



Afghanistan: charting a new path

by Eva Gross

Following a protracted dispute over election results, a national unity government headed by President Ashraf Ghani was sworn in in Kabul last September. This has injected some badly-needed momentum into Afghan politics after months of electoral deadlock and over a decade of Karzai rule increasingly marked by antagonism between the president and the West. This new phase represents an opportunity also for the EU and its member states to tailor their respective approaches and commitments to a changing political and security environment that promises greater activism on the part of Afghanistan's neighbours in the months and years to come.

A promising start

President Ghani has made accountability and legitimacy the centrepiece of his agenda for cabinet and government appointments so as to improve governance and win public trust. In addition to an ongoing attempt at overhauling the country's administration, the focus is on restoring the economy and consolidating security. Having served as minister of finance under Karzai in 2004, Ghani is familiar with the internal mechanisms of government but also with the political resistance to change, including the influence of regional power brokers who could act as spoilers. The delay in appointing his cabinet within the 45 days he had originally foreseen reflects the difficulties in ensuring appointees' capabilities and credibility as well as in coordinating and finding

common ground with his former presidential contender Abdullah Abdullah, who now occupies the post of chief executive in the government.

Restructuring, and drastically resetting the way things are done, takes time – and, in a sense, Ghani's mission is a race against the clock. This applies both to firming up international commitments to support the Afghan economy and to providing security assistance to counter a still active Taliban insurgency – while at the same time instilling trust in the system on the part of the Afghan public at large.

In an effort to restore confidence in the rule of law in particular, President Ghani has moved to resolve the \$1 billion Kabul Bank scandal that had come to serve as a symbol of corruption in the country. But more can be done: customs for instance, an area that last year generated 26% of government revenue, is rife with corruption that involves field officials as well as top bureaucrats and that, according to some estimates, costs Afghanistan roughly 50% of its annual revenue. Continued security assistance is necessary in the light of a still strong insurrectionary campaign that targets both Afghan authorities and Western troops. Just last week, on 16 November, a suicide bomber attacked the armoured car of Shukria Barakzai, a member of parliament and an outspoken women's rights leader – and several attacks on Western installations earlier this week underline the strength and resilience of the insurgency.

International engagement(s)

The signature of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between Afghanistan and the US upon Ghani taking office – an aim shared by both Ghani and Abdullah even during their respective election campaigns – provides a legal framework for future US military presence in the country and, in turn, permits NATO as well as the EU to plan their security-related activities. NATO Operation Resolute Support will follow on from ISAF in 2015 to train, advise and assist the Afghan security forces. From early 2015 onwards, civilian-military coordination will be under the leadership of new NATO Senior Civilian Representative (SCR) Ismail Aramaz, currently Turkey's Ambassador to Afghanistan. EUPOL Afghanistan, the CSDP mission in Afghanistan, provides core assistance in capacity building and rule of law. Equally important, and more immediately, the upcoming London Conference on 4-6 December will discuss donors' commitments for economic recovery and will be vital to shore up international support for Afghanistan.

Security and economics also have a distinctively regional dimension, and this applies in particular to Pakistan and China. Although Ghani's first official visit abroad was to Beijing, in late October, a meeting between him and the Pakistani Prime Minister Sharif took place in Islamabad on 15 November (and included watching a cricket match between teams representing the two countries). On the occasion, Ghani emphatically stated that the past should not destroy the future, thereby putting distance between himself and his predecessor, who had presided over an at times strained bilateral relationship.

But competing structures in Pakistan itself make it difficult to predict whether the civilian government – primarily interested in trade and economics (starting with the planned TAPI gas pipeline connecting Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India) – or the military, which hedges its bets on support for the Taliban and wants to contain India's influence, will determine the direction of future dealings with Afghanistan. Current events in Pakistan itself have already impacted Kabul directly: the Waziristan operation launched last summer against Pakistani Taliban, in fact, has led to large-scale displacements of people from Pakistan to Afghanistan, with Kabul being ill-equipped to support incoming refugees – including extremist elements from both sides.

Beijing playing host to the Heart of Asia Conference on 30-31 October as well as the previous Senior Officials Meeting in mid-July highlights not merely the emerging regional dimension to Afghanistan's

transition and stability, but also China's growing interest in the country. China has become increasingly concerned over the threat of extremism affecting its own western province of Xinjiang. This, in addition to the aim of protecting potential economic investments, has led Beijing to play a more active role in Afghanistan. This includes financial support, training of security forces and, possibly, also a stronger role in negotiating with the Taliban: to this end, China has put forward a proposal for a 'peace and reconciliation forum' that would gather representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the Taliban command.

New context, new momentum

The current juncture represents an opportunity to work with the new government in laying the groundwork for a more accountable system that is supported and accepted by the Afghan population. A committed counterpart on the Afghan government's side deserves to be strengthened to ensure the legacy of the Western investment of the past decade, to build capacity and to embed Afghanistan more solidly into its region in political, economic and security terms.

The international community, including the EU, is adjusting to these new realities. When it comes to security and NATO's presence, a longer timeframe for military contributions could be envisaged, particularly in light of the deteriorating situation in Iraq and the lessons this holds for Afghanistan. And EUPOL Afghanistan, where discussions about phasing out certain activities have also taken place, is poised nevertheless to continue to work in the area of police training and mentoring – with the EU Delegation providing political support and follow-up to certain activities.

As the EU reconsiders the scope and length of its commitments, continued support in the area of development and the rule of law as well as coordination with its Western partners (namely NATO and the US) remains paramount. In its approach to Afghanistan, however, Brussels may have to increasingly factor in also individual regional stakeholders that are taking on a more active role and are bound to leave their own footprint on the future shape of Afghan security – and beyond.

Eva Gross is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

