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16 June 2010

FIFTY-EIGHTH SESSION

Afghanistan - explaining the reasons for the war to the
public

REPORT

submitted on behalf of the Committee for Parliamentary and Public Relations by
John Greenway (United Kingdom, Federated Group) and Marco Zacchera, Vice-
Chairman (Italy, Federated Group), Rapporteurs

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Report transmitted to: the President of the Council of WEU; the Secretary-General of the WEU; the President of the Council of the European Union; the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; the President of the European Commission; the EU Commissioner for institutional relations and communication strategy; the Presidents/Speakers and the Chairmen of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and European Affairs Committees of the 39 national parliaments represented in the Assembly; the Presidents of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Baltic Assembly, the Nordic Council, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the CIS Parliamentary Assembly; the President of the European Parliament; the Secretaries General of the Parliamentary Assemblies of the Council of Europe, NATO and the OSCE.

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¹ Adopted by the Committee on 18 May 2010.

RECOMMENDATION 858²

on Afghanistan – explaining the reasons for the war to the public

The Assembly,

- (i) Having regard to the dwindling support among the public at large for continuing military operations in Afghanistan;
- (ii) Recognising that the high military and civilian death tolls on all sides run counter to the strongly held values of justice and humanity;
- (iii) Aware of the confusion that surrounds the image of and messages emanating from ISAF, intended as a peacekeeping mission but using warlike assets and strategies;
- (iv) Supporting the new strategy adopted by the US Administration and the decisions taken by the London Conference in January 2010;
- (v) Welcoming the establishment within NATO of a communication service equipped with the most up-to-date means for dealing with all sectors of society to which its message is addressed,

RECOMMENDS THAT THE WEU COUNCIL AND THE NATO SECRETARY GENERAL ADOPT A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY WHICH

1. Directs more effort towards disseminating information about the progress and achievements of ISAF and the benefits they have brought to civil society;
2. Reminds people at all times that the principal aim of the war is to combat terrorism, while at the same time placing emphasis on recognition of the sacrifices made by troops on mission and making clear the connection between the work they do and security worldwide and in particular that of the peoples of western countries;
3. Highlights the relationship that has been built up with the Afghan people and the joint programmes underway to effect the move to local ownership of viable institutions, while rejecting utterly the corruption at every level and involvement in the illegal trafficking from which the country suffers;
4. Invests in cooperation projects with the Afghan media through two-way secondments, joint training courses, provision of technical equipment, operator training and assistance in opening independent press and information centres.

² Adopted by the Assembly on 16 June 2010 at the 2nd sitting.

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

*submitted by John Greenway (United Kingdom, Federated Group)
and Marco Zacchera, Vice-Chairman (Italy, Federated Group), Rapporteurs*

I. Introduction

1. In recent years, the Committee for Parliamentary and Public Relations has looked closely at changing public attitudes towards international military operations and considers it more necessary than ever for political decisions in this domain to have the support of the public at large. Crisis-management and peacekeeping activities (the so-called Petersberg tasks) have gradually become part of our daily lives and the deployment of troops on various fronts throughout the world sparks debates which impact on the foreign policy of our countries. Military alliances took a different shape at the end of the cold war; the threats are not the same, they have become globalised and less immediate.

2. Europe is in the process of acquiring the wherewithal to become an autonomous actor in global security. This requires a change in the concept and organisation of defence-related sectors: the armed forces of the majority of countries have evolved into professional bodies and programmes are under way which are geared towards multinational integration.³ As regards equipment, new technology promises new capabilities that require coordination among allies, and the European Defence Agency (EDA) was set up with that end in view.⁴

3. Every year parliaments are faced with the challenge of striking a balance between their defence budgets and new requirements. We are all aware how difficult it is to maintain the level of resources necessary to implement credible and effective programmes in the security and defence sector: in an economic recession, parliamentarians often struggle to vote through the funds requested to carry out such programmes. The man in the street cannot see the immediate benefit of investing in the defence sector when the domestic political scene is dominated by an increased demand for social protection. The question of security is easily understood when it is close to home, but wars in far-off places do not elicit the same support as defending national territory and we are then faced with the challenge of raising public awareness. More particularly, whenever our armies are called upon to take part in a military operation abroad, it is necessary to overcome the resistance and scepticism of a large part of the population which becomes increasingly resistant and sceptic with each setback a mission suffers. Since it is national parliamentarians who vote to send troops on missions abroad, we are increasingly faced with demands for transparency in the decision-making process and in order to maintain public support we must invest in the means to communicate effectively.

4. Of particular concern to us at present are evolving attitudes to the military intervention in Afghanistan – often the subject of front-page news. Over the years and faced with a rising death toll among the troops on mission in Afghanistan, the public at large has lost sight of the reasons for this war. Comparisons with Vietnam are rife and the impression of being bogged down in an impossible mission has stirred people up. Rising costs, loss of human life, casualties among the civilian population and harrowing images of a country in ruins all contribute to waning support and end up influencing the political decisions of western governments, to the point of triggering a radical change in policy as we have seen in the Netherlands. The US Administration is trying to get things back on track and asking the allies to make one last extra effort. But once we are convinced that this is the right stand to take, how can we convince the public at large? What tools do parliamentarians have to win support for the decisions they are being expected to make at such a difficult time in the economic and political lives of our countries?

³ See Document 2041 adopted on 3 June 2009: “Education and training for ESDP: the military Erasmus initiative”, report submitted on behalf of the Committee for Parliamentary and Public relations by Yves Pozzo di Borgo (France, Federated Group), Rapporteur.

⁴ See Document 1965 adopted on 6 June 2007: “The European Defence Agency two years on”, report submitted on behalf of the Technological and Aerospace Committee by Yves Pozzo di Borgo (France, Federated Group), Rapporteur.

5. This report cannot claim to find a definitive solution to this multifaceted debate, but it can help point the way forward. Greater awareness of trends in public opinion can help us guide our political leaders more effectively. It is clearly up to the political classes to make informed decisions and not allow themselves to be swayed by trends in opinion that are exaggerated by the media. It is necessary first to understand public opinion, be aware of it and take it into account, but in a democratic society, it is also up to us, members of parliament, to educate and guide the public and ultimately to assume our responsibilities.

6. However in order to understand how public attitudes are changing both in the Alliance countries and in Afghanistan, it is important to take a brief look back at the events which led to the present situation: the operation's aims and objectives have gradually shifted, which explains the confusion we are faced with today.

II. A historical overview

7. The war in Afghanistan began in September 2001 when American forces launched an attack against the Taliban regime which ruled the country at the time and was deemed to be sponsoring terrorism, in particular those groups linked to al-Qa'ida and Osama Bin Laden thought to be responsible for the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1368 of 12 September 2001 described the situation as "a threat to international peace and security" and, under article 51 of the UN Charter, justified the use of force in self-defence, which resulted in the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom.

8. The initial aim of the intervention was to capture the terrorist leaders responsible for the 11 September 2001 attacks but also to overthrow the Taliban regime. The American operation led fairly quickly to the establishment of an interim government headed by Hamid Karzai following the signing of the Bonn Agreement in December 2001. Since then, however, the situation has become bogged down and taken a turn for the worse: the Taliban, supported by the drug trade and the network of warlords, has put up a stubborn guerrilla-style resistance to ISAF (the International Security Assistance Force grouping the Alliance forces under NATO command) which has in turn obliged the western Allies to progressively step up their military engagement. ISAF, established by UN Security Council Resolution 1386 in December 2001, comprises 44 contributing nations – far more than the sum of member states of NATO which took command of the international force under Security Council authority in October 2003. There has been much debate surrounding ISAF participation and a number of countries have established caveats to limit the use of their armed forces, recalling that it is a peacekeeping mission: thus some countries' troops are not permitted to participate in attacks and others have only equipment that is necessary for self-defence.

9. In 2007 Operation Enduring Freedom and ISAF were brought under single command. The region was divided among the allies in order to secure the south and the west of the country, whilst the American and British contingents provided troops for major advances into Taliban-held territory, which explains the differences in the number of casualties among the coalition states. What is more, the geography of the region – which is largely mountainous – does not make it easy for troops to advance evenly, leading to pockets of resistance that are hard to reach.

10. The Karzai Government has not succeeded in getting local institutions up and running again, and despite western efforts to rebuild and train the Afghan police and army, it is still only thanks to the presence of ISAF troops that the situation remains stable. Western forces have not really managed to win the trust of the local population which is as hostile now to foreign invaders as it was during the war with the Soviet Union. Afghans are generally withdrawn and not really open to a culture that is so different to their own, and in their eyes, the Taliban are the only effective political and military organisation in an ethnic and religious context that is firmly rooted in their history.

11. The number of troops engaged in Afghanistan has risen over the past eight years and been reinforced by the American forces withdrawn from Iraq, but the results have not been encouraging. There have been constant calls for the allied countries to increase their contribution in efforts to win the war. This has become the subject of recurrent debate involving political decisions and dividing public opinion. On the ground, civilians and combatants live side by side. The western allies have lost

1 700 men and, according to official NATO figures, an estimated 9 700 Afghan civilians have lost their lives in military engagements and bomb attacks. There is a growing feeling among the public in both the United States and in the allied countries of being bogged down in an endless war. Barack Obama, in his election campaign, pledged to take a new political approach to resolve the situation.

12. We are therefore at a turning point in the war and diplomatic and political efforts are focused on finding a shared solution, possibly involving those parts of the Taliban which are more open to negotiation. Attempts should be made to rally the population and breathe new life into the country's administrative bodies. The government must also regain the upper hand. The emphasis is now on providing economic and technical aid to support stabilisation and reconstruction. Local corruption hampers such efforts and large sums of money are diverted from ongoing projects, all of which does little to encourage new initiatives. Furthermore, the recent election boycott, the bomb attacks and the Taliban's continuing guerrilla war tend to undermine all efforts in this area. Thus the civilian approach has not been any more successful than the military one, and the presence of a large number of NGOs – each pursuing their own policies and objectives – does not make things any easier.

13. In the meantime, the NATO command has asked the allies to make one last effort and increase the number of troops and equipment on the ground in order to eradicate once and for all the more resistant centres of guerrilla activity. The military solution remains the basis for political negotiation and reconstruction. In September 2009, the Secretary-General of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, went in person to all the contributing countries to negotiate a way forward, raising a debate much appreciated by the media and posing the difficult question for national parliaments of whether to increase the military contingent for the Alliance.

14. The concept of an “exit strategy” from the war has surfaced in American politics: “the war goes on so that the war might end” is the message that goes down best with the public after eight apparently fruitless years of operations. On 28 January 2010, a conference was called in London bringing together all the countries involved in operations in Afghanistan with a view to reaching an agreement on the basis of a gradual disengagement of troops once the territory had been secured and local institutions revived. For the exit strategy – to be implemented in July 2011 – to work, the Afghan Government and forces must take on an increasing amount of responsibility for security.⁵ Indeed, the countries that attended the London Conference expressed their desire for Afghanistan to take its destiny in its own hands, for it to be more directly involved in managing its political affairs, to increase regional cooperation and to ensure a more effective international partnership.⁶

15. The new American strategy for Afghanistan is based on emphasising cooperation and civil reconstruction, increasing development aid, improving the dialogue with “moderate” Taliban, increasing American forces by 30 000, developing Afghan military capabilities through training and increasing the responsibility and role of the Afghan Government both in military operations in the south of the country and as regards national security. It is a real turning point in the country's engagement policy.⁷ The new American President's first visit to Afghanistan and that of Prince Charles on 29 and 25 March 2010 respectively bore witness to the efforts being made to communicate the new strategy adopted by the international forces in Afghanistan.⁸

III. Responsibility, obligation and preconditions in Afghanistan

16. The new strategy to improve security in Afghanistan aims to be global. Indeed, security in the country cannot depend solely on military measures, but must be backed up by a regional, diplomatic or security policy. Some of the essential features of such a multilateral approach are constant vigilance against corruption, well-coordinated aid and a development strategy which strengthens government at

⁵ Press release, Afghanistan: The London Conference, 28 January 2010.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Military Campaign in Afghanistan” by Claire Taylor, House of Commons, International Affairs and Defence Section, 4 December 2009. This new strategy, publicly acknowledged by President Obama in his speech at West Point Military Academy on 1 December 2009, is partly a response to the report submitted by General McChrystal to the President in September 2009.

⁸ The Guardian, “Charles: Troops in Afghanistan ‘having a bloody awful time’”, 26 March 2010.

central and regional level, as well as a wide-ranging social and political dialogue which embraces the insurgent elements who might perhaps cooperate with a democratic regime in Afghanistan.

17. General McChrystal, the new commander in chief of operations, has been tasked with implementing these aspects of the United States' new strategy for Afghanistan. He is to focus in particular on restructuring the Afghan National Police (ANP) and the Afghan National Army (ANA), involving them increasingly in the conduct of operations on the ground. But any reform of the Afghan forces goes hand in hand with that of the government in power. Under General McChrystal, there is to be political and military cooperation.⁹

18. However, the situation on the ground might prove to be a serious obstacle to implementing the various programmes and cooperation initiatives envisaged by the international forces, the United States and the Afghan Government. Other potential obstacles to improving security in the country include corruption and lack of trust in the security forces, in particular the ANP.

19. Afghanistan is a vast country, largely poverty-stricken, divided and with an illiteracy rate of 57% among men and 87% among women over the age of 15.¹⁰ Efforts to establish central government rule over the whole country are complicated by the contrast between town and rural life, tensions between Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and other ethnic groups, and the political exploitation of religious differences. Moreover, clan networks are incompatible with western images of rational bureaucracy. Some Sharia court decisions fly in the face of international human rights and the idea of family-based militia collides with the western idea of a state monopoly on the military.

20. Corruption is not limited to the drug trade; it is rife in all walks of life throughout the country. The efforts of the international forces to stamp out corruption in Afghanistan are unfortunately defeated by the lure of easy money. A considerable number of Afghan politicians have no appetite for reform and would even prefer to see the Taliban in power rather than run the risk of losing income.

21. The Afghan security forces, in particular the ANP, do not facilitate the implementation of measures to improve security in Afghanistan.¹¹ Indeed, some elements of the ANP are heavily dependent on drugs and some are even involved in trafficking weapons and ammunition to the insurgents. In addition, given that the Afghan security forces refuse any form of democratic oversight and that there is a very real risk of some police officers changing sides and joining the insurgents, it is not surprising that more and more people are using private militia. They have better intelligence-gathering skills and are more efficient; for many actors on the ground the militia are therefore a substitute for the ANP which is proving less and less reliable.¹²

22. The situation on the ground, where the blight of corruption is ubiquitous, is a real obstacle to implementing the strategy of the international forces in Afghanistan. This problem prevents any progress being made in the political arena and the police are not capable of assuming their role.

IV. Public opinion in the United States on operations in Afghanistan

23. There are three factors that influence public opinion on the war in Afghanistan: casualty sensitivity, unity among political decision-makers and how their strategy is communicated.

24. Since the trauma of the Vietnam war, the American public has become more sensitive to the issue of casualties from their wars, a phenomenon known as "casualty sensitivity". Only in western

⁹ The future political and military cooperation should be characterised by principles of subsidiarity and commensurability. Subsidiarity means that the military has only a supporting role in the fight against crime (a de facto prerogative of the Afghan police), commensurability means using a level of violence that is proportional to the dangers presented by the situation.

¹⁰ February 2009. www.usaid.gov

¹¹ The ANP did in fact contribute to Operation Mushtarak and is to play an increasing role in operations led by the international forces in Afghanistan.

¹² Interview with the head of security of Médecins sans Frontières in Afghanistan: "The ANP is the last institution I would want to cooperate with. It is my informal network that I trust, the NDS (Afghan secret service) and ISAF".

democracies has casualty sensitivity come to influence decision-making and the level of public support for any given military operation.¹³ This gave rise to a new way of waging war for the United States, with the objective of keeping its own casualties to an absolute minimum and integrating this phenomenon into its approach to warfare. American public opinion seems to vary depending on the number of losses incurred. If, for example, we look at the figures for July to October 2009, we can see a correlation between the number of losses (on average 49 per month, up to 59 in October, the highest yet since the beginning of the war) and the fall-off in support among the American public (up to 58% disapprove of the war, the highest level since the start of the conflict).¹⁴ Nevertheless, the shifts in public opinion cannot be explained solely by the number of casualties.

25. Factors such as the national interest, unity among political decision-makers and the way their strategy is communicated also have an influence on public opinion and sway perceptions of the war. Besides the fact that the national interest must figure large in determining whether the population is in favour of the war or not, presenting a united front¹⁵ and explaining the strategy¹⁶ involved are also important. Comparing the casualty figures since January and how public opinion has shifted is pertinent in that it illustrates the impact of these factors. Indeed, given the increase in the number of losses since December 2009 (the toll has more than doubled since the same January to April period last year), American public support should have decreased,¹⁷ yet it has increased by 5% compared to December 2009¹⁸ (the percentage of those in favour of the war has risen from 43% to 48%). This trend can be explained by the fact that President Obama communicated the new American strategy for Afghanistan in December 2009 and by the London Conference in January 2010.

26. As regards communication, another final factor to be taken into account when analysing public opinion is the progress being made in the war. In the case of the Vietnam war, for example, American public opinion only started to tip when the number of casualties rose and the chances of a political victory began to appear more and more unlikely. The opinion of American citizens is therefore partly shaped by defeat.¹⁹ By analogy, if we look at Afghanistan, the criticism directed against President George W. Bush during his term of office was based more on the fact that any hope of establishing peace and democracy in Afghanistan appeared to be increasingly unrealistic and there was no sign of a quick solution. It is therefore essential to put the war in context and provide the public with benchmarks so that they are clear about the political decisions and understand the stakes of each stage of the strategy.

27. All these factors help explain why the public is willing to accept a greater number of casualties and even, in some circumstances, an increase in the number of troops rather than their withdrawal.²⁰ Casualty figures are important, but what drives public opinion is establishing good communication between all the actors involved – in the case of Afghanistan, between President Obama and General McChrystal – and with the political and military authorities of the other troop-contributing countries.

V. Informing public opinion in Europe

28. European studies up until now have been based almost exclusively on hypothetical scenarios and on respondents' readiness to accept casualties should such a scenario play out. A comparative

¹³ Even if research on casualty sensitivity has up until now focused for the most part on the United States, it can be seen as a model for European states. Observations on the impact of the war in Afghanistan on American public opinion can also be applied to the European public.

¹⁴ See Appendices 1 and 2.

¹⁵ "Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for US Military Operations", Eric Larson, 1996.

¹⁶ Even if experts believe that democratic societies are willing to accept a higher rate of losses among their ranks for the sake of national defence, it does not suffice to explain the public's behaviour.

¹⁷ See Appendix 1.

¹⁸ See Appendix 2.

¹⁹ "Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq" by Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver and Jason Reifler, *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Winter 2005/06, pages 7-46.

²⁰ Cf. President Obama's decision to increase the contingent already present in Afghanistan by 30 000 men in the first half of 2010.

study of the different European countries concluded some years ago that the readiness of the European public to accept their country's participation in conflicts (together with the risk of casualties on their own side) was clearly stronger than that of most national governments.²¹ It is therefore safe to assume that the course of the mission has the same influence on public opinion in Europe as it does in the United States and that concordance between the stated objective and the actual course of the operation, as well as the timing of the public debate, are essential. Below is an overview of public opinion in some of the countries with troops in Afghanistan. It gives some general indications while in no way claiming to be exhaustive.

1. The United Kingdom

29. While the war in Afghanistan is generally regarded as a "good war" in the United Kingdom, public opinion has shifted since the beginning of the conflict and the "good war" concept now seems a distant memory.²² Several factors have contributed to the shift in public opinion. As in the United States, the question of national losses is important, but the way national leaders communicate is even more so.

30. The loss of human life can have a strong impact on public opinion. At the end of 2009, the British public was shaken at the news of the death of six soldiers in one week, news which came on top of the heavy losses sustained over the three previous months (the heaviest since the beginning of the war).²³ Statistics on public opinion gathered in October 2009 show that 59% of the country is opposed to the war in Afghanistan. More generally, a third of the British population is now in favour of the immediate withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.²⁴ The substantial decline in public support has been fuelled not only by the number of fatalities but also by the fact that the campaign has lasted so long and that the aims of the war, few of which have been achieved, seem blurred.

31. British public opinion is therefore not convinced that the United Kingdom's mission in Afghanistan is achievable. In a poll conducted on 4 November 2009, 64% of respondents believed the war to be "unwinnable" (up from 58% in July 2009). Furthermore, the same poll revealed that 42% of those surveyed said they did not understand the purpose of the mission in Afghanistan, some 63% felt that the troops should be withdrawn as soon as possible and 52% agreed that the war was "not worth fighting".²⁵ Faced with such unfavourable results, the government conducted a communication campaign on the war in Afghanistan.

32. With a view to "explaining the successes", the then Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, opened a topical debate on Afghanistan at the end of 2009 in order to recall that the rationale for the mission in Afghanistan remained that of ensuring that that country would never again become a breeding ground for al-Qa'ida and international terrorism.²⁶ The only real justification for the operation, it was recalled during the debate, was the national interest. But the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, also said that the government had a "duty" to set out the reasons behind the Afghanistan operation.²⁷ The government was more convinced than ever that it had to "persevere" and "show some resolution".²⁸ Public opinion changed in the wake of the communication campaign. While the period from January to March 2010 saw the highest death toll (in comparison to the same period over the years since the beginning of the war), with an average of 11 deaths per month, public support rose by 1% and opposition fell by 1%.²⁹ The communication campaign seems to have had a favourable impact on public opinion, notwithstanding the rise in the number of troop fatalities.

²¹ Public Opinion and International Use of Force, edited by Philip Everts and Pierangelo Isernia, Routledge, 2001. Last paper published before the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

²² BBC News, 8 November 2009. www.bbc.co.uk/politics

²³ See Appendix 2 and BBC News, 8 November 2009. www.bbc.co.uk/politics

²⁴ See Appendix 2.

²⁵ BBC News, 8 November 2009. www.bbc.co.uk/politics

²⁶ Sir Jock Stirrup on BBC News, 8 November 2009. www.bbc.co.uk/politics

²⁷ House of Commons debate, Hansard, 14 January 2010.

²⁸ BBC News, 8 November 2009. www.bbc.co.uk/politics

²⁹ See Appendix 2

33. The British public therefore remains divided on the question of whether or not to stay on in Afghanistan. Opinion is determined by the number of troop casualties and the importance of the mission is tied to the national interest.³⁰ In the words of William Hague, the new Foreign Secretary, “Public support would not be sustained for a campaign of that length in which we could not show really clear military and political progress in Afghanistan”.³¹ Some divergences are already perceptible within the new cabinet, since Defence Minister Liam Fox has stated that he would like the British troops to be withdrawn as soon as possible. “We are not a global policeman”, he said. “We are not in Afghanistan for the sake of the education policy in a broken (...) country. We are there so the people of Britain and our global interests are not threatened”. As in the United States, communicating strategy and highlighting the national interest play a key role in forming public opinion and can heighten or attenuate the effect on the collective conscience of the number of troop fatalities.

2. Germany

34. The German Federal Government did not hold a serious public debate at the time of the intervention. However, in reaction to the public’s reluctance to engage in a foreign war, the Bundestag is now trying to lead an extensive public debate to ensure that the consensus among the political parties on the Afghanistan operation does not break.

35. In fact a majority of the German population is fundamentally opposed to the operation as such and for some years now has favoured a withdrawal of the German armed forces from Afghanistan. In spring 2007, 57% of the respondents in a survey commissioned by the German weekly *Der Spiegel* were in favour of pulling out; by July 2009 the percentage had risen to 69%. This increase went hand in hand with a shift in German public opinion on the issue of German casualties, with the public becoming more sensitive to losses among Germany’s own troops. Indeed, opinion polls show peaks in favour of a withdrawal whenever there are German casualties.

36. Another indicator of German citizens’ increasingly negative attitude towards the operations in Afghanistan would appear to be the way in which the conflict is presented in the media, which has changed over the last two years. As the intensity of the conflict has increased, more personal information – names, pictures and biographies – has started being published about fallen soldiers, whereas previously only the soldier’s rank and place of origin were given.

37. Several reasons for that change can be identified. The first is that up until early summer 2003 no German soldier had died under enemy fire: of the nine German casualties, two had died while defusing anti-aircraft rockets and seven had been killed in a helicopter crash.

38. In May 2003, for the first time, a German soldier was killed by a landmine in Afghanistan, prompting a change in the media handling of the conflict. Many German newspapers draw a clear distinction between deaths in accidents and deaths on the frontline, and separate statistics are used. The public also perceives the two categories differently: accidents, it is reasoned, can occur anywhere, while there is no such justification for death by enemy action. An especially explosive issue for the German Government is the fact that every German casualty since November 2005 has been the direct result of enemy action, while there have been no accidental deaths, reflecting a clear escalation of the conflict.

39. This development is particularly problematic for the Ministry of Defence. The public debate has intensified since the first detailed press reports on German casualties, with the prospect of a troop withdrawal being mooted. Moreover, the phenomenon is snowballing: the more reports there are in the press with the names and pictures of fallen soldiers and their loved ones, the stronger the resonance with the public.

40. In addition to this, the further the mission objective – the stabilisation and pacification of Afghanistan – moves away from being realised, the greater the significance of each casualty in the eyes of the public.

³⁰ BBC News, 8 November 2009 www.bbc.co.uk/politics

³¹ BBC News, 8 November 2009 www.bbc.co.uk/politics

41. The incident in September 2009 in which Colonel Klein (commander in Kunduz) ordered an air attack on two tankers captured by the Taliban and which cost the lives of many civilians led to a further escalation of the debate. One notable consequence of this incident was the resignation of the then Defence Minister, Mr Franz Josef Jung, on 27 November 2009. It also further raised public doubts about the purpose of Germany's participation in ISAF. Surprisingly however, following the Kunduz air strike the approval ratings for the armed forces' operation rose from 27% to 37%, although it is unclear to what extent this was a reaction of defiance against the harsh criticism directed against Germany by its allies.

42. As part of the future strategy for Afghanistan, civilian aid is to be almost doubled to 430 million euros per year. However, there are conditions attached. The German Government's plan is to link development aid even more closely with its military intervention. Only those organisations that cooperate closely with the military in the north of Afghanistan – where the German armed forces are stationed – will be subsidised. "Everywhere where soldiers provide security", said Development Aid Minister Dirk Niebel (FDP) in January, "we need to step up construction work so that people will see: here there is security". His ministry, he said, would allocate funds only in relation to specific tasks.

3. The Netherlands

43. Public opinion in the Netherlands is less strongly opposed to the war than in Germany, but in Germany government strategy has the backing of the Social Democrats, who were responsible for sending German troops to Afghanistan in the first place. In the Netherlands the situation is different and demonstrates that serious repercussions can ensue if parties within government do not work together. The decision to extend the mandate of the Dutch contribution to ISAF led to the fall of the Dutch Government and new elections are to follow. The question of keeping troops in Afghanistan was certainly not the only issue tearing apart the parties in the governing coalition in the Netherlands; they were also divided over a controversial decision to raise the age of retirement and the urgent need for deep budget cuts. But it was the dispute over the troops that brought relations to breaking point.

4. France

44. France has 3 250 soldiers in Afghanistan and 150 gendarmes. President Nicolas Sarkozy has flatly refused to send any more troops and an official in the Elysée Palace said the Dutch decision would do nothing to change that. The French President's refusal to contemplate troop reinforcements has been driven by a combination of hostile public opinion (polls have shown that most French people want their troops out) and impending local elections.

45. For the first time in September 2008, the President of France was obliged to answer to parliament in a vote concerning a foreign military assignment. Up until then the President alone took this type of decision and sought parliamentary endorsement only if he regarded it as politically necessary. In April 2008 President Sarkozy decided without consulting parliament to strengthen the existing French contingent by about 700 soldiers. Changes to the French Constitution in July 2008 meant that from then on the President had to inform parliament of troop deployments overseas, and parliament had to approve any military deployment lasting more than four months.

46. The country's politicians found logical the answer in 2008 to the question as to whether France should be involved in the mission in the Hindu Kush. Shortly after the deaths of 10 soldiers in August of that year, Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner stated in a joint hearing before members and senators that the current military action could not be categorised legally as a war, even if it resembled one. Following the deaths, President Sarkozy said that France was fighting terrorism in Afghanistan. The French contingent was then increased by 100 in Kabul.

47. Defence Minister Hervé Morin speaks of three options for Afghanistan: development aid, education assistance and additional military resources. According to Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, France must make the Afghan population its key priority, so that Afghanistan might gradually begin providing its own security, regain control of its main public services and generate its own income.

5. Italy

48. Whilst the political classes in Italy are fundamentally Atlanticist, the differences in opinion that have emerged since the beginning of operations in Afghanistan have reduced support for ISAF. The idea that it is a peacekeeping mission – a necessary criterion, given that the Italian Constitution bans war as a means of conflict resolution – has now been called into question as a number of factors indicate that it is in fact a real war: the Italian public has been shocked at the number of soldiers who have lost their lives and the slogan “bring our boys back home” was launched within the government coalition itself. The restrictions set on Italy’s participation under the first mandate – which served to emphasise the peacekeeping nature of the operation – were largely overlooked over the years and the situation has gone from bad to worse. Polls now indicate that over 58% of the population is against Italy’s continued participation in the war. The government has pledged only a limited number of reinforcements and in the future promises above all to provide military and technical assistance to local security forces. Defence Minister Ignazio La Russa expressed regret at the Dutch withdrawal from the operation and said he was confident the mission would come to an end in 2013.

49. At the end of February 2010, the Italian Parliament approved the extension of all international missions through a finance bill which is renewed each year. There is still an opposition led by minority political groups, but the new US strategy is supported by the Italian Government, which intends to further strengthen its military presence by stepping up troop rotations and contributing more instructors to train the local forces. Its aim is to reach a total strength of 4 000 troops during the course of this year. Recently there has been a public communications effort following an attack in which two soldiers died in May. On several occasions the Defence Minister and even the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, have declared that Afghanistan cannot simply be left to its fate, while Foreign Affairs Minister Franco Frattini has stated quite plainly that if the coalition shows any signs of wavering, the Taliban extremists will seize the opportunity to make a comeback. The public showed concern about the fate of a woman soldier who was seriously wounded during the same attack and the press has been taking a close interest in the presence of female soldiers and their role in this kind of international operation.

6. Spain

50. Ever since the withdrawal of Spanish forces from Iraq, the Zapatero Government has been at pains to improve relations with the United States: the Spanish contingent in Afghanistan includes 1 576 troops, plus some 40 Civil Guards involved in training the Afghan police. All the political parties seem to be in favour of the military intervention and the public – directly touched by the tragedy of the terrorist attack on Madrid station – is generally favourable despite the many losses suffered by the Spanish contingent. On 17 February last, parliament approved, without debate, the dispatch of a further 511 troops, as requested at the London Conference.

7. Poland

51. The Polish contingent will reach 2 600 troops in the course of 2010, no mean achievement for a country whose armed forces were not modernised until the end of the cold war. Whilst the Polish public is largely sceptical about the outcome of the mission – at the end of 2009, 75% of respondents said they were against continuing operations – the government is to some extent paying the price of its contribution to NATO which by and large remains the popular choice for the country’s first line of defence.

8. Sweden

52. On 7 February 2010, the death of a Swedish soldier on foot patrol in a village unleashed a wave of emotion and undertones of patriotism unknown before in a country where the deeply ingrained attitude is one of neutrality and distance from military problems. A new phenomenon emerged and an American-style media campaign was launched “to honour the dead” by wearing a yellow ribbon. Up until then the only Swedish losses had been two soldiers killed in an IED explosion five years previously. But there has been an ever-increasing number of attacks recently and the government has to give answers and in particular explain the choice of tactics. There are 500 troops in the Swedish contingent who are mainly tasked with carrying out foot patrols, allowing soldiers to engage with the

local population and explain the reasons behind the peacekeeping mission. Such a mission was guaranteed to win the support of the Swedish political parties and public and more than half of the country approved of their troops being deployed on the ground. By the end of 2009, however, only a third of the population approved. This latest episode has highlighted the real risks encountered by Swedish troops who, being directly exposed to hostile elements, are an easy target compared to other coalition units which travel around in close and heavily-armed convoys. The upcoming elections might well swing in favour of the left-wing parties whose very pro-neutrality electorate has been for the withdrawal of Swedish troops since the beginning of the conflict.

9. Belgium

53. Belgium, present in Afghanistan since 2003, is contributing, in 2010, 626 soldiers to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and is deploying six F-16 combat aircraft in Afghanistan. The Belgian troops are located in three military sites: Kabul, Kunduz (north) and Kandahar. They have not suffered any military losses since the beginning of the war.

54. When the US announced that it would start withdrawing troops from Afghanistan in July 2011, Belgium extended its engagement by one year, to the end of 2011. However, with a change of government scheduled for 13 June 2010, the issue of Belgium's military presence in Afghanistan is once again at the heart of an electoral debate. Depending on the outcome of the election, Belgium could decide on an earlier withdrawal of its troops and the immediate repatriation of its six F-16s stationed in Kandahar. Whichever political formation wins the elections it will represent, in part, Belgian public opinion regarding the country's presence in Afghanistan. The Flemish Socialists have made this a condition for participating in the government and they are supported on that point by the Groen and Ecolo parties. Indeed, a large swathe of public opinion, particularly in the north of the country, does not understand the aims of the war in this far-off theatre or see any justification for its cost, particularly in these times of crisis. Failing a total withdrawal, a decision to stop sending reinforcements or even a partial withdrawal could figure among the concessions that might need to be made for the formation of a new government. The majority parties (the Liberals and Christian Democrats) for their part are staunchly in favour of living up to the commitments entered into by the Allies in Afghanistan and believe that it is not possible to leave Afghanistan prematurely, as it is the security of the West that is at stake.

VI. Perception of the situation from the point of view of the Afghan people

55. The presence of the international armed forces is not only mandated by international law, it also has the support of the Afghan Government as well as the majority of the population. In 2010, Afghans are more optimistic about the future than in previous years. A joint survey conducted by the broadcasting stations ARD, ABC News and the BBC at the end of 2009 showed that 70% of Afghans supported the international military presence,³² 30% up from a poll carried out the previous year.

1. Polls and statistics

56. President Karzai began his second term of office in August 2009 with wide public support. Three out of four Afghans think he is doing a good job and credit him with improving security and stability in the country. The Afghan National Army has 70% approval and the police 61%. That support is probably based more on the principle of hope than on the actual efficiency of those institutions.

57. An additional factor in the public's growing confidence is that living conditions have noticeably improved. Indeed, of the 13 areas of everyday life covered in the poll, 10 are perceived to have improved (including security from crime and violence; availability of jobs/economic opportunities; roads, bridges and other infrastructure; availability of clean water; supply of electricity; availability of food; availability of medical care; rights of women; the ability to afford the price of

³² The poll was conducted for ABC News, the BBC and ARD by the Afghan Centre for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research (ACSOR) based in Kabul. Interviews were conducted in person, in Dari or Pashto, among a random national sample of 1 534 Afghan adults between 11 and 23 December 2009.

things you want and need; and support for agriculture). The three remaining areas are either perceived to have worsened (freedom of movement and security from the Taliban and other armed groups) or to have remained the same (local schools).

58. Although most areas of everyday life are perceived to have improved since Karzai's second term, these improvements need to be put in perspective. For example, as regards the perception of "medical care", although the approval figure ("very good") has doubled, it is still only 14% against a previous 7%. While improvements are a positive sign, higher levels of satisfaction still need to be reached.

59. People are also more optimistic about the military conflict with the Taliban and other insurgents. A year ago, 43% of Afghans felt that the Taliban were getting stronger, whereas now only 30% hold that opinion. 40% think the insurgents are weaker now. There is an increasing amount of hope that the Taliban can be defeated or integrated into a negotiated solution.

60. As regards the apportionment of blame for the violence in the country, things have changed in the last year. While the Taliban and al-Qa'ida have always borne the brunt of the blame, the figures have gone from about one third of the population laying the responsibility at their door to over 40% in 2010. The American forces now get only 5% of the blame against 12% in the previous year.

61. The United States and NATO are still not seen in a favourable light: 60% state that the United States and NATO are not doing a good job and only 40% support the Americans. It is not so much the presence of the troops that is singled out for criticism but the behaviour of foreign nationals on the ground. When it comes to assessing President Obama's new strategy, 60% of Afghans would rather the deployment of international troops was limited, while the majority support the objectives of the new strategy and think they can be accomplished.³³

2. The position as regards the media

62. Apart from a short period in the 1960s, the Afghan press was always state-controlled: nothing could be published or printed without official permission. Anyone who wrote anything that was critical of the government did so at the peril of his or her life. Radio and television, like the printed media, served the primary purpose of showing the government in a good light. This was the information policy of all the Afghan regimes from the monarchy, the Republican regime and the Communist government to the Mujaheddin and the Taliban regime.

63. That suddenly changed after the fall of the Taliban government in 2001. No sooner had President Karzai's government declared the freedom of the press than new publishing companies, newspapers and magazines were springing up everywhere. Never before have there been so many private publications in Afghanistan. The Ministry of Culture and Information counts more than 400 officially registered publications. Even taking into account the fact that the majority are produced in the capital city of Kabul, that figure is no mean achievement for a country with an illiteracy rate of more than 80%.

64. Another new development in addition to the privately-owned newspapers is the creation of radio and television broadcasting stations. The state's information monopoly has been broken, although this is difficult for many of the country's citizens to understand. Many Afghan politicians are not yet used to discussing their political plans openly and to keeping the public informed, while media representatives are finding it hard to grasp that they can express criticism without risking their lives. The many dictatorships and 23 years of war have taught them to be cautious.

65. Now, however, the country's media find themselves in a deep credibility crisis due to the unprofessional conduct of the people responsible for sensitive information. The state newspapers and broadcasting stations do not fulfil the public's needs either for unbiased reporting or entertainment programmes. The state-controlled media are increasingly guided by ideological considerations, acting for the most part as a propaganda machine for the government.

³³ ARD website, 11 January 2010. www.tagesschau.de/ausland/afghanistanumfrage

66. Critical reporting is not the private media's strong point either. The print media apparently lack well-qualified journalists. A whole host of publications such as political essays and literary works like poems and short stories are flooding the market: almost anything can be written about. But anyone who dares write anything that is critical of Islam lays themselves open to the wrath of the powerful Islamist groups and to accusations of blasphemy.

67. Private radio and television broadcasting stations for the most part avoid programmes with a political content, preferring to win over audiences with various forms of entertainment, such as the popular Bollywood music and films imported from India.

68. There is little choice for people who wish to keep informed about political events in Afghanistan and abroad: Afghans are obliged to turn for reliable political information to foreign radio stations like the BBC, Deutsche Welle and Voice of America, rather than to the Afghan media.

69. Almost all the Afghan media owe their existence to the support of foreign countries and NGOs. The French, for example, are strongly involved in the field of print media. Ayena, a strongly guarded media house in the centre of Kabul, is the publisher of a dozen national weekly magazines. The Americans have brought to life the well-known Sadaye Azadi radio station which broadcasts in the country's two official languages Dari and Pashto.

70. Germany provides major assistance for the reconstruction of the state radio and TV stations, with the focus not only on technical repairs but also the advanced training of journalists. Deutsche Welle has an arrangement with the Afghan Government for the daily broadcasting of about 20 minutes of international news in Pashto and Dari via the Afghanistan RTA radio and television station in Kabul. Deutsche Welle has increased its radio broadcasting times for Afghanistan and will shortly be broadcasting on FM in the Kabul metropolitan area. In addition the radio programmes prepared for the ISAF troops can be heard daily in Kabul and in the north of the country.

71. In a bid to help Afghans regain some control over their country, RAI, an Italian public service broadcaster, ran a training programme for 20 Afghan journalists in Rome at the end of March 2010. The journalists can take their new-found knowledge back to their country and improve public access to news and information.

72. One example of France's willingness to engage with the Afghan population and its commitment to Afghanistan is Radio Surobi, the first FM radio station in the Surobi region which was established at the initiative of Colonel Benoît Durieux of the French Foreign Legion and first began airing in December 2009. In the words of radio journalist Raphaël Krafft, brought in to set up the station and train local journalists, Radio Surobi "is above all a forum for exchange at local level, run by Afghans for Afghans". The long-term objective is for the station "to find local funding, because the aim of Radio Surobi is to be financially and geographically independent of its French sponsors and to achieve one day the status of a non-profitmaking association".³⁴

VII. The Alliance's communication strategy

73. As part of the preparation of this report, the Committee, aware of the gaps in the communication policy with the public, held a hearing with Dr Stefanie Babst, NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy, who explained how that sector was organised within the Alliance. The concept of a communication strategy is fairly new and in the past there was only a press and information office (as has always been the case in the armed forces). Communication today is far more structured as the realisation has grown of its importance as an instrument of "soft power" and a political tool necessary for consensus-building and dialogue in a number of areas beyond military issues. There are three stages of public diplomacy: the first and most immediate stage is daily communication, the second is strategic communication which develops a set of simple themes, and the third long-term stage involves developing lasting relations with experts and students who will be the decision-makers of tomorrow.

³⁴ Cynthia Glock, "Afghanistan ondes de paix en Surobi", *Armées d'aujourd'hui*, No. 350, May 2010.

74. In the field of public diplomacy and strategic communications, NATO aims at supporting allied nations in public diplomacy campaigns. The current priority is to focus on NATO's image and core role in securing peace in the world. This admittedly involves combat operations, but there is no hiding the fact that NATO is first and foremost a military alliance. From the outset, the mission in Afghanistan suffered from rather confused communications influenced by developments in the war. Different approaches were used depending on the audience: the Americans, in response to the attacks of 11 September 2001, immediately took up the image of the war against terrorism, the pursuit of Ben Laden and the fight against al-Qa'ida bases, while the allies focused instead on re-establishing democratic institutions in the wake of the Taliban dictatorship. The Afghan people were not portrayed in their true light; their land was considered as a place of combat and their culture and history were ignored. It was felt that once a local government was established – that of Hamid Karzai was soon in place – the Afghans themselves should get their country back up and running again. Over the years, it was realised that this was not feasible and it was only much later that the local population was engaged and associated with the success of the operation: that has now become the most important aspect of the operation and it is now clear to all that the international mission will not succeed through force alone and that the main strategy for the future must aim to win hearts and minds on the ground.

75. A centre has at last been set up within NATO to collect information on action taken and the results achieved: a simple, practical list is thus drawn up, kept up to date and distributed to the local Afghan media. A psychological approach also has to be taken, as attitudes are not the same: it is necessary to share points of view and not only information. Nor should it be forgotten that the Taliban have an efficient propaganda machine and the Afghan population, which cannot forget the past, is disorientated and fearful for the future. The situation in Afghanistan concerns us all. The country cannot rid itself of the ubiquitous corruption and drugs and arms trafficking; it is economically underdeveloped and its institutions are unreliable. But Afghanistan does not need a prefabricated western model imposed on it. That is why ISAF has set up a research and communication centre on the spot, close to the military action: in the allied countries, the messages are therefore coordinated, but everyone must do their part to give the public clear information and not get caught up in the political game of masking what is unacceptable, which gets in the way of understanding.

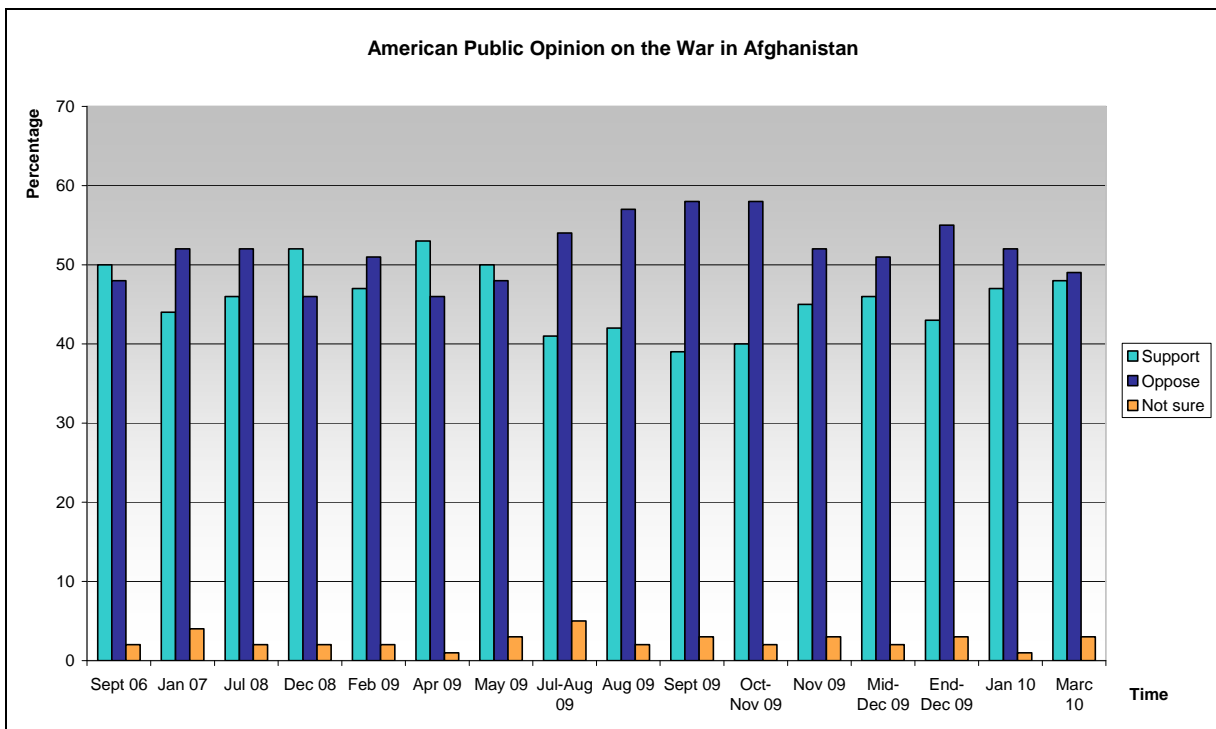
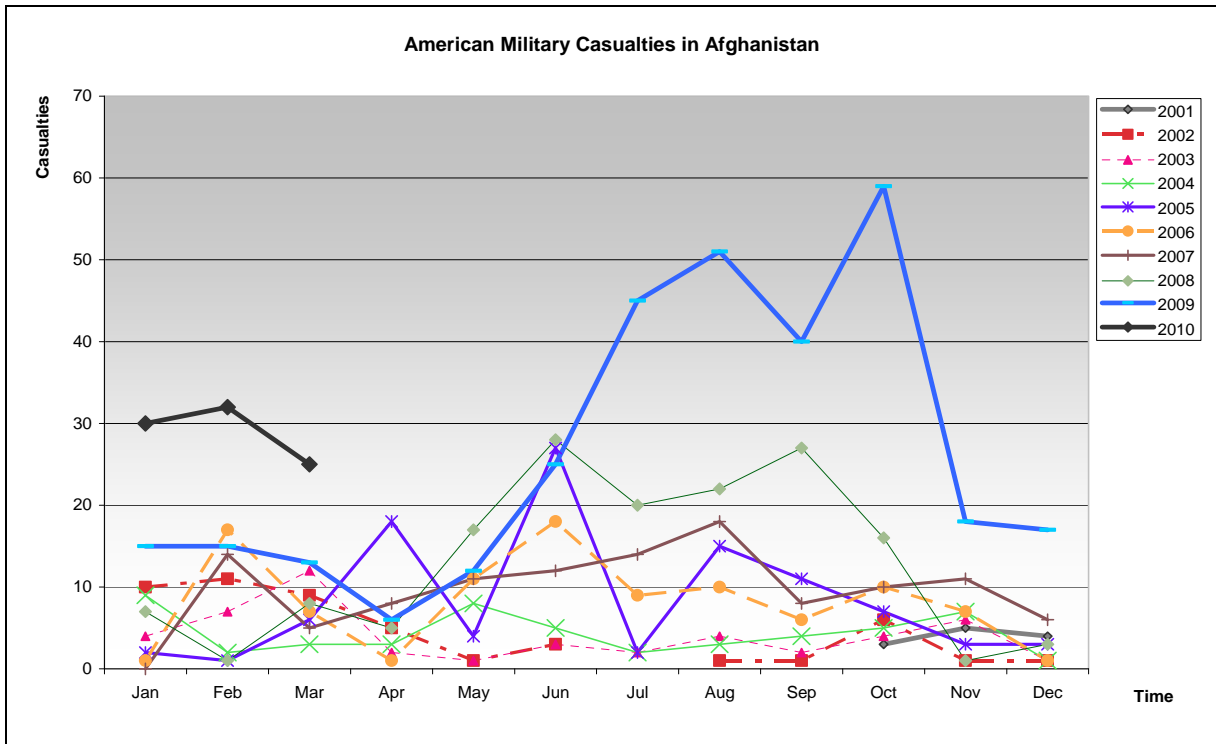
VIII. Conclusions

76. If the goals of the ISAF mission are to be achieved, its entire effort must be directed towards that end, including, as the report points out, that of winning over public opinion. On the one hand, account must be taken of the views of our own citizens who need to be reminded at every turn of the objective of the mission, which is to combat terrorism – the consequences of which impact directly on our national life. On the other, it is more than ever essential for the Afghan people to accept and support the action being taken now and that planned for the future. The need for a change of heart is obvious and it is important that the idea, prevalent on the ground, that this is a war of occupation conducted in the interests of foreign powers, should be corrected.

77. Besides augmenting military assets, the Alliance, aware of the challenges it faces, has at long last established communication management structures. It can only be hoped that this strategy will become increasingly visible to the wider public, and that parliamentarians will be able to draw on its support in any vote on whether to continue with military operations. This leads on to the purpose of the report. Your Rapporteur proposes a draft recommendation addressed to our governments and to the Secretary General of the Atlantic Alliance urging the adoption of a strong and clearly focused communication strategy in respect of all activities connected with the Afghan mission. Such a strategy is essential to ensuring public recognition of the actual and real success of military and civilian action in Afghanistan. The sacrifice of so many of our troops and their families as well as the Afghans themselves deserves nothing less.

APPENDIX 1

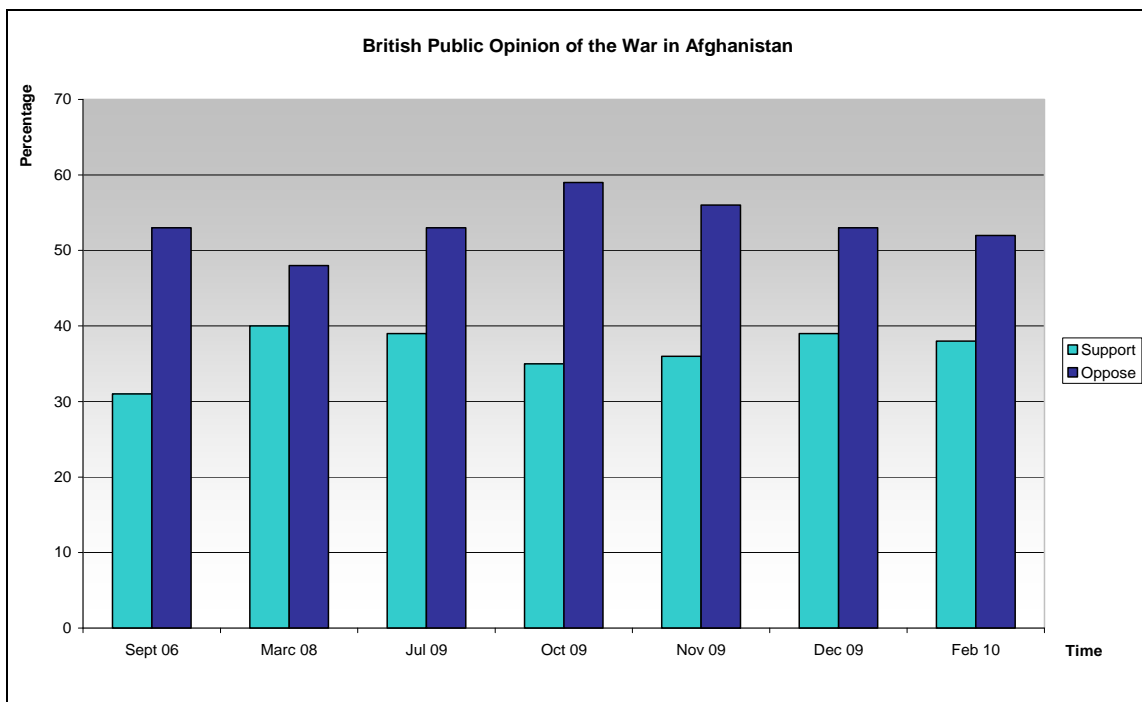
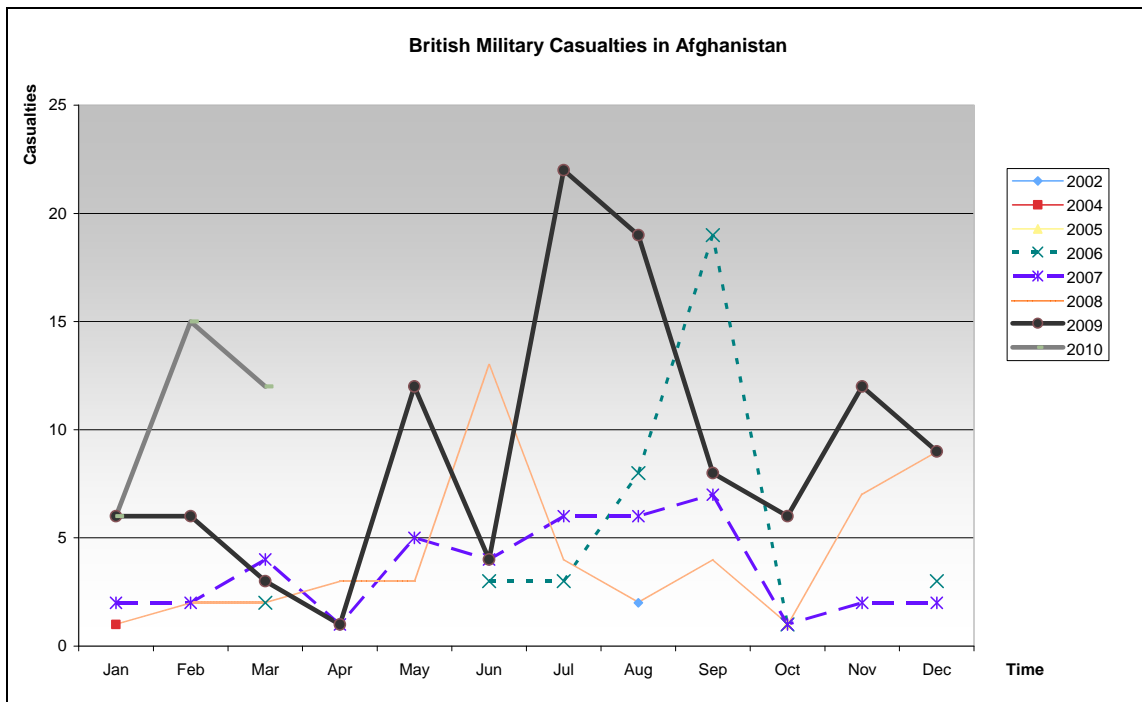
American Military Casualties in Afghanistan³⁵ and American Public Opinion of the War in Afghanistan³⁶



³⁵ Graph compiled from the website www.icasualties.org

³⁶ Graph compiled from the website www.pollingreport.com/afghan.htm, from the question: "Do you support or oppose the US war in Afghanistan?"

APPENDIX 2

British Military Casualties in Afghanistan³⁷ and British Public Opinion of the War in Afghanistan³⁸

³⁷ Graph compiled from the website www.icasualties.org

³⁸ Graph compiled from the website www.angus-reid.com in answer to the question "Overall do you support or oppose the military operation involving UK soldiers in Afghanistan?", based on the following articles: "Britons Remain Opposed to Afghanistan Mission", 9 December 2009; "Most Britons Still Oppose Afghan Mission", 25 February 2010; "Britain, Canada differ from US on Afghan War", 23 July 2009; and from the BBC News website, "Afghan Conflict Support Rises", 14 March 2008.

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