The meaning of Europe's "step change" in Afghanistan

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The European Union has endorsed an action plan for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Described as a "step change" in EU policy, it makes clear that the European powers are fully behind Washington's imperialist adventure and want to secure their own interests in the region by piggy-backing on the US war machine.

Last week, European Union foreign ministers meeting in Luxemburg promised more aid for Afghanistan and Pakistan in a response to a report they commissioned, which warns that the political and security situation in the region is worsening. Making clear that the European governments have no intention of heeding overwhelming public sentiment for a swift exit from Afghanistan, the report states, "The situation in Afghanistan has a direct impact on Europe. Many of the most serious global threats facing us today are present in the region."

Calling for concerted international support for Afghanistan, the report adds that whereas eventually "the Afghan state must take full responsibility…this does not equal an international 'exit strategy.'"

A press statement pledged that "the European Union stands ready to take on the complex challenges in Afghanistan and Pakistan."

Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, announced that the European Commission will spend an additional €200 million in the coming months to support its new strategy, on top of the almost €1 billion a year already being spent. The foreign ministers also promised more officers for the EU police mission (EUPOL) in Afghanistan, which presently has just 271 of the 400 police trainers pledged.

The document stresses a European belief that a military solution by itself cannot guarantee the stability of the region. Bildt told the *Financial Times*, "If we don't put in place some sort of functioning state in Afghanistan, some system of governance, then all our other efforts will fail."

The EU speaks of its aim as the development of a "comprehensive agenda for a strengthened strategic relationship" with Pakistan and the need for "an increased dialogue" with "regional stakeholders" such as India, China, Russia, Iran, Turkey and the Gulf States.

Despite these implied criticisms of US policy, the document represents a quite explicit endorsement of the counter-insurgency operation presently being waged by the White House and the Pentagon. The only genuine caveat that the European powers place on their support for the US-led war is a desire for American soldiers to do the bulk of the fighting and dying. All the EU's cynical talk of the need for "political settlements," state-building and democratic governance is predicated on the military suppression of the Afghan insurgency.

This explains why the EU states have lent fairly open support to the demands of Gen. Stanley McChrystal for an additional 40,000 US troops to be sent to Afghanistan. Following the previous week's NATO foreign ministers meeting, Bildt declared, "The McChrystal report is very clear. The military security efforts are critical to success in Afghanistan, but without success in the political civilian effort they are going to come to nothing whatsoever."

The EU can focus on the "political civilian effort" only to the extent that it can rely on the US to carry out the "military security efforts" demanded by the occupation. McChrystal's recommendations would bring US forces in Afghanistan to around 105,000 personnel, compared with the 35,000 or so from the EU. Even this figure is misleading, given that several

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states, including Germany and Spain, have at least formal restrictions on their troops being engaged in combat operations, in an attempt to placate anti-war sentiment at home.

It should be noted that this has not prevented German troops from conducting combat operations in northern and northeast Afghanistan, nor from ordering an airstrike in Kunduz in September that resulted in the death of at least 125 people, one of the worst massacres in the history of the war.

Even so, the European powers do not want their direct military involvement to escalate if this can be avoided. That is why they have been, if anything, more receptive to McChrystal's demands than President Barack Obama, who has held off making a definite additional US commitment while he has sought additional troops from Europe—with little success. So far only British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has agreed an additional 500 personnel. In contrast, President Nicolas Sarkozy stated on October 15 that France will not send "a single soldier more" to fight in Afghanistan.

Such pledges from Sarkozy count for little, but do indicate the belief of the EU powers that an additional military commitment by the US is infinitely preferable to, and at the very least a precondition for, any increased European military role.

Commenting on Europe's refusal to agree more troops at the NATO summit, the German news magazine *Spiegel* stressed on October 29, "For once," this "hesitation cannot be attributed to widespread war fatigue in Europe." Rather, "US President Obama has been silent about the situation for far too long, and European countries like Germany and France are correct to demand better American leadership on the issue of Afghanistan."

Noting Obama's delay in deciding on McChrystal's demand for additional troops, *Spiegel* made the extraordinary and false claim that the "general public" wants "the White House and the Pentagon to deploy more troops."

"Obama's administration currently creates the impression that it has been abandoned by courage," the magazine complained. Therefore, "why should countries like Germany and France believe the verbose promises of a president who is not even sending a clear message at home, even though he has a majority in both houses of Congress?"

On the same day, Britain's *Guardian* featured a column by military commentator Tom Rogan headlined, "Obama Must Listen to Gen McChrystal."

Rogan wrote, "The stakes are high. Ultimately, Obama's decision will shape not only the outcome of the conflict in Afghanistan, but also the moral character and strategic position of the United States, Britain and NATO."

Whatever the sordid political calculations and manoeuvres that animate policy makers in Berlin, Paris and London, the European powers are fully culpable in the war in Afghanistan and share full responsibility for the criminal actions perpetrated there—both now and in the future. The war can be ended only through a unified struggle by the working class against the imperialist bourgeoisie and its political representatives in Europe and America.

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