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***"Afghanistan and Pakistan"***

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## AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

Afghanistan and Pakistan are the most relevant, dangerous and pressing challenge that the international community faces today. Europe has to play a much stronger role.

This is a regional crisis that needs to be faced with a regional strategy and sufficient resources. This was not the case in the past. We are going to be paying the price of wrong decisions, poor judgement and lack of attention, focus, understanding and care.

We cannot leave the region.

The good news is that, in my opinion, Afghanistan is still winnable if we act fast and allocate the right amount of collective effort, resources and interest. Winning means in my opinion being able to sustain a better security situation and delivering a better life for the Afghans. For that we need desperately to involve the neighbours and defeat the danger of Jihad in the region. Pakistan is not a failed state even if it is facing the biggest threat to its existence since its birth in 1947. Pakistan by itself and because of its influence on Afghan matters and the critical role that the Pashtun border areas play in the security and stability of the whole region deserves a much bigger place in our agenda. Europe has to play a decisive role in the whole region but especially in Pakistan. We have an opportunity and also a responsibility that needs a common European answer. We have not done enough and it is time to start doing it.

The Obama administration is working on a new approach, that some call a "comprehensive surge" that seems to combine in a coherent strategy diplomatic and military means: more troops with better anti-insurgency tactics and equipment; more emphasis on development and reconstruction; better governance in Kabul; political objectives which are more modest but better suited to the realities in the ground; and a regional strategy that involves the neighbours, especially Pakistan. Europe has to participate in such a debate if only because we will be called on to share the conclusions, the brunt and the costs of any Afghan policy coming from Washington.

The most important points of this new American strategy underline the principal problems that have to be addressed such as the security situation, the fatigue of the Afghan population as regards what they expected from the presence of the international community after their liberation from the Taliban rule, corruption and failures of Karzai's government, and so forth. In any case we cannot afford to fail and we still have the possibility of creating a more secure, accepted, respected, stable and legitimate Afghanistan. It is not going to be cheap or fast but nothing is easy in international politics much less so in that part of the world. What is not an option, and would be extremely risky, is to think about abandoning Afghanistan and let it to be the ground for the rivalries of its neighbours or a narco-jihadist Pashtun caliphate able to create havoc in the whole region. Afghanistan is the tomb of empires and historical analogies but we have to remember always that we left once and the consequences were disaster, civil war and 9-11.

The critical and most immediate question that has to be faced is the next presidential elections that cannot be about maintaining the present state of governance, corruption and inefficiency. Will President Karzai be able to provide the kind of change that Afghans want and the international community needs?

Maybe it is the right moment to stop talking only about an Afghan problem and start thinking in Af-Pak terms. This seems to be the idea behind the nomination of Richard Holbrooke as U.S. special envoy to these two countries. The recent news about the creation of a similar European appointee confirms this tendency.

We need more than just diplomatic coordination or the continuity of normal bilateral relations in the area. Political momentum has to be created. We ought to have also the capacity of mobilizing and intensifying our efforts on a regional basis. We have to abandon the absence and laziness of European leadership regarding Pakistan. With the exception of the British, the level of visits and interaction between the European and the Pakistani leadership is clearly inadequate bearing in mind the declared strategic importance of our interests in the region.

Working with Pakistan is much more than ending the Taliban sanctuaries in the tribal areas of the Durand Line. It is about addressing the well entrenched sense of insecurity of Pakistan, convincing them about the nature of our commitment in the region and eliminating the chronic state of denial of the Pakistani establishment about the extension and danger represented by the jihadist networks in Pakistan. These beliefs and feelings run deeply in the mind of most Pakistanis. They are naturally related to its creation and terrible history of wars with India. So, even if any suggestion in this direction is not well received in Delhi we must, and it is implicit in the mandate of any American or European especial envoy, address the question of Pakistan-India relations and of the issues and controversies that still divide and confront them. The objective of the terrorist jihadist network in Pakistan has always been to derail and destroy any peace process between both countries because they know that any progress in that field would destroy the legitimacy of the culture of martyrdom and violence that sustains them.

Pakistan is the second Muslim country in the world, the only one with the nuclear weapon, has the 7th largest army on the planet and ranks 144 out of 177 in the UN's list of human development. We need Pakistan not only not to fail. A much worst nightmare than losing Afghanistan would be Pakistan falling in the hands of extremists. We need Pakistan to become a factor of stability in the region and in the world. The problem is a failed strategy that wastes the resources of Pakistan in the confrontation with India that could find a better use for defeating the internal Taliban and terrorist threat and ensuring development for its people. The future of the subcontinent and of our efforts in the area is being played now in this country. The moment is critical. A weakened government in Islamabad is facing the challenge of the combined Taliban/al Qaeda/jihadist threat while it has to deal with a terrible social and economic crisis and the powerful military protect their autonomy and maintain their influence.

The European Union played a very important role in the 2008 elections and the preceding months by their presence and pressure for a fair and transparent democratic process. I have to underline the election observation mission work lead by the EPP-ED MEP Michael Gahler. We have to retake that place in the Pakistani political dynamic and we have to do it as Europeans by placing support to democratic Pakistan, a country that is key to our main political objectives and priorities in the world, high on our agenda. This is a task that needs not only bilateral efforts but also the commitment of the European institutions and a new understanding of the new world where we desperately need to go beyond the inheritance of our diplomatic traditions, colonial past, and cultural affinities in order to be present and have a strong influence in places, questions and issues that require our understanding, effort and contribution. I do not see many places or moments where European action is needed more. I do not think that our leaders can wait any longer to act and start giving this region the attention it deserves.