

Blueprint for an EU role in Obama's "AfPak" strategy

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Europe has a lot of ground to make up if it is to make a real contribution to the new U.S. drive in Afghanistan and Pakistan, warns Shada Islam. But she says that doing so is vital to transatlantic relations and to Europe's global ambitions

Commentary:

Barack Obama's ambitious new game plan for fighting the Al Qaeda-led insurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and his demands for a stronger European role in the effort, present EU governments with a make-or-break opportunity to upgrade their less-than-impressive engagement so far. The stakes are higher than many in Europe would like to believe, for the destruction of Al Qaeda and Taliban safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan is crucial to the survival of both quasi-failing states. It is also needed to stop further terror attacks on both the West and the Muslim world.

Afghanistan and Pakistan – AfPak – present a critical test for transatlantic relations and Europe's hopes of crafting a strong new strategic partnership with Washington. EU countries' actions in both countries will also do much to determine Europe's credibility as a global security actor and its ability to leverage non-military "soft power" tools of aid, trade and diplomacy to stabilise troubled nations.

The EU has so far had a distinctly different approach to Afghanistan and to Pakistan. A large majority of EU states have sent troops to Afghanistan and are pumping in millions of euros to bolster that country's fragile economy, even though this has not translated into political influence. By contrast, Europe's relations with Pakistan, a country which is seen as even more pivotal than Afghanistan in the combat against terrorism, remain exceptionally low-key and uninspiring.

The time is now over for reflection, consultation and for sitting on the fence. European governments had been vocal in their criticism of U.S. policy towards Afghanistan during the Bush Administration, and their advice was ignored. With President Obama, Europeans have an opportunity to partner with the U.S. in seeking solutions to the challenges of AfPak.

To do so, they must pay more attention to both Afghanistan and Pakistan. President Obama is right in describing the AfPak border, with its numerous Al Qaeda training camps, as "the most dangerous place in the world." Sadly, European leaders have been unwilling or unable to make a forceful case for curbing Al Qaeda-led insurgencies in Afghanistan and Pakistan as a way to ensure Europe's security.

The EU has mainly left discussion on Afghanistan mainly to NATO, and European policy towards Pakistan has been focused on aid with little emphasis on meeting the country's insurgency and governance challenges. Europe must now act urgently to forge a pro-active new strategy which responds to both the development and security challenges facing Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most important of all, it must put its relations with Pakistan much higher on its foreign and security policy agenda.

The Americans are using increased military power to back up their AfPak strategy. They now recognise that Europeans will not send substantially more combat troops to Afghanistan, but believing that the insurgency cannot be defeated by military action alone, the U.S. wants Europeans to participate in a so-called "civilian surge" that would go hand-in-hand with an increase in U.S. and NATO boots on the ground. The EU has the tools and the expertise to implement such a "comprehensive approach" by stepping up efforts to improve Afghanistan's governance and address its rule of law deficit. As well as improved law and order, it can also spearhead moves to strengthen the counter-narcotics drive by switching from a focus on eradication to implementing integrated rural development schemes which include the construction of local roads for the marketing of alternative crops.

Its experience in regional cooperation and integration gives the EU exceptional credibility as an "honest broker" to ease strained relations between Afghanistan and its neighbours, and also contribute

to better relations between Pakistan and India. Although it will be more difficult, Europeans could lead the way in opening negotiations with "reconcilable" Taliban insurgents and militants who either have no links to Al Qaeda or are willing to sever them.

European countries are regarded by many in Afghanistan and Pakistan with less hostility than the U.S. This is especially so in Pakistan, where U.S. drone attacks on insurgents in the tribal areas continue to cause public outrage. Washington's standing in Pakistan has also been tarnished by the Bush Administration's support for President Musharraf, whereas the EU has built up credit among Pakistan's political elite – including lawyers, human rights activists and pro-democracy groups – by focusing on the need to hold free and fair elections, insisting on the independence of the judiciary and concentrating on the building of stronger civilian institutions.

Europe's performance in Afghanistan has not been uniformly grim. The EU is a leading aid donor there, providing a total of €3.7bn over 2002-2006. A stronger European military effort was promised at both the NATO and EU-U.S. summits in April this year, but we should make no mistake that the European effort in Afghanistan will be judged by the success or failure of its EUPOL police mission. This EU flagship operation is unfortunately overshadowed by the much larger U.S. police programme, and is also dwarfed by similar schemes run by EU member states. It is also trammled by serious staff shortages, although EU governments have pledged to double the mission staff to 400 members, recruiting the additional police officers is proving difficult. To make the Afghan posting more attractive, governments should be ready to raise salaries, hire so-called "contract agents" or to turn to the private sector to supply police officers.

To be effective in Afghanistan, EU states must reinforce their coordination and cooperation on the ground and at headquarters. "AfPak" envoys appointed by EU member states, including Britain, France, Germany and Sweden, should make a point of working closely with Ettore Sequi, the EU's pointman for Afghanistan and Pakistan. On top of that, there must be a consolidation of the three separate EU representations in Kabul, namely the European Commission delegation, EUPOL and Sequi's office.

Bringing Pakistan back from the brink is going to be even more difficult, especially since the EU has so far failed to recognise Pakistan's strategic importance. Now, Pakistan is slowly climbing up the European agenda, with the organisation of a first-ever EU-Pakistan summit and plans to provide new trade concessions along with increased aid to the country. To be effective, EU assistance will have to focus on the two sides of the AfPak border to include both countries' Pashtun areas.

The EU's priority must be to help Pakistan tackle its twin challenges of building a functioning democracy and defeating religious extremism. This requires that despite Pakistan's chaotic politics, the European Commission and individual governments keep channels of communication open with its democratically-elected leaders, however weak they may be. Democracy in Pakistan is above all conditional on the army's retreat from political life. No encouragement should be given to suggestions that the army meddle in politics as another military coup would not only undermine civilian institutions but also undercut efforts to curb the insurgency and fight terrorism.

There is much room for improvement in the EU's trade and aid ties with Pakistan. EU aid to Pakistan, stuck at €500m since 1976, is a fraction of the \$10bn dollars in U.S. aid that Pakistan has received since 2001, and which has been easily overshadowed by the new commitments being made by the Obama Administration. Europe's trade relations are also uneasy.

The EU is Pakistan's largest trading partner, with EU imports mainly of textiles and clothing currently valued at about €3.5bn a year. But a spate of EU anti-dumping investigations, and the removal of Pakistan from the EU's special duty-free scheme for developing countries, coupled with Brussels' reluctance to start negotiations on a free trade agreement with Islamabad, have strained the trading relationship.

An overhaul of EU aid priorities in Pakistan would be welcome, away from the present near-exclusive focus on health, education and rural development to a broader reform agenda, including police and judicial training, the modernisation of political parties and a strengthening of parliamentary procedures. This would mean setting aside more funds for Pakistan, not an easy move given the many other demands on the EU's external budget.

The EU has a role to play in helping Pakistan's increasingly dynamic civil society groups. The focus

should be on ensuring media independence and providing support for groups that advocate human rights, including the protection of women, children and support for marginalised communities. EU encouragement for promoting Pakistan's long-standing Sufi traditions would also help counter the spread of the cruel Taliban interpretation of Islam. The Pakistani government needs advice on crafting a new counter-terrorism strategy which strives to combat extremism through development, not just military deployment.

A more targeted approach that is centered on winning hearts and minds should focus on bringing development to the arid and mountainous northern regions. Building schools and hospitals is a priority, but Pakistan must also invest in developing better job training programmes for the region's young men who often migrate to the Gulf states in search of employment. More generally, Pakistan's friends must shift from backing the country's political personalities to helping build strong institutions.

European governments must lose no time in doing their AfPak homework. This doesn't just mean putting both Afghanistan and Pakistan higher on the agenda; EU countries should coordinate and where possible, consolidate their programmes, policies and representations. It's not what national policymakers like to hear, but Europe's failure to do so will sour transatlantic relations and also put the brake on crucial steps towards expanding the EU's global outreach.