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## Kai Eide Interviewed by GPF's Catherine Defontaine

*Catherine Defontaine*

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At the beginning of November 2011, Global Policy Forum associate Catherine Defontaine interviewed Kai Eide. Ambassador Kai Eide was appointed Special UN Representative in Afghanistan and head of UNAMA by Ban Ki-Moon in 2008. He served in this position from March 2008 to March 2010. Prior to that, Ambassador Eide served the UN in different positions, mainly in the Balkans as Kofi Annan's Special Envoy in Kosovo and as UN Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He also played a significant role in the Middle East and co-authored the Mitchell Report on the 2000 Palestinian Intifada. In addition to his UN work, Ambassador Eide worked for the Norwegian Foreign Ministry and as the Norwegian Permanent Representative to NATO (2002-2006).

The interview is split into four sections. The interview, together with descriptions of the four parts, can be found below.

### **Part 1: Introduction**

Kai Eide reflects on the history of the UN's involvement in Afghanistan and assesses the impact of the different foreign interventions in Afghanistan, going back to the Anglo-Afghan war (of 1839-1842).

### **Part 2: UN's Role**

Kai Eide discusses the role of the UN in Afghanistan and describes the main challenges he was facing when he was head of UNAMA and Special Representative in Afghanistan. He explains his attempts to reach out to the Afghan population and to the Taliban in his effort to create a sustainable peace process. He also mentions the controversy over the 2009 reelection of Hamid Karzai and his disagreement with his deputy, Peter Galbraith.

### **Part 3: The Role of NATO and other actors in Afghanistan**

Kai Eide gives us his thoughts on the role of humanitarian actors in Afghanistan and the role played by NATO in the country. According to Kai Eide, though there were disagreements between the UN mission and the NATO strategy, the two organizations tried to coordinate their efforts in their attempts to put an end to the conflict.

### **Part 4: Prospects for the Future**

Kai Eide criticizes the US' military strategy in Afghanistan. He highlights the importance of relying on civilian institutions in the country and of creating a national unity in the Afghan government, which would represent all the different parties in the country.

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### **Part 1: Introduction**

**Catherine Defontaine:** I am talking with Ambassador Kai Eide. Ambassador Eide, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us on the issue of Afghanistan. As an introduction, would you be able to provide a brief historical context of the UN's involvement in Afghanistan?

**Kai Eide:** Afghanistan became a member of the United Nations in 1946, and, already in the very last part of that decade, we saw the first UN involvement in the country. That involvement has continued throughout the sixty years that have followed, during the Soviet occupation, but also during the Taliban. There has always been a strong UN commitment and humanitarian involvement. When we look at the UN in Afghanistan today and also during my time, it is important to remember that the UN is different from any other international organizations in that country. It did not come as a result of the "war on terror" but came there to help the Afghan people, many years before. When other organizations leave Afghanistan, and they will, then, I believe, the UN should and will have to stay on to continue assist the country, not least in order to relieve humanitarian and development problems.

**Catherine Defontaine:** How do you assess the Western intervention of October 2001 in Afghanistan? Could you reflect on the history of the different foreign interventions in Afghanistan?

**Kai Eide:** That is a very ambitious question. But I think that all foreigners who have tried to intervene in Afghanistan know that this is a very difficult undertaking. The Afghans are tough and proud fighters. They managed to beat the British during the first Anglo-Afghan war from 1839 to 1842, and, at the end of that war, only one out of thousands of British soldiers managed to make it

alive back to Jalalabad. The British faced fierce and stubborn fighters, who resisted foreign interference. The Soviets experienced the same in 1979, when they invaded the country. There were altogether 150,000 Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan. In February 1989, after ten years, the Soviets understood that they had lost the war and completed their withdrawal from the country as the last Soviet soldiers crossed the so-called "friendship bridge" between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. The Afghans had defeated the British Empire and now the Soviet superpower. No foreign endeavor is the same of course. The international forces present in Afghanistan today were invited by the Afghan government. But, they experience much of the same opposition. If you come to Afghanistan as a guest, you are always welcome. But if, in the eyes of the Afghans, you cross the line between guest and occupier, then you will meet fierce resistance.

## **Part 2: UN's Role**

**Catherine Defontaine:** Regarding UN presence in Afghanistan, what role is the UN playing in the country? Could you reflect on the mandate given to the UN?

**Kai Eide:** The UN family plays a role that covers a wide range of issues. First, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is a political mission and covers political issues such as coordination of international assistance, institution-building, police reform, elections, regional cooperation and other political areas. It is the Afghan government's main interlocutor with the wider international community. Furthermore, the UN presence has a strong humanitarian and development side. For instance, the UN Mission has undertaken several country-wide polio vaccination campaigns, and distributed large amounts of food in periods of drought and famine. In addition to UNAMA, around twenty specialized agencies are working in the country.

**Catherine Defontaine:** What were the main challenges you were facing when you were head of UNAMA and Special Representative in Afghanistan?

**Kai Eide:** There were so many. There were tensions already in our mandate; the UNAMA mandate said that we should work closely with the military. But of course, many of the UN agencies did not want us to work closely with the military, but wanted the UN to maintain its independence and not be seen as being part of the war against the Taliban. And I think that was important. For me, it was very difficult to position myself between the military, which wanted more and closer cooperation, and the UN agencies, which wanted a distance to the military. My instinct was to keep a distance and that was what prevailed. That was one of the challenges. Then, there were many others, for instance, the efforts to bring the international community to speak with one voice on political

issues and to bring the assistance from international donors together in one strategy. On the last part, I must say, we did not succeed very well. We managed to set some priorities with the Afghan government, but when I arrived, the international aid effort in Afghanistan was chaotic, and when I left two years later, it was not much better.

**Catherine Defontaine:** During your term, from 2008 to 2010, were there significant changes on the ground and do you think there is an evolution now?

**Kai Eide:** There were significant changes but mainly in the wrong direction. The military campaign did not go well and is still not going well. We managed to improve the aid coordination somewhat by setting some clear priorities. But it did not lead to changes in the behavior of the donors. Politically, Afghan institutions are still struggling. There has been, for a long time, a dispute between the President's office on one side and the Parliament on the other side. There is more ethnic tension today than there was two or three years ago. If you look at all these trends together, then I am very concerned. Afghanistan is not heading in the right direction. Today, some, especially in the military, claim that we are defeating the Taliban. But, that is not what I experience when I talk to my Afghan friends or visit Afghanistan.

**Catherine Defontaine:** The UN's role involves two aspects: humanitarian and political. However these two aspects may be contradictory because if the UN takes sides and supports the Afghan government, the Taliban and other insurgents see the UN as a party to the conflict. The UN has been targeted three times in attacks: in November 2009, in late 2010 and in earlier 2011. It then seems highly difficult for the UN to play an effective humanitarian role, which is supposed to be neutral and not politicized. Would you say that the UN is playing the role it should have in Afghanistan?

**Kai Eide:** To some extent I think that this is a real problem. But it is a problem we tried to address. For instance, I do believe that we managed to keep the necessary distance from the international military. It was important not to be seen by the Taliban as part of an international military campaign. NATO Secretary General said that we must all be one team and one mission. General Petraeus said the same. I disagreed with such views. The UN was not part of a militarily dominated mission. The UN was a distinct, independent actor. Of course, we had to have a decent relationship with the military, but we were not part of their mission. That is why I also said that the UN arrived before and will stay when the others have left. Concerning our relationship with the Afghan government, it is important to remember that all internationals are in Afghanistan at its invitation. Yes, we were close to the Afghan government and the Afghan government plays more and more the leading role in military, political and humanitarian efforts. I do not think it was because of the UN's political role

or relationship to the international military and to the Afghan government that we were attacked. There has been an increasing number of attacks on humanitarian workers, NGOs, aid organizations for a number of years. This trend has continued. The attacks take place because these organizations themselves either work for the Afghan government or receive money from governments that are engaged with military troops on the ground. Sometimes, the Taliban see them as undertaking activities that can undermine Islam. So, there are many reasons, but I did my utmost to remain as impartial as possible. I would also like to add that I do not think there were any humanitarian organization or UN agencies, which had better contacts with the Taliban than we had. If we had been seen as being an unacceptable interlocutor, this would not have been the case.

**Catherine Defontaine:** You revealed in early 2010 that you had secret talks with the Taliban. Could you talk about this? And could you reflect on UN strategy in Afghanistan? Do you think it is comprehensive enough?

**Kai Eide:** I will not give a misleading impression that we had regular contacts with the Taliban. We had contacts in various places, but they were sporadic. I do not think any actor on the ground, international or Afghan, had regular contacts with the Taliban and this is unfortunately still the case. We never managed to get into a real and regular dialogue. I think that it was right to make every effort to enter into such a dialogue, because there is no military solution to this conflict. There is only a political solution. During the last months, the Taliban and their associates have dealt very dramatic blows to the prospects of a peace process, for instance, by the killing of Professor Rabbani. We argued in favor of having contacts with the Taliban already in 2008. And we said that we should be open to talk to everybody, even the top leadership. When the Obama Administration came in, in early 2009, it also talked about a reconciliation policy. But the US Administration stressed that they wanted to talk only to moderate Taliban, which meant not to Mullah Omar, not the leadership. Now that has changed. Washington has adopted exactly the same strategy we advocated three years ago. I wish we could all have come to this conclusion three years ago. Unfortunately, valuable time has been lost. Three important years. And we will pay for that, I am afraid.

**Catherine Defontaine:** You often stressed that it was important for you to reach out to the Afghan population. As UN Special Representative in Afghanistan, what were your relationships with the Afghan government?

**Kai Eide:** With the Afghan government, it was, most of the time, a good relationship. There were moments of confrontation with the President, with ministers, but overall, it was a good relationship. I had an access that very few internationals, if any, had at that time to the President and to key members of

his government. But you are right when you say that I stressed the importance of reaching out to the people. The UN has to be seen as caring about the interests of the most vulnerable parts of the population. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for any international representative today to establish the kind of contact that we want with the people. We cannot just leave the car in a small village, walk around, talk to people as we would like to. It is difficult because of the security situation. But it is important to communicate to the Afghans that we do respect them, that we respect their culture, their history and their religion. It is important to tell them "I have come here as your guest and nothing else." Unfortunately, many failed to communicate that message.

**Catherine Defontaine:** The reelection of Hamid Karzai in 2009 was tainted by rumors of corruption and fraud. Could you talk about this reelection? What are the difficulties of organizing and having elections in a situation of conflict?

**Kai Eide:** There were not only rumors of irregularity and problems. There were massive irregularities and fraud, during these elections, as there were in 2010 for the National Assembly elections. It is very difficult, as you can imagine, to open election offices in the parts of the country where the conflict is raging. It is difficult to send observers and to see and understand what is happening in villages and communities that are completely foreign to us. We do not understand the language, the culture, etc. Besides, from a logistical point of view, just to bring everything that is needed to the polling sites was a tremendous challenge. We had to rent 3,000 donkeys in order to bring election materiel to the most remote parts of the country. This illustrates the challenge of organizing elections in a country like Afghanistan. There were irregularities and yes, there was fraud committed by the Afghans. But we tend to forget another important phenomenon; there was also massive international interference from some foreign politicians and representatives of the international community, first and foremost, from some US representatives. There was fraud on one side, there was interference on the other side and I regret both of them.

**Catherine Defontaine:** You did not mention Peter Galbraith, who famously accused you in Afghanistan and was then subject to criticism with regards to the situation in Iraq. Could you talk more about this?

**Kai Eide:** It was a complicated relationship. He was not my favorite to come in as a deputy in the UN mission. But the Americans put pressure on Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and he was then appointed as my political deputy. As you know, he was there only for a few weeks before he left because of controversy between him and me on the elections. And he was subsequently dismissed by the UN Secretary-General. I believe that some of the proposals he made were unacceptable. They were in violation of the Constitution, and of the rules and regulations that had been established for these elections. They represented

unacceptable interference in Afghan affairs. Peter Galbraith is a talented person, but unfortunately he was not a person that I could have confidence in during a very demanding election process.

**Catherine Defontaine:** People have been troubled by drone attacks, deals with warlords and opium trafficking by officials in the Afghan government, in particular Hamid Karzai's brother. Could you give us your thoughts in this regard?

**Kai Eide:** We, and me in particular, often tried to convince the President to include reform-minded politicians in the government. In late 2008 and early 2009, we did in fact succeed in increasing the number of reform-oriented members of his cabinet. But there were also warlords, who enjoyed a culture of impunity. We should not have allowed that to happen. Of course, this responsibility has also to be shared by the Afghans and by the international community. You mentioned Hamid Karzai's half-brother. He had worked for the Americans for years, had been aided by them. He was, on the one hand, a dubious figure and, on the other hand, an ally of the United States. Today, we criticize the President for including some of the warlords that I frequently mentioned - Ismael Khan, Dostum, Fahim Khan – in his government. Who were they? They were the most important individuals that the United States depended on in order to beat the Taliban. We have never done our job of marginalizing these warlords. On the contrary, we have courted them, we have expressed respect for them, we have enriched them. I have concrete examples of situations when the President wanted to arrest a prominent warlord, but western countries with troops on the grounds objected. And the reason was that they feared that such arrests could provoke instability where they had their forces in the country.

### **Part 3: The role of NATO and other actors in Afghanistan**

**Catherine Defontaine:** NATO is focusing on increasing its civil-military role. Could you comment on that and give us your thoughts on the role of humanitarian actors in Afghanistan, especially with regards to COIN efforts and the "winning hearts and minds" campaign?

**Kai Eide:** I think there are some important and essential principles. One of them is that military and humanitarian efforts must not be linked. They must be separate from each other. If not, the humanitarian effort will be seen as part of the campaign against the Taliban. It is tremendously important for us to be independent and to tell the military as well as some of the governments that we will follow basic humanitarian principles, which means that those, who need our humanitarian aid most, will have it. We will not distribute humanitarian aid, for instance food, for political reasons, but purely on a humanitarian basis. It is

important to keep this distinction clear and maintain the independence of the UN and of the other humanitarian agencies. Now, you mentioned the “winning hearts and minds” policy. It is a policy that has not worked. The opposition and the skepticism about the international military in Afghanistan today is higher than it has ever been in spite of the billions of dollars spent by the military on so-called “hearts and minds” projects. It would have been much better if we had said, look, we will take this money, we will spend it through Afghan channels, and the Afghans can use it to demonstrate to their own people that they can deliver results and progress. We failed in the beginning in what was perhaps the most important challenge, which was to develop civilian institutions on the ground, so that the new government could extend its power, and we also failed to start up projects that could have demonstrated to the Afghans that there was a peace dividend.

**Catherine Defontaine:** Could you talk about the work of the UN and NATO in the country? Was there some coordination between the two organizations?

**Kai Eide:** Absolutely, there was a constant dialogue between us. I saw the commander of the international military regularly. We tried every Thursday morning to meet and have breakfast together and we exchanged views about the political situation. He told me what his assessment was and I gave him mine. That is quite normal and as it should be. We should understand each other. That does not mean that we were part of one mission, based on a military strategy. But we have to understand each other's thinking. That being said, it was also important for me to demonstrate a certain distance and readiness to criticize, for instance when operations carried out by international forces caused civilian casualties. We had a number of such disagreements with the international military. The Afghan government and people noticed that we were able to speak up when such incidents took place. And it was appreciated. But I must say that, gradually, the Taliban became responsible for an ever greater part of the number of civilians casualties. Unfortunately, it was impossible to establish a regular dialogue with them. There were no interlocutors on that side and the Taliban did not respond to any appeals to avoid the killing of innocent civilians. There were also other issues where we and the military had different views. But I think we had a decent relationship and a good dialogue. We agreed in many respects, but we also understood that on certain issues we had to accept that we disagreed.

#### **Part 4: Prospects for the future**

**Catherine Defontaine:** US President Barack Obama has announced that US troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Could you reflect on this decision? What might be the consequences of this? Do you think it

will create a security void or in the contrary might it not lead to more safety and security in the country?

**Kai Eide:** I was skeptical when their military surge took place in 2010. President Obama, in a speech in December 2009, announced that more than 30,000 additional troops would be sent in Afghanistan, and then, that he would start reducing the number again on July 1, 2011. What was missing was the civilian component. As the result, the international strategy in Afghanistan became almost completely militarized. I thought that was a mistake and we are suffering from that, still. The US Ambassador, at the time, was a former military commander in Afghanistan and he was also, as I was, opposed to a strategy that was so heavily militarized. We would have preferred greater attention on the development of Afghan civilian institutions, police, judiciary, the administration in provinces and districts. Instead, billions and billions of dollars have been poured into the army and security forces in general. I believe that the ambition of building an Afghan security force of 350,000 troops by 2014 – which is the current plan – is wishful thinking. It is not going to work in a country where most of the recruits are illiterate and where the basic training is limited to a few weeks only. We are setting ourselves deadlines – that are unrealistic – and that we will not be able to meet.

**Catherine Defontaine:** Afghanistan today is marred by Human Rights violations, insecurity, economic hardships and a surge in opium production. What would be your main recommendations to ensure peace and security in the country?

**Kai Eide:** If you had asked me that question three years ago, my answer would have been clear: much higher priority on developing strong or solid civilian institutions, much greater emphasis on higher and professional education, investments in agriculture and in infrastructure. Afghanistan is a potentially rich country with, for instance, the largest iron ore deposits in Asia. We should invest in a strategic way. Unfortunately, we have lost time, the conflict has spread and we have found ourselves in an increasingly difficult situation. What I hope is that we will have the patience required in order to help the peace process get underway and to see that process consolidated. If you look at a longer-term perspective, I think there are reasons for some optimism. First of all, there are important natural resources in the country. Real infrastructure and a better-educated population could really help bring the country out of poverty. Secondly, there are millions of kids at school today. In a few years, they will be graduating and many of them will have university degrees. They want a different kind of society. They want to participate in decision-making and they want a democratic system. And third, a media revolution is taking place. You see today a proliferation of radio channels, TV channels or internet, social media, that I believe will inevitably lead to modernization and reform. So, if we can get

through the next two or three years, then in a longer term, I am fairly optimistic on behalf of the Afghan people.

**Catherine Defontaine:** To conclude, what are your main concerns regarding the situation in Afghanistan in the future?

**Kai Eide:** There are so many. Of course, to stabilize the relationship with the neighbors is tremendously important. Inside the country, there is more ethnic friction than I have seen before. I hope that Afghan politicians from various parts of the society could come together and say: we need a national unity that can bring us out of this. The current fragmentation of political life and of the society is dangerous. And I believe that the key members of the international community, particularly the United States, should not focus on President Karzai alone as they have done in the past, but also on the leaders of the other communities, on the warlords, the power brokers, and the opposition in the Parliament. They all have to take their share of the responsibility to create the national unity required.

**Catherine Defontaine:** Ambassador Eide, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us on the issue of Afghanistan and for this interview.