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EDITORIAL

Plenty of Blame for Afghanistan

It was not a pretty sight: Defense Secretary Robert Gates, last week, accusing NATO allies of not doing nearly enough in Afghanistan. But beyond the finger-pointing, there is a much more serious issue. Unless the United States and Europe come up with a better strategy — and invest more money, attention and troops — the “good war” will go irretrievably bad.

One year after NATO took over all peacekeeping responsibilities (the United States still has 26,000 troops there), attacks by Taliban and Qaeda forces, including suicide bombings, are on the rise. Afghans are growing increasingly disillusioned both about their country's government and its Western backers. Poppy production is also soaring as the Kabul government, Washington and Europe squabble over the best approach to eradication.

There is plenty of blame to go around. President Hamid Karzai and his government are weak. Pakistan, with Washington's acquiescence, has not done enough to root out Al Qaeda along Afghanistan's border. NATO has 28,000 troops on the ground, but member states seem to be losing their enthusiasm for the effort.

Urgent pleas for 3,500 more military trainers for Afghan security forces, 20 helicopters and 3 infantry battalions have gone unanswered. British, Canadian, Australian and Dutch troops are fighting in southern Afghanistan, where insurgents are most active. But some European countries have placed so many restrictions on where and how their forces will operate — including barring deployments in the south — that they are hobbling the effort. France, Germany, Italy and Spain are among those that could do more.

One of the biggest problems is that when NATO took command in Afghanistan, many members expected that most of the fighting would be over and their troops would focus on development and stabilization. Instead, they are increasingly taking casualties, and European leaders have still failed to tell their citizens why Afghanistan matters — and why a major effort must be made to deny the Taliban and Al Qaeda a safe haven.

We understand Mr. Gates's frustration. He might do better with the Europeans if he told another truth: Before NATO got involved, Washington never had enough troops in Afghanistan, nor did it have a coherent strategy for stabilizing and developing the country. Its decision to invade Iraq ended up shortchanging the effort even more. Too few ground troops, meanwhile, meant too much reliance on airstrikes, leading to too many civilian casualties, which fanned popular anger and resistance.

By the end of last week, Mr. Gates and European officials agreed that instead of trading blame they would begin a much needed top-to-bottom review of their strategy. Better late than never. The review must look at everything: politics, development, counternarcotics and security. It must find ways to improve coordination between NATO, Washington and Kabul. It must acknowledge that European and American troops will most likely have to remain there for many years. And it must be done quickly, before Afghanistan unravels even

more.

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