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NEW DEAL – BOOSTING EUROPE'S ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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When French President Nicolas Sarkozy takes over from his Slovenian counterpart at the beginning of the France's Presidency of the European Council, he will take on an impressive burden. The EU has to manage a military mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a police and justice operation in Kosovo, and a military deployment to Chad.

Of all the peace keeping missions, the most important for Europe is NATO's Afghan mission. But in spite of a major European commitment – including billions of Euro for reconstruction, and thousands of troops from EU countries deployed – stabilising Afghanistan has never been high on the EU's agenda. A damaging split has opened in the European ranks over where national contingents may or may not fight. Germany, Italy, and Spain refuse to send their troops to southern Afghanistan where fighting against the Taliban is heaviest. Only Britain, Denmark, the Netherlands, Poland, Estonia and Romania are prepared to risk their forces in these areas.

Increasing violence and instability in Afghanistan have made it all the more important that the EU stays the course. Hamid Karzai's government is largely powerless outside of Kabul; the US Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell has told Congress that the Afghan government controls under a third of the country, while the resurgent Taliban controls a good tenth.

Most analysts agree that outright military defeat of the Taliban is now impossible. This means that a settlement offering some of the insurgents financial rewards and a share of constitutional power to entice them to switch sides is unavoidable. Yet President Karzai shows little sign of moving towards a political approach to resolving the conflict. Indeed, he expelled two diplomats in December 2007 for allegedly negotiating with the Taliban, before vetoing the appointment of Paddy Ashdown as UN envoy.

A swift and successful end to the conflict is now out of reach; even optimistic scenarios foresee an international presence being required for years to come, with fighting continuing, albeit on a reduced level.

However, there is some cause for hope. February's election in neighbouring Pakistan saw extremists lose support in the border provinces which the Taliban have used as a staging post for incursions into Afghanistan. The long overdue appointment of a new UN envoy – the experienced Norwegian Kai Eide – also provides an opportunity. But turning

the situation around will require changing the way the international community operates. In this, Europe can and must play a leading role.

France's hosting of an international conference on development aid for Afghanistan in late June and an increase in the number of French troops gives the Elysée an opportunity to drive the EU's policy in Afghanistan. France should help prepare Europe for a renewed international commitment there in coordination with a new US President.

For Europe must do more than repeat the same old pledges and send a few extra troops. Rather, a "grand bargain" is needed whereby Europeans agree to commit more troops and resources in exchange for a shift in American strategy that should place more weight on the search for a political solution to the conflict. This new strategy should be cemented at a new Bonn-type conference bringing together heads of states from the US, UN, EU, and all of Afghanistan's regional partners.¹ But if this is to happen, Europe has to raise its own game.

EUROPE'S ROLE

Since the Taliban's fall in 2001, the EU has been a major donor to Afghanistan. While an initial suggestion for a coordinated EU force within NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) did not materialise, EU countries have deployed thousands of troops through the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom mission and NATO's ISAF mission.² The EU-27 now account for more than half of the ISAF's total deployment. Member states are in command of 11 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) across the country.

EU-Afghan relations are governed by the Joint Declaration between the EU and Afghanistan agreed in 2005. The EU has granted Afghanistan preferential trade terms to assist economic recovery. The European Commission has allocated €610 million to Afghanistan for the 2007-2010 period and has a Special Representative (EUSR) in Kabul. The Commission and member states accounted for nearly a third of total pledges of financial assistance at the 2002 Tokyo and 2004 Berlin donor conferences.

EU funds have paid for the rebuilding of the Kabul to Jalalabad road, improvements to healthcare, rural development, and de-mining programmes. The EU also covered half the cost of the 2004 Presidential elections, 40 per cent of the cost of the 2005 parliamentary elections, and sent election monitors to both. In 2007, the EU launched a European Security and Defence Policy police mission while the Commission established a complementary rule of law programme.

1. Daniel Korski, "Afghanistan: Europe's Forgotten War", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, January 2008.

2. "Europe's Growing Engagement in Afghanistan: What Success for ESDP?", Eva Gross, *CFSP Forum* 5 (4): 11-14. July 2007.

Notwithstanding these valuable contributions, Europe should still be spending more and exerting a greater influence over the policy of the international mission. As the International Crisis Group wrote in 2005: "While Europe is widely trusted by Afghans, few – even at high level – appreciate the full scale of EU commitments."³ Worse still, the EU's effort is hampered by a lack of political oversight, poor allocation of already insufficient resources, and a lack of both internal and external cooperation.

Most EU governments have failed to act on NATO's request to boost troop levels. One exception is the UK, which has recently pledged to increase its troop numbers in the restive poppy-growing province of Helmand. But European troop contributions continue to fall well short of the 17,000 US troops under ISAF command along with the 8,000 GIs deployed independently. Apart from Dutch soldiers in Uruzgan and a Polish and Romanian presence in Ghazni, Paktika, and Zabul, few other EU nations are willing to operate in the southern and eastern parts of the country where the Taliban increasingly have free reign. Overall, there are at least 60 operational restrictions – known as "caveats" – on European troops, preventing commanders from deploying military assets where they are most needed.

Despite the need for a stronger commitment, the Commission's annual development assistance to Afghanistan will fall in 2008, from €200 million to €150 million. Individual EU member states, which contribute well over twice the amount of funding provided by the Commission, have failed to act as a coherent donor group. Instead, they have adopted divergent policies. Some, like France, have provided little assistance. France's €33 million pledge for reconstruction support is low in the context of its projected total foreign-aid budget of €7.8 billion in 2008.

In areas such as policing, the rule of law and counter-narcotics, EU states have pursued policies entirely independently of each other. The EU Police Mission (EUPOL), launched in June 2007, was meant to address this lack of coordination but its mandate was eventually restricted to police reform, with the Commission funding a separate judicial program. EUPOL started poorly, losing its first commander, and faces serious problems recruiting effective staff. The mission's projected staff complement of 200 is probably ten times smaller than what is required.

As with military-to-population ratios, the international police presence in Afghanistan is below the levels of similar missions. EUPOL's contingent of 200 compares poorly to the 186 police officers the EU has in Bosnia and Herzegovina – down from 500 between 2003 and 2005 – and 1,479 in the UN-run Kosovo mission, a figure set to increase when the EU takes over the mission later in 2008.

3. "Rebuilding The Afghan State: The European Union's Role", *International Crisis Group's Asia Report* N°107, 30 November 2005.

Coordination, all-important in post-conflict operations, is weak. Chains of command are often unclear. While the EU has integrated its Balkans offices in Macedonia, each EU institution has a separate leader and office in Kabul. Back in Brussels, things are little better. European leaders rarely discuss Afghanistan and senior officials are equally unconcerned: experts from member states meet only twice a year. When Afghanistan does make it onto the agenda – at meetings of the Ministerial Troika or at foreign ministers’ dinners after formal Council sessions – the discussion lacks purpose.

In sum, Europeans have failed to define and implement a united strategy for Afghanistan. There has been no substantive debate about how to reconcile divergent national approaches to counter-insurgency and policing, nor any attempt to forge an overarching political approach. Finally, there is a feeling that nobody is in charge. A position of Deputy Director-General with responsibility for Afghanistan has remained vacant in the Council Secretariat, while efforts to replace the EU envoy in Kabul have not begun in earnest.

The EU cannot remake coalition strategy alone. But a united EU can act as a powerful advocate for a better and more coordinated international approach. The US rightly argues that more troops are needed to dominate the terrain, and lambasts European allies for their failure to step up their effort. European countries are equally right to criticise the current military strategy and to fear that without a change, an increase in troop numbers might only lead to greater civilian casualties alienating the local population.

EU countries should help resolve this tension by committing to send more troops, trainers, and civilians to Afghanistan, as well as lifting all remaining “caveats” which hamper their soldiers’ effectiveness. This would give EU countries more legitimacy to ask for an overhaul of military strategy. The EU must also reverse the decline in reconstruction funding and spend funds at grass roots level through the Provincial reconstruction Teams (PRTs), and in support of provincial governments and the reconciliation effort with the Taliban.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is vital for the EU to improve its performance in Afghanistan. The following initial steps should be taken:

- The Council should name a new high-profile EU Special Representative (EUSR) to replace the long-serving Francesc Vendrell.

- The new EU Special Representative should be mandated to:

- Integrate the local Commission representation, the EU Heads of Mission, and EUPOL to create a tighter EU set-up, as in the Balkans.

– Broaden the EUPOL mission into a police-and-justice mission and push for a major increase in numbers.

– Make EU aid in to Afghanistan's provinces dependent on the achievement of specific benchmarks set out in "good governance contracts". This will improve the effectiveness of local government.

– Develop proposals for boosting the resources provided by the EU to Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

– Assist democratisation by making funding for the 2009-10 presidential and parliamentary elections conditional on the introduction of an element of list-based proportional representation. This would promote the development of political parties and dilute the influence of local war lords.

■ A Wise Men's Committee, should be jointly appointed by the Council and Commission and chaired by a prominent European, to develop a new EU approach to the region, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Once they have received the report, the EU Presidency should convene a conference focused on the region and consideration should be given to appointing a high-level EU Envoy to Pakistan.

■ The EU's Political and Security Committee and NATO's North Atlantic Council should meet quarterly to discuss Afghanistan exclusively.

■ The EU Presidency should convene an "Afghan forum" of officials from member states. Political Directors should meet before each foreign ministers' meeting, while junior officials could meet monthly.

■ Since it is unlikely that the German, Italian, and Spanish governments can be persuaded to send their troops to the south, the "Afghan forum" should develop a plan for "alternative burden-sharing", detailing how troops in the north could take on more responsibility for the training of the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police.