiative**

The NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan has grappled with a shortage of helicopter lift assets for several years. The lack of suitable roadways, the challenging terrain of this region, and the increasing scope of NATO operations in theatre make the impact of this shortage even greater, especially with regard to the safety, security and medical care for the Force. The NATO logistics community has launched an initiative in autumn 2008 that is helping address this situation.

The NATO Senior Logisticians' Conference (SNLC) recognized that the helicopter shortfall in ISAF could not be solved by simply acquiring more helicopters, so it focused on enabling logistics efficiencies and multinational logistic support solutions to increase the available flying hours of deployed platforms in theatre. With more airframes mission capable, the Alliance could then increase its aviation capacity and effectiveness in ISAF.

Before this project began, some Allies were returning their helicopters to their home countries for periodic phased maintenance, and in some cases, even for spare parts replacement. This resulted in the unavailability of platforms for operations for up to four months and incurred increased costs in the millions of Euros.

The SNLC endeavour is based on the NATO doctrinal approach of the "Lead Nation" concept whereby a nation that has a developed logistic capability can share it with other nations via bilateral and multilateral mutual logistic support agreements (MLSAs). Another key element is the shared use of NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency (NAMSA) contracts and other sales agreements for in-theatre maintenance, spare parts, and facilities between ISAF Allies operating similar helicopter platforms.

This in turn can enable participating Allies to leverage existing multinational logistics capabilities and supply chains into theatre, dramatically reducing their maintenance down time and costs, and ultimately providing increased flight hours per platform in support of ongoing operations by ISAF forces in Afghanistan.

As an example of the work being done, Canada, Australia, The Netherlands, and Germany are now participating in a programme led by the U.S., with future participation that may include Spain, Italy, Turkey, and possibly the United Kingdom. In fact, the Netherlands has already saved over 2 Million Euros by having their AH-64 Apache Phased Maintenance done in theatre, as compared to home station. This generates increased savings and combat capacity not just in theatre, but for units back home as well.

Working together and reducing costs are key elements for all nations with troops and equipment supporting ISAF. Lieutenant General Kathleen Gainey, of the United States, noted, "This is a tremendous opportunity. Multinational initiatives such as this increase warfighting capacity, enhance cost savings and bolster allied cohesion."

In similar programmes, France is leading the Eurocopter-based "Western European" group, with Italy volunteering to lead the NH-90 group. Finally, the Czech Republic is the leader of the HIP Helicopter Task Force which is attempting to establish arrangements for all HIP-owning Allies.

To capitalize on the momentum gained, the four groups are also beginning to focus on enhancing further areas of common maintenance for ISAF, for example strategic warehousing, tool calibration, oil analysis, etc. No matter the level of multinational ambition, though, these improvements in efficiency and effectiveness will yield big dividends to the NATO alliance for years to come. Efficiencies are critical, Gainey asserted, "At a time of budget constraints across the Alliance, initiatives such as this help bridge logistical gaps and financial shortfalls, while keeping our forces armed, reduce maintenance time and ready for ISAF operations."

