



## CANADA-EUROPE TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUE:

### SEEKING TRANSNATIONAL SOLUTIONS TO 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY PROBLEMS

<http://www.carleton.ca/eurocluster>

*Commentary October 2008*

## **The Charge of the Lite Brigade: the EU in Afghanistan**

**David Long\***

The Afghanistan mission combines military intervention, statebuilding, and democratization in a narco-state at war with itself – one that has historically been a graveyard of empires. In this troubled environment, the states of the European Union have proceeded in a manner resembling the blunders commemorated at another time in Lord Tennyson's poem, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

The European nations' involvement is shaped by their participation in the NATO-led ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) operation. Though 25 of 27 European Union nations are engaged in the mission, the reality is that only a few European states have significant numbers of troops in Afghanistan and even fewer (two to be exact, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands) are in the main combat zone in the south, even after the much heralded French deployment into the east of the country. No wonder some laugh that ISAF actually stands for I Saw Americans Fight.

European engagement is circumscribed by caveats and conditions on the location and role of deployments. These are meant to placate restive domestic audiences who fail to see the value of the mission. But the caveats are not simply the result of cowardice or craven caving to populist pacifism. They are the product of strategic and diplomatic calculation. Hesitations over NATO's first combat mission outside Europe highlight the fact that the vision of global NATO has never been a unanimous position of the member states. Only the member states who share the American vision of NATO as a global security actor have deployed to fight the Taliban-led insurgency in the south. Both the so-called Old and New Europe have doubts about the global agenda. Old Europe is largely happy to reserve NATO as the guarantor of European security through the provision of territorial defence. Meanwhile, New Europe, not long liberated from Soviet clutches, still fears Russian interference and prefers NATO's anti-Russian focus be maintained. Given recent developments in Georgia, who can blame them? All the while, as Afghanistan has increasingly negative connotations among European publics comparing it to the fighting in Iraq, for European leaders a major distraction has been Kosovo, a simmering crisis seen as in the EU's backyard rather than far from home.

*\*David Long is Professor of International Affairs at Carleton University. The views expressed are attributable only to the author in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which he is associated.*

European policy is plagued by jurisdictional jealousies: some prefer more EU and less NATO, others the member states rather than an EU mission, and still others the Big Four leading policy. Even the EU's collective intervention is shaped by its internal schisms. While the Commission allocates billions of euros to a variety of development, humanitarian and other rebuilding projects, its mandate in the provision of non-military aspects of security assistance overlaps with the role of the Council's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy. The EU's special representative in Afghanistan is supposed to bring cohesion to all this and in effect provide 'one-stop shopping' regarding EU policies. This is a tall order for recently appointed, Ettore Francesco Sequi, an Italian diplomat. The failed EU Constitution and its successor, the Reform Treaty, were supposed to rationalize the EU's foreign policy instruments and decision-making. Don't hold your breath.

Where bold moves have indeed been taken by the Europeans, such as attempts to bring warring factions together, they have been rebuffed by the Afghan government (and EU diplomats expelled from the country) or have run afoul of contradictory policies preferred by the United States, for instance, over whether to legalize or destroy local poppy cultivation. The steady – a cynic might say glacial – development of the European Security and Defence Policy has been given a fillip with EUPOL as it trains Afghan police as part of its civilian crisis management dimension. But this project depends on the preservation of a security environment and an uncorrupted culture of governance in which these police and justice officials can go about their business.

But the ultimate conundrum in Afghanistan is the mismatch of the intervention with its goal. The European engagement is a charge of the Lite Brigade because it follows the pattern outlined in Michael Ignatieff's polemic *Empire Lite*. Unlike military engagements and imperial conquests of the past, today's interventions are conducted in the long shadow of mass democracy. This means that deployments need to be justified at home, defended before a domestic audience. It also means that the 'host' or target state is to be rendered democratic in some way, despite the fact that this is achieved paradoxically through the instrument of alien military force. The EU's involvement maps on to Ignatieff's critique of post-cold war peacekeeping and peace enforcement as imperial ventures in disguise, as was the case in the trusteeship over Kosovo. Today's interventions are not about conquest as an end in itself but as a means to another end (democracy) through short term low-level military engagement.

As a consequence, what is at stake is not military victory or defeat. To neutralize Afghanistan as a potential future threat to the West is to stabilize it by irreversibly changing it. This is a politico-strategic outcome rather than a military one, achievable only over the course of generations. The EU's Lite Brigade intervention can only be miniscule and temporary by comparison.

So where was the strategic calculation regarding the EU's intervention in Afghanistan? And what sort of government bleats to its allies that it needs help in a region that it deliberately chose to engage in? The marked lack of strategic wisdom is a result of hubris and an interventionist culture that is prevalent across the Western world. In essence, interventionism is the unexamined belief that some action on our part is better than none, even in affairs we don't understand, in regions where we don't have reach and our interests are unclear, and in conflicts that any realistic assessment would indicate are unlikely to be remedied given the resources available for an international military intervention.