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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

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## Karzai signs strategic pact with Italy

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President Hamid Karzai, during his visit to European countries, signed a strategic partnership agreement with Italy, his office said on Friday. Karzai left Kabul for the United Kingdom on a five-day trip on Tuesday. He is also to ink a strategic partnership agreement on long-term cooperation with France. The Presidential Palace said the Italian government would support Afghanistan beyond 2014 after the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country in the areas of security, economy, counternarcotics and implementation of the constitution, as well as capacity building. Speaking at a joint news conference with Karzai after the signing ceremony, Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti said: "Inking the strategic cooperation agreement with Afghanistan is the core of our future cooperation with that country." Karzai had said at a meeting with his Italian counterpart Giorgio Napolitano: "We are pleased to sign a long-term strategic partnership agreement and appreciate the aid and sacrifices of Italian soldiers for Afghanistan's stability." "It is a time of pride for me to sign a strategic pact with the friendly country," the statement quoted Karzai as saying. Italy could also invest in extraction of mines in Afghanistan under the long-term agreement, according to the president, who is scheduled to leave for France to sign a similar accord. Meanwhile, France's president was expected to announce Friday whether he will order an accelerated withdrawal of French soldiers from Afghanistan after meeting with President Hamid Karzai — a move that could be rich in implications for the NATO-led alliance. Nicolas Sarkozy was hosting Karzai for a long-scheduled meeting a week after four French troops in the NATO-led mission were shot dead by an Afghan trainee at a joint base in eastern Afghanistan. Sarkozy and Karzai were also expected to sign a "friendship and cooperation accord" before speaking to reporters, the French presidency said in a statement. At a ceremony honoring the soldiers Wednesday, Sarkozy said the troops gunned down were victims of a Taliban rebel who had infiltrated a military base staffed by French and Afghan forces. After the shootings, France halted its training programs for the Afghan military and threatened to

withdraw its 3,600 troops ahead of schedule — a move that could pressure NATO. Sarkozy's government has been under political pressure to withdraw French troops before the United States' pegged pullout in 2014. Polls show most French want an early withdrawal.