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Commentary

Seeking a new international approach on Afghanistan and Pakistan

By Shada Islam and Daniel Korski

The appointment of senior Norwegian diplomat Kai Eide as the long-awaited United Nations envoy for Afghanistan provides a unique opportunity to craft a new international strategy for the country, led by political rather than military goals and driven by a regional and comprehensive approach.

Stabilising and reconstructing Afghanistan also requires greater international engagement with Pakistan's new democratically-elected government, which is committed to stepping up efforts to fight religious extremists, including Pakistani and Afghan Taliban.

After six years of warfare and a massive aid effort, Afghanistan's reconstruction teeters on the brink. But the US administration believes it has found its "Anbar moment" - the decisive point which, like in Iraq, will signal a turn-around in the war effort.

Washington believes that 'moment' is happening in eastern Afghanistan, where US-run Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), the military build-up and a new counter-insurgency approach have given the US-led coalition the upper hand in areas once seen as insurgency-ridden.

The US argues that success in Afghanistan only requires more troops, trainers and money, not a new strategy. Its demands that reluctant European allies take a larger role in combating the Taliban in the south and east of the country will therefore loom large at the NATO summit in Bucharest on 2-4 April.

However, in the areas that the US claims are safer, Taliban suicide and roadside bombings, threats to the local population and attacks on non-governmental organisations have forced many aid agencies to close down. Reconstruction work has also ceased.

Meanwhile, the drugs trade is swelling Taliban coffers and insurgent attacks have made the main road from Kandahar to Kabul too dangerous for foreigners. US intelligence 'czar' Mike McConnell recently admitted that the Taliban have retaken about 10% of the country, while the Afghanistan NGO Security Office (ANSO) reported that insurgents carried out more attacks over a wider area in 2007.

A new Afghanistan policy requires that the international community encourages President Hamid Karzai to engage mid-ranking, 'moderate' insurgents, by developing a package of financial and other incentives which could convince them to support the government rather than the Taliban. This will be controversial, but is necessary.

However, political negotiations must be conducted from a position of strength and cannot replace military action. European countries should therefore commit to sending more troops, trainers and civilians to Afghanistan, while also lifting some of the 60 'caveats' on their troops' activities.

If European NATO allies are unwilling to do this, the US will have to step in, with an estimated 10,000-plus additional troops required for the coalition to control territory in the south and east.

Recent developments in neighbouring Pakistan could help. The electoral success of Pakistan's mainstream secular political parties and the resounding defeat of Islamist groups are a major

setback for the 'Pakistani Taliban' and are expected to erode support for the militants, including Taliban and Al-Qaeda operatives sheltering in the region.

Significantly, Pakistan's new political leadership appears determined to improve strained ties with Afghanistan, ending the deep mistrust that characterised relations between Presidents Musharraf and Karzai.

A return to civilian rule and the military's retreat from politics will also free the Pakistan army to focus on fighting militants in its north-west and take tougher action to stop the cross-border movement of insurgents into Afghanistan. On the domestic front, counter-terrorism policies forged by a legitimate, democratic government are likely to secure more popular support than the actions of a discredited president believed to be fighting "America's war".

All is not lost in Afghanistan. However, a new strategy, including strengthened relations with Pakistan, is required. This is a vital task best undertaken by a joint NATO-EU committee of experts, chaired by a prominent European.

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