# MSC Booklet Paper No. 5: Engage, or Lose: a New Grand Bargain on Afghan Strategy

*Von Timo Noetzel und Philipp Rotmann*

## Timo Noetzel und Philipp Rotmann setzen sich in ihrem Beitrag mit den Herausforderungen für die NATO-Partner in Afghanistan auseinander.

The coming weeks and months are going to seal the fate of the US-European partnership in Afghanistan. With Canada and the Netherlands close to a quick exit and Germany also debating a timeline toward exit, the new U.S. strategy is the final chance for the alliance to strike a grand bargain on goals, means, burden-sharing and implementation and to avoid a failure of the ISAF mission. Most allies recognize that absent a major turnaround before President Obama's July 2011 mile stone (and similar political constraints in other alliance capitals), strategic defeat for ISAF is a real possibility. If we fail, every ally – including Washington – will have an even harder time rebuilding political support at home, with potentially disastrous consequences.

For NATO to make the U.S. strategy fully its own allies must strike a new consensus on both the politico-strategic and the operational level. For each element of a reliable transition to Afghan security responsibility, NATO members need to find political agreement on how to make it happen: first, building effective Afghan security forces; second, improving Afghan governance and accountability; third, regaining the initiative against the insurgency; and fourth, focusing resources on populated areas to protect the people.

After years of neglect, a new American President refocused his country's attention from Iraq to Afghanistan, appointed a new commander and more than doubled U.S. forces to implement a radically revised and more limited strategy. On the substance, the U.S. set goals that its European allies can much more easily support. From his March 2009 strategy to his December speech at West Point, Obama moved from "disrupt, dismantle and eventually destroy extremists" to "deny al Qaeda a safe haven" and "the Taliban the ability to overthrow the government." Compared to his predecessor, Obama discarded the language of "whatever it takes" for "goals that … can be achieved at a reasonable cost, and [that] we need to achieve to secure our interests," and chose not to mention "victory" even a single time. By pragmatically reducing its political objectives, the United States opened the door to a substantive power-sharing deal with a "degraded" Taliban who no longer pose an existential threat to the Afghan state and government.

At the same time, crucial preconditions for such a deal are outside the reach of Western influence and strategy-making. What if the Afghan government and sub-national authorities remain flawed partners in 2011 and beyond? What if, for instance, Pakistan is unable or unwilling to prevent Al Qa'ida and the Taliban from using parts of its ungoverned spaces as sanctuary, or if Iran uses its influence in Afghanistan to retaliate against Western pressure to give up its nuclear program? In addition, the July 2011 timeline sets expectations far too high in almost every sector, given the level of complexity involved in Afghanistan. Actors on the ground but NATO in particular will need to find ways to cope with this.

If Washington does not want to face these challenges alone, surrounded by only a token alliance similar to the more recent period in Iraq, it needs its allies genuinely engaged in a

common cause. In order to better absorb friction, the U.S. and its allies rapidly need to build deeper intellectual and institutional links. The current trend points to the opposite direction: the new two-tier ISAF command structure in Kabul concentrated almost all of the key positions in the hands of U.S. or British officers.

With renewed engagement, America's allies expect to have some reasonable influence on strategy – not to start from scratch, but to find openness and serious engagement with their questions. How to deal with the drug economy effectively? How to build civilian governance capacity and foster genuine checks and balances against major corruption in Afghan politics? After all, more dollars do not always make better results. Finally, we have yet to open debate about a long-term perspective for stabilization and development in Afghanistan, including voices and engagement, perhaps even troops, from the region and the Muslim world.

Such a reengagement will require three steps to be taken. First: get real. Some allies such as Germany need to catch up to the U.S., Britain, Canada, Denmark or the Netherlands in conducting a deep and honest review of their performance and their willingness to provide resources and political will so far.

Second: clear the air. Years of small slights in every direction – whether about police training, civilian casualties or deals with insurgent groups – left the sense of trust into the loyalty and commitment of partners in tatters. Neither is as one-sided as it might seem. Political and military support was offered and rejected by the U.S. in 2001, only to be bitterly missed when things turned for the worse. NATO allowed the Taliban insurgency to re-emerge only because it collectively failed to take the challenge of stabilization and state-building seriously in the first few years after the Bonn Agreement.

Third: rebuild the coalition in order to make a genuinely common strategy. To breathe new life into the mission and realize the commitments made on January 28 in London, the allies need to go beyond technical tinkering and small-scale collaboration within safe distances of their respective hot buttons. Unlike Washington, however, Berlin, Paris or Madrid failed so far to support their insights with a rapid increase of resources or institutional change, as required.

There is no obvious fix. The Afghan operation threatens to overburden NATO. The alliance struggles to maintain politico-strategic unity and lacks adequate capabilities. Inevitably, failure in Afghanistan would result in growing strategic rifts within NATO and will shrink its potential as a global security actor. However, regardless the degree of fallout, Afghanistan is not going to be NATO's last stabilization challenge. The glaring gaps of European military forces trained for counter-insurgency as well as police builders, governance and development experts ready to deploy into war and conflict zones require better institutional responses, as does the need to capture their experiences, support critical reflection and contribute to collective learning. And most importantly, a real "civilian surge" requires a much greater reliance on and development of civilian capacity.

A new deal for the second stage of post-9/11 international engagement in Afghanistan requires a willingness to invest more from European countries, but it also requires America to be engaged and compromise where its allies offer to take a lead – particularly as results rarely flow directly from dollars spent and troops deployed.

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