# Britain: Brown and Miliband seek in vain to regain support for Afghan war

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With the Afghan death toll mounting, Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Foreign Secretary David Miliband have tried desperately to regain support for a war which three-quarters of the British population now oppose.

Making the annual Guildhall foreign policy speech, Brown proposed that a conference be held in London early next year to draft a plan to hand over power in Afghanistan. He suggested that he was seeking an exit strategy from this increasingly bloody war, while denying that that was what he was outlining.

"I want that conference to chart a comprehensive political framework within which the military strategy can be accomplished," he said. "It should identify a process for transferring district by district to full Afghan control and set a timetable for transfer starting in 2010."

Secretary of State David Miliband followed this up next day when he spoke at a NATO conference in Edinburgh. "Our goal is not a fight to the death" in Afghanistan, he insisted. Miliband claimed that the vast majority of the Taliban were not committed to international terrorism and could be integrated into an Afghan government. Britain's strategy, he said, was to divide the Taliban. Most of the Taliban, he said, were committed to their tribe and locality rather than "global jihad."

"[The British strategy] is to unite a critical mass of the key players behind shared goals--al-Qaida kept out, the different tribal groups kept on-side, and the neighbours prepared to play a constructive role in Afghanistan's future."

Miliband claimed that polls showed that less than five percent of the Afghans want the Taliban back: "This is our greatest strength. But they fear that the international community will tire of the war and the Taliban will return, inflicting brutal retribution on those who 'collaborated' with the government."

He outlined a three-part strategy. First, he called for Taliban fighters to be reintegrated into Afghan society. Second, the governance of Afghanistan should be strengthened by greater oversight; and, third, there should be greater reliance on Pakistan.

"The opportunity is to squeeze the life out of the terrorist threat from both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border," Miliband said. "That will happen only if Pakistan and the international community develop a new relationship based on a recognition of interdependence and shared interests."

These statements from the UK prime minister and secretary of state are a response to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. A total of 98 British military personnel have been killed and 400 wounded this year alone. The British death toll since the deployment began in 2001 is 235.

This is as nothing with the thousands of Afghans who have been killed as a result of the neo-colonial war and occupation. What concerns the British military, however, is that hostility towards the occupation is growing within Afghanistan, with coalition forces having faced 13,000 attacks in the period between January and August this year. It is the highest level of attacks since the situation began to deteriorate, according to a report this month from the US Government Accountability Office.

Brown and Miliband have presented their announcements as a distinctively British initiative. The reality is, however, that Britain functions as the junior partner of America in the Afghan occupation as it did in Iraq. Strategy and tactics are decided in Washington, not Westminster. In part, at least, the British government is pitching its Afghan strategy to an official American audience, and Brown and Miliband's

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statements reflect the divisions that have opened up within the US political and military elite. General Stanley McChrystal, the current commander in Afghanistan, has called for an extra 40,000 troops. But US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, a former commander in Afghanistan, has said that a further deployment would serve little purpose because the Afghan government is so corrupt.

So far no decision has been taken and this uncertainty, as well as the mounting casualty figures, has taken its toll in Britain. Writing in *Time* magazine Catherine Mayer commented, "Uncertainty is one of the most corrosive elements in politics, and as days melt into weeks with no firm decision from President Barack Obama on whether the US will increase troop levels in Afghanistan, the remaining British consensus on the issue is threatening to dissolve."

There was a swift response from Senator John McCain, the former presidential candidate, who slapped down Brown and Miliband.

"History shows us that if you set dates for when you're going to leave, the enemy waits until you leave," he said, speaking at the Halifax International Defense Forum in Canada. "The exit strategy is success," he insisted. "The exit strategy is not time-date certain."

As a member of the US Senate Armed Services Committee, McCain's opinion is likely to carry more weight than Brown's or Miliband's views on military strategy.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates has also made it clear that the British plan is not an option. He said it was "too early" to set a timetable for the hand over of power in Afghanistan.

Najam Sethi, editor-in-chief of Pakistan based *Daily Times* warned that "all this talk about exit strategies … feeds into the perception that the Americans are not going to win."

Also at the conference was Harvard research fellow Michael Semple, who said that the situation would only improve in Afghanistan when it "becomes evident that the US and allied commitment is long term and that's it's not all bet on a short term surge." Afghanistan, Semple said, "is going to be messy for a long time."

Local deals would not secure the entire country, he added. Even the troop surge advocated by McChrystal would not, in itself, be enough.

"It's not 30 or 40, or 50,000 (troops) this year, it's the impression that the commitment is long enough to ensure there is stability in the country."

Within days of his speech, Miliband was attempting to make it clear that he was not advocating withdrawal, stating, "If international forces leave, you can choose a time--five minutes, 24 hours or seven days--but the insurgent forces will overrun those forces that are prepared to put up resistance and we would be back to square one."

He told the *Guardian* at the end of a visit to Afghanistan where he attended the inauguration of President Hamid Karzai and visited British troops, "[I]f we weren't here their country would be rolled over."

He acknowledged that there is "a high degree of concern" about casualties, saying, "There is a natural reaction to 18, 19, 20-year-olds, your neighbours, relatives and your friends being killed. It makes you ask, why are we there, can you succeed, is it worth it?"

But he denied that British opinion was about to flip to a demand for immediate withdrawal.

The approach that Brown and Miliband have outlined is not in fact for withdrawal, but for what amounts to a widening of the war. It is a strategy that involves placing greater reliance on local forces, principally Pakistan. If the British plan were followed it would mean an even greater escalation of what is already being called the Af-Pak War in some circles.

Brown has committed 500 more troops. They await word from Washington for their deployment.

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