Winning European hearts and minds on Afghanistan

Governments across Europe have failed to engage public opinion and win voters’ support for their military involvement in Afghanistan, says Fabrice Pothier. He puts forward a plan for “review commissions” that would redress the situation.

The war in Afghanistan is a war of a new kind, being waged simultaneously on the security and development fronts. The battle for the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, especially those disenfranchised communities in the southern provinces, will determine the success or failure of the mission.

But in our haste to win the support of Afghans, we forget that this is a battle that must be fought at home too. National opinion polls conducted in recent years in European countries making significant military and development aid contributions to Afghanistan – notably the UK, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and France – point to shrinking support for the mission and a growing public sentiment that the mission is doomed.

The dramatic deterioration in the security situation is only part of the explanation. It has more to do with the European governments’ failure to convey to their citizens a clearer and more realistic vision of the mission in Afghanistan, how it is tied to our national interest and why the mission must involve both development and military efforts at the same time. We are plainly losing the battle for European hearts and minds on Afghanistan.

In the aftermath of 9/11, NATO’s intervention in Afghanistan benefited from the overwhelming support of Western public opinion. The contrast during 2003 and 2004 with the controversial Iraq war only reinforced the widely-shared view that Afghanistan was the “right war”. But since the renewed Taliban...
offensive in 2005, this broad support has been dangerously eroded. In a recent survey, 63% of those surveyed in France and in Britain, 66% in Italy and 69% in Germany think the war against the Taliban has been a failure. The downturn in public support is rooted in the long-standing miscalculation and miscommunication by European leaders of the real risks of the mission. They were hoping to build peace on the cheap, with a light military footprint and a focus on reconstruction rather than on tackling the largely underestimated threat of the Taliban insurgency. They were also hoping to sell the Afghanistan mission with abstract arguments about Europe’s security being played at the Hindu Kush and the Helmand desert. But a sceptical European public opinion requires better arguments to justify what is a complex, high-risk and long-term mission.

The consequences of this failure are dire. European troops and civilian experts on the front lines do not enjoy the moral support they deserve. At the same time the capacity of governments, especially in Italy and Germany, to make hard choices and strengthen or even renew their commitment to Afghanistan is now seriously limited. The problem goes wider than that, of course. The inability to build broad and genuine public support for Afghanistan calls into question Europe’s ability to defend its common security and work with its American partner.

Each European country significantly involved in Afghanistan should, as a matter of urgency, set up an independent public review of its future commitment. These would contribute to re-framing the debate on I am not as pessimistic as Fabrice Pothier when he says that our policymakers are losing the battle for European hearts and minds on Afghanistan. The European and North American pledges on Afghanistan were reinforced in April at the NATO summit in Bucharest. As to the EU, the European Commission and the member states have been responsible for a third of all the reconstruction assistance there, which makes them the second largest donor in Afghanistan behind the US. Of the EU’s 27 member states, 25 are contributing to the NATO-led ISAF mission, and the international community’s efforts to establish a functioning and sustainable Afghan state would appear stronger than ever.

But our aim of creating an enduring, stable, secure and prosperous Afghanistan which fully respects human rights and the rule of law, requires tenacity, perseverance and, above all, solidarity. Afghanistan is undoubtedly a long-term commitment for the Westerns community. And although we have seen indications of improvements in a number of different fields, the major challenges remain. In other words, we must sustain and strengthen the pace and the extent of our progress. I have to agree, of course, with Fabrice Pothier that there are even...
Afghanistan in more open and constructive terms than the current highly polarised “should-I-stay-or-should-I-go?” debate. The model could be the Manley commission, named after former Canadian Foreign Minister John Manley who chaired the commission that the Canadian government set up in 2007 to review the country’s future involvement in Afghanistan. It was set out to de-politicise a national debate on Afghanistan in Canada that had grown increasingly acrimonious following poor government communications and mounting fatalities. European countries should follow

MATTERS OF OPINION

US public supports military action in Afghanistan more than Iraq

According to a Gallup poll in late July 2008, Americans tend to think that the military involvement in Afghanistan is more important for their country than that in Iraq.

Asked to choose which campaign was the most important for the United States, 44% picked Afghanistan compared to 38% who opted for Iraq. One in 10 of those surveyed could not separate the two actions. Political allegiances showed some correlation with responses: Republican voters tended to say Iraq was the more important, while Democrats and independents mainly chose Afghanistan.

Less than three in 10 thought it was a mistake for the US to have sent troops into Afghanistan, compared to two-thirds who supported the operation. The latter figure has remained fairly constant since 2004.

In the Gallup poll, when asked whether they would support the US sending more troops to Afghanistan, 59% of US citizens said that they would, a rise of three percentage points since summer 2007. But nearly four in 10 (38%) still said they were opposed to sending more troops.
the Manley commission in evaluating the different options and proposing a pragmatic way forward that reflects each country’s national interest. They should also generate a substantial public discussion on why Afghanistan matters for Europeans.

Public opinion is at different stages of crisis in each European country. In every case, however, it seriously threatens Europe’s capacity to be in Afghanistan on the long-haul.

Italy is a striking example of the political cost for European governments of losing hearts and minds at home over Afghanistan. The vote in February 2007 to renew the Italian mission in Afghanistan led to the temporary collapse of the Prodi government. To have such devastating effects, a small group of extreme-left coalition partners, who on principle opposed military deployment in Afghanistan, took advantage of the government’s schizophrenic message: refusing to admit that Afghanistan is at war on one hand, whilst asking to extend the military mission on the other. Even though a vote at the Senate finally passed and Prodi recovered his job, the Italian mission was put under even more constraining terms and caveats.

Germany is another example, though less extreme, of a parliamentary democracy where the government has failed to fully acknowledge the state of war in Afghanistan in fear of losing the shaky Parliamentary support for the mission. If this approach has worked on the short run, it leaves very little capacity for more fundamental adaptations to the German commitment. Military engagement is still a controversial issue in Germany. But since the involvement

signs of weakening public support in certain EU countries for the Western involvement in Afghanistan. Our failure to explain to the citizens the rationale for our presence in Afghanistan is the main reason for that. And even though in our globalised world distances have deeply shrunk, Afghanistan is in the perception of European citizens still very far away. Other priorities closer to home seem more urgent. In Afghanistan’s case, geography is proving more powerful than geopolitics.

At the same time, we have to realise that the six-year long military presence in Afghanistan and the prospect of our engagement lasting further there has significantly eroded public support and has tired European citizens and politicians too. We should also analyse this declining public support in the current broader context of increased euroscepticism. The failure of the Irish referendum on the Lisbon treaty has once more brought into the public debate the questions that still hang over the future of Europe – where is the European Union heading? Where are its borders going to be? Are we ready for a simple voice in foreign and security policy?

Nevertheless, abandoning Afghanistan is simply not possible. What European policymakers need is a fresh long-term strategy on Afghanistan, based on a comprehensive approach to security, stronger national commitments and full cooperation among all parties involved. This strategy should be accompanied by an effective communications policy, so that EU citizens become more aware of the reasons for seeing their tax money invested in a consolidation of the Afghan state. Public opinion has not completely understood
of German troops in the 1999 Kosovo war, a new consensus has slowly emerged. Chancellor Angela Merkel’s government, although renowned for the strength of its commitment to global issues like climate change, has not expended much political capital on making the case for German involvement in Afghanistan.

Risk-averse politics are, of course, all too normal in our modern parliamentary democracies. Nonetheless, the response from European governments has been weak and disingenuous, downplaying the seriousness of the Afghanistan mission at home while at the same time agreeing with international partners on the importance of prevailing there. This has left the public debate polarised between the equally unattractive options of withdrawing now or remaining in Afghanistan indefinitely. Both the public in Europe and the troops are left uncertainty in the middle, with little information available to the former and an unclear mission for the latter.

In the UK, the news of the deployment of British troops in Helmand, the most dangerous province, was greeted with typical public patriotism. British senior government officials nevertheless used expediency to “sell” the deployment, setting unreasonably low expectations about the nature and risks of the mission. In a revealing answer to journalists in Kabul, Britain’s then Defence Secretary John Reid told the BBC: "We would be perfectly happy to leave in three years and without firing one shot, because our job is to protect the reconstruction." Since then, his successor has fought an uphill battle against the notion that British troops are sent in unprepared, in too few numbers and ill-equipped to fight an elusive but lethal enemy in the context of a minimal development effort and a booming trade in illegal opium. This tragic under-evaluation and miscommunication left British public opinion unprepared for mounting fatalities.

The British government also invited still greater confusion by presenting the Helmand mission as an opportunity to tackle the problem of illegal heroin on British streets. Back in 2002, Prime Minister Tony Blair had reported to the House of Commons that at the G-8 summit that year he “set out detailed UK proposals for curbing opium production in Afghanistan, which is the source of some 90% of the heroin on our streets, and we agreed collectively to step up efforts to deal with this menace”. Although Afghanistan is indeed the source of most of the heroin trade in Britain, tackling its production as part of the British military mission is unlikely to address the problem of demand. Yet this simplistic argument helped the British government to reinforce support for the Afghanistan mission among Conservatives as well as Labour MPs whose urban constituencies in the north of England are particularly vulnerable to drug problems. In any case, it’s not an argument that has done much to sway public opinion in the UK. A recent survey in The Sunday Times
newspaper suggested that more than half of all Britons now believe British troops should pull-out of Afghanistan.

France offers a different but telling example of Europe’s missed opportunities over Afghanistan. The long-awaited announcement by President Nicolas Sarkozy of additional troop deployments was first made on a visit to London and then at NATO’s Spring summit in Bucharest. Even though the deployment concerned only 700 additional troops, it marked a clear qualitative shift in France’s role in Afghanistan. However, the announcements were marred by confusion over the objectives of the deployment, the appraisal of the situation on the ground and regarding the political context of France’s reintegration into NATO’s military command structure. Usually supportive of troop deployments, French public opinion seemed to welcome the decision with general scepticism – 68% of the population was opposed to Sarkozy’s decision, whilst only 15% were in favour. The Socialist opposition party, whose former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin had sent in the first troops in 2001, expressed atypical opposition to the decision.

How would the public review commissions in European countries involved in Afghanistan work? Each would define more clearly the country’s interest, review the different scenarios for involvement in Afghanistan, evaluate the short and long-term risks and benefits of each option and then recommend a realistic baseline for success. Every national commission’s analysis should start from the point that Afghanistan is in a state of war, but that Afghanistan is the gateway to Europe for terrorism, organised crime and drugs. In terms of challenges to our common security, Afghanistan has never been that close to us as it is today.
success can be achieved through finding a political strategy that combines both security concerns and development needs. It should not shy away from controversial but vital issues like Pakistan and broader questions of regional cooperation, as well as the narcotics issue. Each commission should be independent from official institutions, including Parliament, composed of eminent civilian and military representatives and should be chaired by a political figure who commands non-partisan respect. Ideal candidates would be former Prime Minister Giuliano Amato in Italy, former Defence Ministers Alain Richard for France and Volker Ruehe for Germany, and Lord Paddy Ashdown, former leader of the Liberal-Democrats, in the UK. Commissions should consult senior national and international policy players, and also experts and opinion formers. Each commission’s timetable should be linked to a major Parliamentary vote on Afghanistan, but should not be connected to electoral calendars to avoid becoming embroiled in partisan politics. A commission’s work should also not finish on the day it delivers its report; it should reconvene on regular basis to review progress, or the lack of it, and to keep public discussion alive and focused.

Europe badly needs to clarify its stance on Afghanistan and its role there. With a new White House occupant likely to strengthen the US focus there, Afghanistan is a test to Europe’s capacity to be a reliable and unified transatlantic partner. The Afghanistan mission has been marked in Europe by too much propaganda and too little realistic commitment. It should not become Europe’s first missed opportunity with the new U.S. Administration. It is time for European governments to show the same courage as their own troops on the ground, engage in debate, broaden the argument, set realistic expectations and regain hearts and minds at home. The EU’s much-vaunted European security and defence policy will be meaningless if it cannot adequately win the support of its citizens for, what is after all, the defining conflict of this new century.

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