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President Bush's Transatlantic Tour: The U.S. Must Pressure Europe on Afghanistan and Iran

Nile Gardiner, Ph.D.

The war in Afghanistan and the looming Iranian nuclear threat will be priority issues for the United States as President Bush crosses the Atlantic this week for what is likely to be his final tour of Europe. He will meet with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

The trip is an important opportunity for the President to press key European allies to contribute more troops and resources to the NATO-led effort in Afghanistan. The English-speaking members of NATO are bearing an overwhelming proportion of the burden in Afghanistan as most European countries refuse to play a full role. This is an unsustainable situation that is causing deep strains in the Alliance and weakening the fight against the Taliban.

President Bush should also use this trip to call upon European Union member states to join the United States in a tough sanctions regime aimed at halting Iran's drive to develop a nuclear weapons capability. With its extensive support for international terrorist groups such as Hizbollah and Hamas, its open threats to wipe Israel "off the map," and its ambitions to become a nuclear power, the Iranian regime poses this generation's greatest state threat to international security.

Successful resolution of these two critical matters will not only revitalize the transatlantic alliance, but also strengthen two critical fronts in the campaign against Islamist terrorism.

An Unequal Burden in Afghanistan. The United States, Great Britain, Canada, and Australia (a non-NATO country) currently provide 35,680 of the 52,900 troops serving in the NATO-led International Assistance Force (ISAF): over 67 percent of the total. Europe and the rest of the world provide just 17,200 soldiers, or less than a third.¹ This unequal state of affairs is causing tensions in the transatlantic alliance, and the Canadians, who have already suffered heavy casualties, have threatened to pull their troops out of the country unless they are reinforced by troops from Europe.²

Britain, which still has 4,000 troops in Iraq and is severely overstretched militarily, has over 8,500 soldiers serving in Afghanistan: more than the rest of the major Western European powers combined; Germany has sent just 3,370 troops, Italy 2,350, France 1,670, and Spain 800. The British even dispatched their third in line to the throne, Prince Harry, to southern Afghanistan, where he fought for several months before a media blackout shielding his presence was broken.

There is also the critical issue of who is actually doing the fighting. Most military operations against the Taliban are being conducted by the British,

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Americans, and Canadians (with significant front-line support from the Dutch). As of February this year, these three countries had lost almost 650 troops since 2001 (85 percent of total fatalities). The rest of ISAF combined had lost a total of 115 soldiers (15 percent).³

Many European nations, including Germany, continue to operate under a system of “caveats” that are drawn up by some NATO members to keep their troops out of harm’s way. German forces, for example, are based in the north of the country, far away from the main battlefields. In fact, British media have reported that German troops are not permitted to travel more than two hours away from a major medical facility and that Luftwaffe helicopter pilots are barred from flying at night, with a requirement to be back to base by mid-afternoon.⁴

Such limitations on engagement ignore the reality that NATO is a martial alliance, not a peacekeeping organization. The stakes are extremely high, and there is a danger that, in light of the combat restrictions placed on some NATO troops, the brutal Taliban, backed by al-Qaeda, will reassert control over vast areas of the country. Not only does ISAF need thousands more troops to be sent to the war-torn Afghan nation, but continued success against the Taliban specifically demands that combat-ready troops be deployed across the southern province of Helmand, where much of the key fighting is currently taking place.

Germany Must Strengthen Sanctions Against Iran. In addition to revitalizing Continental NATO members’ participation in combat operations

throughout Afghanistan, President Bush will seek the support of key European allies for the strengthening of sanctions against Iran.

Europe and Germany in particular hold the key to increasing economic pressure on the Iranian regime. In recent years, Iran has derived roughly 35 percent of its total imports from the European Union, and European exports to Iran are worth over 12 billion euros a year.⁵

Germany is Iran’s biggest trading partner, with exports worth over 4 billion euros in 2006, and therefore is capable of exerting extraordinary economic leverage over Iran. According to a 2007 report by the Realité EU think tank,⁶ which compiled information from several sources including the German–Iranian Chamber of Commerce in Tehran, a staggering five thousand German companies do business with Iran, including heavyweights such as Siemens and BASF. Two-thirds of Iranian industry relies on German engineering products, and the German Engineering Federation (VDMA) boasts of German machine construction exports to Iran worth 1.5 billion euros in 2005, with an increase in 2006.

Unfortunately, Berlin has yet to demonstrate a firm willingness to pressure Iran.

In fact, Germany remains the weakest link in the West’s confrontation with Tehran. Despite the huge economic clout that Berlin wields with Iran, the Merkel administration has not been at the forefront of international efforts to force the Iranian regime to relinquish its nuclear aspirations. In contrast to French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s emphatic denun-

1. See International Security Assistance Force Web site, current as of June 3, 2008, at http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/isaf_placemat.pdf (June 10, 2008).
2. “Canada PM issues Afghan ultimatum,” *BBC News Online*, January 31, 2008, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7219415.stm> (June 10, 2008).
3. Graphic, “Troop Deployment in Hostile Areas of Afghanistan,” in “McCain Wants More EU Troops for Afghanistan,” *The Daily Telegraph*, February 10, 2008, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1578224/McCain-wants-more-EU-troops-for-Afghanistan.html> (June 10, 2008).
4. “For us ze war is over by tea time, ja,” *The Sunday Times*, November 18, 2007, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article2890985.ece> (June 10, 2008).
5. “Europe and the Mullahs: How the EU Subsidizes Trade with Iran,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2007, at <http://www.opinionjournal.com/editorial/feature.html?id=110009689> (June 10, 2008).
6. “Germany’s Economic Ties to Iran,” *Realité EU*, September 17, 2007, at <http://www.realite-eu.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=9dJBLLNkGiF&b=2315291&ct=4420179> (June 10, 2008).

ciations of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's highly provocative statements, Angela Merkel has appeared weak-kneed and indecisive. As a result, the European Union's policy of "constructive engagement" toward Iran, championed by Merkel and her predecessor Gerhard Schroeder, has been a spectacular failure.

Tehran's strategy will seek to splinter Western opinion regarding any potential economic pressure, thereby weakening the likelihood of sustained international sanctions outside of the United Nations. Iran's rulers know that they can rely on both Russia and China to block sanctions at the Security Council and are hoping that internal divisions within Europe will hamper the imposition of Europe-wide measures. The success of the Iranian nuclear programs relies upon a divided West; it is critical that in the coming days, President Bush remind the Merkel administration of this fact.

No Alternative to Action. Failing to deal with the Iranian threat will result in immense consequences: a nuclear-armed rogue state ruled by fanatical Islamist extremists that will have no qualms about using its power to dominate the Middle East or to arm a wide array of proxy international terrorist groups. It is a vision of the future that cannot be allowed to come true, and the European

powers, particularly Germany, must reject appeasement in favor of an assertive policy of zero tolerance for Iran's nuclear ambitions. This is a time for tough resolve from the German Chancellor and other key leaders in Europe: Weakness and indifference will only comfort such a brutal terrorist regime.

At the same time, Europe's major powers can and must do more on the battlefields of Afghanistan. If this does not happen, the consequences for the future of the NATO Alliance could be dire. France's offer of an additional 700 French troops is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough to make a significant difference on the battlefield.

Europe's failure in Afghanistan threatens to tear NATO apart, in which case the most effective international organization of our time could become irrelevant. It is time for Chancellor Merkel, President Sarkozy, Prime Minister Berlusconi, and other European leaders to fully commit their troops and resources to winning the war against the Taliban. For the sake of the Alliance and the broader war against Islamist terrorism, there is no alternative.

—Nile Gardiner, Ph.D., is Director of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.