

Summary: The enthusiasm in Europe for the U.S. election of Barack Obama has raised hopes for progress on a range of issues on the transatlantic agenda, among the most pressing of which is stabilization and reconstruction in Afghanistan. Yet it remains uncertain whether Obama's personal popularity can or will translate into additional contributions from Europeans, who have deep reservations about the use of force. Public opinion data suggests that the new U.S. administration should pursue a new diplomacy that builds on European support for a range of non-combat missions.

Progress on Afghanistan will be made not just by "selling" the mission better. President Obama needs to demonstrate to Europeans not just that he is willing to listen to their concerns, but that he understands their domestic politics. Obama will need to change the perception that the United States sees the solution in Afghanistan in military terms alone. He can build on expert consensus and NATO policy that what is needed is a "comprehensive approach" combining reconstruction and security. He can play to European strengths to address the soft power needs in the field that complement American hard power strengths in security.

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Engaging Europe on Afghanistan

by John K. Glenn and Oliver Mains¹

Introduction

The enthusiasm in Europe for the election of Barack Obama has raised hopes for progress on a range of issues on the transatlantic agenda, among the most pressing of which is stabilization and reconstruction in Afghanistan. NATO-led forces have stumbled in the past year amid rising violence, growing corruption, and continued regional instability. On his visit to Berlin during the election campaign, Obama called in no uncertain terms for Europeans to contribute to Afghanistan, but it remains uncertain whether his personal popularity can or will translate into additional contributions from Europeans. In Germany, for instance, polling showed that 80% would refuse a request by Obama for additional troops in Afghanistan.² Even if European leaders would like to do more as part of closer relations with the United States, they will have to make the case for additional sacrifices to their publics which have deep reservations about the use of force.

The aim of this policy brief is not to provide a new roadmap for Afghanistan but to analyze the prospects for renewed commitments in light of American and European public opinion. While the new U.S. administration has an opportunity to improve relations with Europeans, progress on Afghanistan will be made not just by

"selling" the mission better, but by adopting a new diplomacy. Obama needs to demonstrate to Europeans not just that he is willing to listen to their concerns, but that he understands their domestic politics. Public opinion polls suggest that Europeans are not opposed to the mission in Afghanistan but concerned about strategy and willing to support a range of non-combat missions. Obama will need to change the perception that the United States sees the solution in Afghanistan in military terms alone. He can build on expert consensus and NATO policy, that what is needed is a "comprehensive approach" combining reconstruction and security. American military commanders do not necessarily want additional European troops to fight alongside them but need additional support in economic reconstruction and the training of Afghan forces. These are areas European publics are willing to support and could lay the groundwork for renewed cooperation in the region.

Transatlantic public opinion on Afghanistan

For the past eight years, attracting support from European leaders has been difficult in part because of the steep decline in the reputation of the United States. According to *Transatlantic Trends*, an annual foreign policy public opinion survey

¹ John K. Glenn is the director of foreign policy and Oliver Mains is program associate at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF). The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of GMF.

² "Germany to Obama: We Will Resist Calls for More Troops," *Deutsche-Welle*, September 11, 2008.

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published the German Marshall Fund of the United States, while 64% of Europeans viewed U.S. global leadership as “desirable” in 2002, only 36% of Europeans viewed U.S. leadership as “desirable” in 2008, and 59% viewed it as “undesirable.”³ This shift has been accompanied by differences in foreign policy attitudes between Europeans and Americans on a range of issues, including the mission in Afghanistan. *Transatlantic Trends*, for example, asked Americans and Europeans whether they support their countries’ troops participating in international reconstruction efforts and conducting combat operations against the Taliban. In 2007, while 64% of Europeans supported their participation in reconstruction efforts, only 30% of Europeans supported committing their countries’ troops to combat the Taliban. By contrast, Americans showed strong support for both economic reconstruction and combating the Taliban. (see Chart 1)

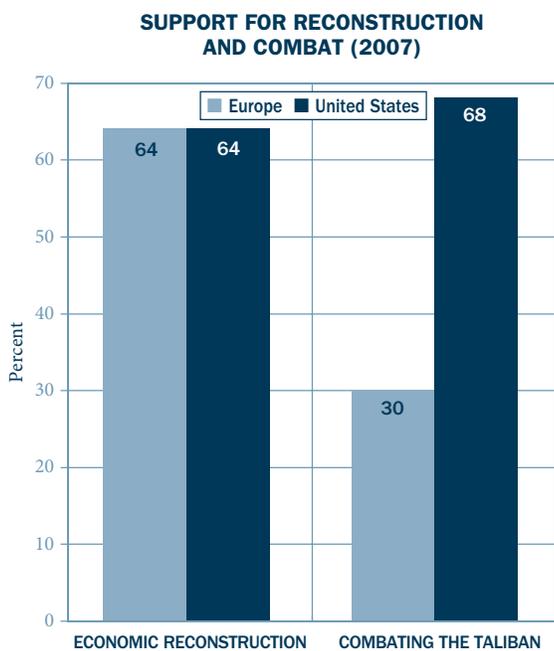


Chart 1

Among the top five European countries contributing to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), support for combating the Taliban ranged from 24% in Germany, 28% in Italy, 36% in France, 45% in the Netherlands, to 51% in

the United Kingdom. This gap over combat has been used by many observers to warn against hopes for renewed transatlantic commitments on Afghanistan. Other public opinion polls, for example, have found that 68% of British support a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan,⁴ along with 55% of French,⁵ 61% of Germans,⁶ and 49% of Dutch respondents.⁷ How can European support for the use of troops in reconstructing Afghanistan be reconciled with the apparent preference for removing troops from the conflict entirely?

Differences over Afghanistan are often explained in light of broader differences in values between Americans and Europeans.⁸ American Historian Robert Kagan famously argued that the divergence in attitudes toward the use of force reflect differences in military capacities that create fundamental challenges for effective transatlantic cooperation.⁹ In *Transatlantic Trends*, Europeans and Americans were asked whether they would agree or disagree with the following statement: “under some conditions, war is necessary to obtain justice.” Remarkably, 74% of Americans agreed with this statement, compared with 29% of Europeans in 2008, numbers that have remained largely unchanged since the question was first posed in 2003.

Yet a closer look at transatlantic public opinion suggests that American and European attitudes are more complex, belying the apparent preference for withdrawing troops and complicating the notion that fundamental attitudes toward force drive this preference. Americans and Europeans have multiple values that at times compete with each other for priority under different circumstances. For example, despite differences over the use of force, 83% of Europeans and 72% of Americans also agreed that economic power is more important in world affairs than military power. Eighty-one percent of Europeans and 89% of Americans agreed that, when their country acts on a national security issue, it is critical that it does so together with its closest allies.¹⁰

In 2008, *Transatlantic Trends* sought to probe further on the divide over combat in Afghanistan by asking about support for a range of possible missions that went beyond a choice between economic reconstruction and combat.

³ *Transatlantic Trends Key Findings Report 2008*, www.transatlantictrends.org. *Transatlantic Trends* is a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Compagnia di San Paolo, with additional support from the Fundação Luso-Americana, Fundación BBVA, and the Tipping Point Foundation. The survey is based on a representative sample of public opinion of 1,000 people in the United States and twelve European countries: Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. For results based on the national samples in each of the 13 countries surveyed, one can say with a 95% confidence that the margin of error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus three percentage points. For results based on the total European sample, the margin of error is plus or minus one percentage point. Europe-wide figures are weighted on the basis of the size of the adult population in each country.

⁴ “Britons Call for Troop Withdrawal,” BBC News, November 13, 2008.
⁵ Adam Sage, “Pressure Grows on Sarkozy for Afghanistan Pullout,” *Times Online*, August 23, 2008.
⁶ “Pew Global Attitudes Project” Pew Research Center, June 12, 2008.
⁷ “One in Two Dutch Oppose Afghanistan Mission: Poll,” *Reuters*, April 18, 2008.
⁸ See, for example, Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes, *America Against the World: How We are Different and Why We are Disliked*, New York: Henry Holt, 2006.
⁹ Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, New York: Vintage Books, 2004.
¹⁰ Key Findings Report, *Transatlantic Trends* 2008.

SUPPORT FOR NON-COMBAT OPTIONS (2008)

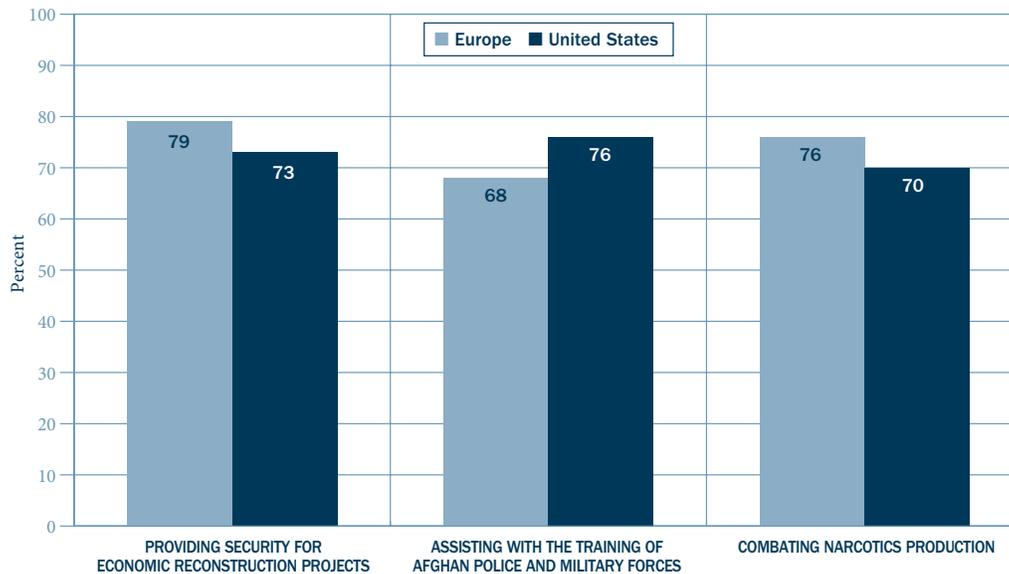


Chart 2

The survey asked American and European respondents whether they would support their country's troops providing security for reconstruction projects, assisting with the training of Afghan police and military forces, combating narcotics production, and combating the Taliban. (see Chart 2)

While European support for combating the Taliban remained low, support for each of the three non-combat options was unexpectedly high: 79% of Europeans supported providing security for reconstruction projects, 68% approved of assisting with the training of Afghan police and military forces, and 76% approved of combating narcotics production.¹¹ Each of these numbers is higher than the 2007 aggregate for reconstruction support, suggesting that increased specificity tends to yield more support among European publics.

Among the top five European countries contributing to Afghanistan, support for all three options was even higher than the European averages. (see Chart 3) Over 80% of French, German, Italian, and Dutch respondents supported providing security for economic reconstruction. Support for combating narcotics production ranged from 85% in France and Italy to 73% in the United Kingdom, and support for training Afghan police and military forces ranged from 81% in the Netherlands to 68% in France.

Public opinion and policy debates

The transatlantic divide over combat in Afghanistan is not only a matter of public opinion but is reflected in policy debates, highlighting the challenge for the Obama administration. While few European policymakers have explicitly called for withdrawal, many have expressed reservations about increasing commitments in Afghanistan for a range of reasons. Some argue the conflict is not winnable under any circumstances and cite the failures of previous occupiers. For instance, BBC Correspondent David Loyn has claimed that in Afghanistan, "imposing power from the centre has always been temporary—like gathering together sand or water—since local loyalty outweighs any other. However strong the weapons of foreign forces, they have always achieved less than local forces."¹² Others link their concerns about the mission in Afghanistan to their wider rejection of the Bush administration's policies in the region and the war in Iraq. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, for example, has worried that some Europeans have conflated the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, resulting in the failure to recognize their own national interests in stabilizing Afghanistan.¹³

Other European policymakers claim to support the mission but raise questions about strategy, arguing that what they see as an American overemphasis on counterterrorism has alienated the

¹¹ Key findings Report, *Transatlantic Trends* 2008.

¹² As quoted in Saul David, "Review: Butcher and Bolt by David Loyn," *Telegraph.co.uk*, October 3, 2008.

¹³ "Gates Presses Europeans to Back Afghan Mission," *Deutsche-Welle*, February 9, 2008.

SUPPORT FOR NON-COMBAT OPTIONS, TOP FIVE EUROPEAN TROOP CONTRIBUTORS TO ISAF (2008)

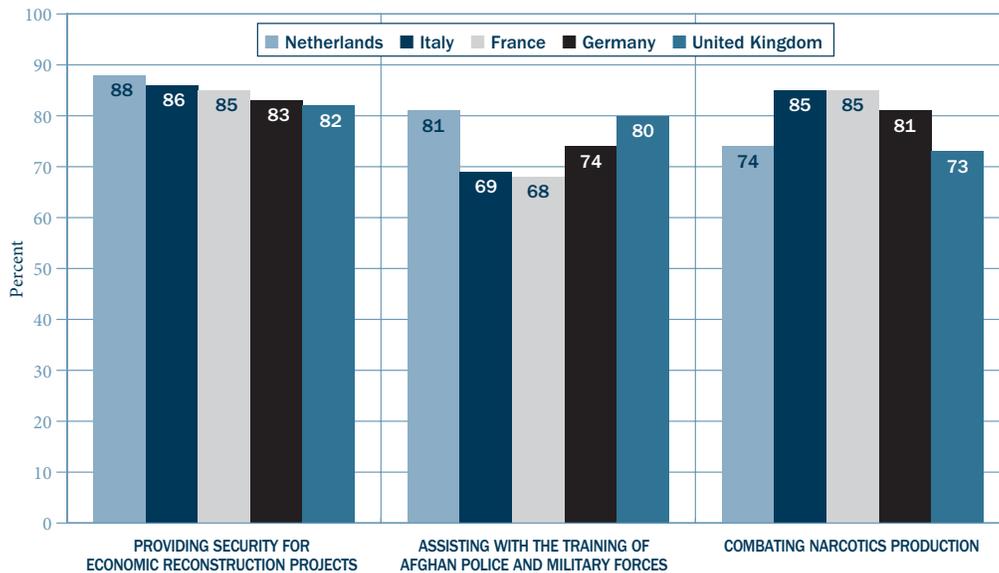


Chart 3

Afghan population with civilian casualties while allowing the Western-backed central government to spiral into incompetence and corruption. As one leading German newspaper notes, “In the minds of Germans, there is a good mandate (the Bundeswehr-ISAF) and a bad mandate (OEF-terrorist hunters); there is a good soldier, who would prefer to call himself a reconstruction worker, and a bad soldier, who fights in the south.”¹⁴ Caveats on troop missions concerning combat may not indicate simply an unwillingness to fight but a perception in Europe that reconstruction of infrastructure, the establishment of a legitimate judicial system, training of police and military forces, and encouragement of alternatives to poppy production are the key to stabilization rather than combating insurgency.

Public opinion, such as that reviewed in *Transatlantic Trends*, suggests that many Europeans have concerns about strategy in Afghanistan but have not rejected the mission itself. If Europeans had already made up their minds that engagement in Afghanistan was simply unacceptable or unlikely to succeed, then surveys such as *Transatlantic Trends* would not have found support in providing security for reconstruction projects, combating narcotics production, and training Afghan police and military forces. For many, the question is not whether the United States and Europe should stabilize Afghanistan, but whether perceived differences in strategy will change under a new U.S. administration in a way that will make cooperation more likely.

A new diplomacy for Afghanistan

There is hope for an improvement in U.S.–European relations under an Obama administration. As reported in *Transatlantic Trends*, 61% of French, 55% of German, and 51% of British respondents believed Barack Obama would improve transatlantic relations. Yet, Obama will need to tread carefully. While it may have been relatively easy for European leaders to say no to former U.S. President George W. Bush, given his unpopularity over the Iraq war, American policies on detention, and climate change, Obama still faces hurdles among the European publics. To turn his widespread popularity into progress on Afghanistan, Obama needs to demonstrate that the United States has rethought its approach to the region as well as its relationships with allies. He needs to show that the United States is willing to listen to its allies’ concerns about casualties and understands their domestic politics. This includes a recognition of the concerns of German politicians before parliamentary elections due in September 2009, an understanding of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s delicate political position as the inheritor of unpopular troop commitments made by Tony Blair, and recognition of the potential for France’s socialist opposition groups to attack French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s commitment to Afghanistan.

Obama needs to convince Europeans that he does not see the solution in Afghanistan solely in military terms. He began this effort with his

¹⁴ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,582681,00.html>

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speech in Berlin in the summer of 2008, declaring that the “Afghan people need our troops and your troops, our support and your support to defeat the Taliban and al Qaeda, to develop their economy, and to help them rebuild their nation.” He can draw on the past statements of those like former German Defense Minister Peter Struck, who argued in 2002 that “Germany’s security is also being defended at the Hindu Kush.” Obama can build on expert consensus that there is no choice between economic reconstruction and combating insurgents but that both must be part of a “comprehensive strategy.” This has been the official policy of NATO since the Bucharest Summit in April 2008. He can draw on the statements of American military commanders who believe that what is needed is “not more troops but more non-uniformed instruments of power.”¹⁵ Similarly, Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, former commander of the Combined Forces Command in Afghanistan, declared that, if he could choose, he would prefer an additional \$50 million in reconstruction assistance to another battalion of troops.¹⁶ These are precisely the areas that Europeans are likely to support: economic reconstruction, the training of Afghan forces, and combating narcotics production.

The new U.S. administration should demonstrate that it understands European preferences and capabilities in reconstruction, building on public support and expressing appreciation for renewed efforts publicly. While European efforts in the areas of reconstruction have been underway for some time, these efforts remain underfunded. Even with a renewed transatlantic commitment to a “comprehensive approach” in Afghanistan; however, there will remain the critical challenge of coordinating efforts at reconstruction and security, without which neither will be effective.¹⁷

Conclusion

The aim of this policy brief has been to analyze the challenges for President Obama in mending European alliances and revitalizing the mission in Afghanistan. Implicitly, our argument recognizes that a “surge” of troops will not be sufficient in itself, that a broader reform of Afghan institutions will be required, and that reconstruction and stabilization are long-term processes that will require continued engagement from the international community. Progress in Afghanistan will mean addressing challenges in Pakistan, which appears incapable of or unwilling to police its borderlands. The transatlantic differences analyzed in this brief also do not account for differences within Europe, where some NATO members such as Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom have called for greater burden sharing so that their countries do not bear the

costs of casualties while others contribute funds for reconstruction. Indeed, efforts by NATO members such as these may be an essential part of a broader U.S. approach toward garnering new commitments from others.

Those who predict a new crisis of unrealistic expectations for the new administration have been quick to point to potential limitations in European contributions as evidence that the recent rift in transatlantic relations is a result of broader diverging interests and values, rather than a disagreement over policies. The data and arguments presented here suggest otherwise, that the new U.S. administration should pursue a new diplomacy that can build on European public opinion supportive of a range of non-combat missions. President Obama can play to European strengths to address the soft power needs in the field that complement American strengths in the areas of hard power and security.

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About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a nonpartisan American public policy and grantmaking institution dedicated to promoting greater cooperation and understanding between North America and Europe. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 through a gift from Germany on the 25th anniversary of the Marshall Plan as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has seven offices in Europe: Berlin, Bratislava, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, and Bucharest.

¹⁵ Col. Martin Schweitzer quoted in “The War in Afghanistan,” *The Economist*, December 13, 2007.

¹⁶ Quoted in Asia Pacific Bulletin, November, 2006, <http://www.asiapacific.ca/en/apbn/pdfs/bulletin282.pdf>

¹⁷ See for example “The Seven Capital Sins of the Donor Community in Afghanistan,” Serge Michailof, Policy Brief, The German Marshall Fund of the United States.