

The EU in Afghanistan

What Role after NATO's Withdrawal?

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As we approach 2014, there is much discussion about the nature and impact of NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan, and rightly so. The country will present a variety of security challenges after the withdrawal, and it is not clear that Afghan security forces will be capable of meeting them. Without adequate security, Western investments in Afghanistan over the last decade will be threatened and the potential for future advancements diminished. For this reason it is important to recognize that, in addition to the NATO mission, there is also a need to consider the EU's engagement following the 2014 withdrawal, because that undertaking will likely confront new challenges that NATO forces have thus far held at bay.

The EU, in line with its "longstanding commitment to Afghanistan," is an important contributor to the Afghan state. Since 2001, the Office of the Special Representative of the European Union (EUSR) for Afghanistan has worked toward strengthening democracy, rule of law, governance and capacity-building, economic prosperity, and human rights. Between 2002 and 2011, the EU contributed €2.5 billion in development and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. The European Commission and member states contributed €600 million from 2011 through 2013. Generally speaking, EU assistance has progressed from supporting efforts to generate internal stability toward a greater focus on sustainable development.

The EU Police Mission (EUPOL), established in 2007, has provided training; it has

advised and mentored detectives, prosecutors, anti-corruption units, the Ministry of the Interior, and senior leaders of the Afghan National Police (ANP). EUPOL's activities have focused on three pillars: 1) "institutional reform of the Ministry of the Interior," 2) "professionalization of the ANP," and 3) "connecting police to justice reform." The mission includes 350 international police and 200 local officials. Its multi-annual budget for the 2011–2013 timeframe is €108 million. Nonetheless, with approximately 5,000 trained Afghan police officers, the mission has contributed only modestly to the overall number of trained ANP forces.

In fact, EU investments are relatively small compared to those of other international actors. NATO/ISAF military operations constitute the greatest expenditure

for international involvement in Afghanistan by a large margin. During the US “surge” in 2009, for example, the number of ISAF personnel totaled 130,000, and military-based spending by NATO totaled \$63.1 billion (€46.1 billion), more than 10 times the amount of international aid that year. Currently, NATO/ISAF personnel number around 87,000. The United States alone contributes around 60,000 military personnel and \$1.8 billion (€1.3 billion). The United States also accounts for more than 40 percent of total aid to the country, whereas the joint contributions provided by EU institutions and member states has never exceeded 15 percent.

US withdrawal

The United States will reduce its troop level in Afghanistan to 34,000 by February 2014 and will cease all combat operations by the end of 2014. It is not yet certain how many trainers, other forces, and military assets will remain after that time. Press reports suggest that, beginning in 2015, the United States will likely maintain no more than 10,000 troops in the country. Half will focus on training Afghan troops, and the other half will conduct counterterrorism operations and protect US facilities. Germany has committed 800 troops for a post-2014 training mission and will retain responsibility for Regional Command North. The United States will continue to provide air support to partner nations, but other capabilities such as helicopter evacuation (“medevac”) will cease.

Afghan security forces will be responsible for providing security after NATO’s withdrawal. The Afghan National Army (ANA) currently has around 195,000 members and the ANP around 155,000, for a total of 350,000 Afghan security force members. Unfortunately, their degree of training and professionalism is questionable. Afghan security forces suffer from drug abuse, illiteracy, limited loyalty, and high attrition rates resulting from casualties and desertions. Some estimates place

the ANA attrition rate as high as 25–30 percent per year and the ANP’s at 10–15 percent. Afghan forces lack air capacity, heavy weapons, bomb detection and disposal skills, logistics, and intelligence-gathering abilities. They also lack the money to pay their troops. The international community will pay most of the costs for maintaining Afghan security forces in the years to come.

The EU’s decisions and post-2014 challenges

In June 2013, the European Council concluded that “the European Union remains firmly committed to supporting state-building and long-term development in Afghanistan” and that “the EU will continue to support the preparation for presidential and provincial elections in April 2014 and parliamentary elections in 2015.” The long-term Cooperation Agreement of Partnership and Development, whose negotiations were launched in 2012, could provide the future legal basis for the EU’s cooperation with – and assistance to – Afghanistan. However, as of December 2013, the EU has not made any concrete commitments for the post-2014 timeframe.

The European Council meeting on December 19/20 presents an opportunity to more accurately define the EU’s engagement. This is a strategic choice for the EU. One option is to continue the current level of effort in police training as well as development and humanitarian assistance. The alternative is to join the United States and NATO in a “Western withdrawal” and substantially reduce in-country resources. (In theory, there is also a third option of increasing EU resources and engagement, but such an undertaking seems unlikely, as there is little evidence suggesting that member states have the ambition and political will to augment expenditures.)

The current absence of a concrete strategy, combined with the EU’s limited role in Afghanistan, suggests that the most likely scenario after 2014 is “more of the same.” Unfortunately, this approach is unlikely to

succeed because the remaining challenges in Afghanistan will only increase as foreign security forces depart the theater.

The greatest challenge in Afghanistan after 2014 will be the security situation. Once the United States and NATO withdraw large numbers of troops from the country, the likelihood of a deteriorating security environment increases dramatically. Since NATO has begun reducing its security responsibilities, police deaths and civilian casualties have increased rapidly. Afghan forces, bolstered by the remaining NATO presence, might be able to secure major cities, but other parts of the country may become detached from the Kabul government. Although they are unlikely to fully regain power in Afghanistan, the Taliban could plausibly control territory in the south and east. Other insurgent elements, such as tribal warlords and opium traders, will continue to pursue their own advancement.

The resulting security gap will make development and capacity-building efforts more difficult, if not impossible. EU programs will be under enormous pressure as humanitarian and development personnel are forced to retreat into secure areas.

Furthermore, the upcoming presidential elections in 2014 and parliamentary elections in 2015 have the potential to dramatically alter the political landscape, as does the Taliban's increasing social and political influence. How the Afghan government will operate after those elections is unknown, including what role, if any, the Taliban will play in a future government. The elections could produce a strong national government that continues to receive Western support and the backing of many Afghan tribes. Alternatively, the elections could produce factional power blocs that use government powers and Western aid to favor their own local populations.

Afghanistan will also require maintenance and strengthening of its democratic institutions. Electoral and governmental reforms are needed to continue Afghanistan's democratic transition, including a

national voter registry, party registration process, an independent Election Commission, and an Electoral Complaints Commission. Some observers suggest Afghanistan should adopt a "hybrid system" to include tribal structures alongside Western, democratic structures. If such a system comes into being, it is unclear how power will be distributed, what role the Taliban would play, and whether the West could support such a system.

Recommendations

Because "more of the same" is unlikely to succeed in a diminished security environment, the better option is for the EU to substantially reduce resources committed to Afghanistan. This would include reductions in security advisers, training programs, as well as aid and development contributions. A coordinated termination will allow the Union to begin disengaging from the Afghanistan conflict. It will avoid a scenario in which the EU attempts to continue programs past 2014 but fails to achieve its objectives, leading it to once more lose credibility as an effective external actor. Without NATO-guaranteed security, continuing current engagement would present an unacceptable risk to the lives of training and development personnel. Furthermore, pulling out of Afghanistan as part of a transatlantic consensus should encourage and motivate Afghan ownership of in-country responsibilities.

Germany should encourage the European Council to choose this option and to follow the December 2013 meeting with an announcement of a deliberate withdrawal that is coordinated with other Western forces. Doing so will provide clear notice to Afghan partners and will afford EU actors and institutions maximal time to coordinate task-sharing with NATO partners during the withdrawal process and possibly afterwards.

The withdrawal option entails risks, perhaps most notably the creation of a power vacuum that other actors will begin to fill.

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The reduction in EU engagement will mean fewer personnel in-country, fewer opportunities for Afghans to receive training, and the potential loss of prior investments in Afghan personnel and infrastructure. With a reduced commitment in the region, the EU will have diminished capacity to influence emerging power centers or to directly access sources of information.

However, Brussels should not completely turn its back on Afghanistan. Germany should further encourage the EU to shift its focus and its efforts toward greater engagement with the larger Central Asia region, possibly under the rubric of a new EU strategy for Central Asia. Many regional actors perceive Afghanistan to be a destabilizing factor in the region, and they lack confidence that Afghanistan will be a reliable partner once Western forces withdraw. By pursuing a new, comprehensive approach for the Central Asia region, the EU could help mediate the external (and possibly internal) reconciliation process while creating equitable development and security agreements in the region. Examples of such agreements might include joint civilian development programs, cross-border trade initiatives, integrated border management, and/or enhanced educational, scientific, and cultural exchanges. Accompanying the shift toward the larger region, the Union could combine the EUSR for Central Asia with the EUSR for Afghanistan and improve communication among all EU entities and member states operating in the region.

Given the non-viability of other options, this sort of regional engagement may be the only available mechanism to address Afghanistan's post-2014 challenges. Germany should help Brussels develop a specific road map that identifies the benchmarks to be achieved through 2014. This roadmap should replace the 2009 EU Action Plan for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Both the 2014 benchmarks and the Central Asia strategy should be coordinated with NATO and the United States to facilitate joint engagement and task-sharing. The EU, member states, the European External

Action Service, and the Commission should jointly insist on concrete, realistic proposals and barometers for assessing achievements.