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Afghan fallout

After almost two decades, international presence in Afghanistan ended in August 2021. The allies' effort to build a stable and democratic Afghanistan failed dramatically, with the Taliban now back in control after the collapse of the Afghan government and security forces. The experience might have undermined the European Union's confidence in its capacity to help stabilise fragile regions and build working democratic institutions. It has also raised questions about the trust between European and American partners. But instead of focusing on these two much-debated topics, this chapter examines the practical lessons the European Union can learn from Afghanistan. Understanding the Afghan failure is important for the political debate that should aim at improving our capabilities and strategies in order to make the EU more effective in providing stability and security in many fragile regions of a rapidly changing world.

The shock

If there had been suggestions of what major events to watch in 2021, Afghanistan would not have made it to the top of the list despite the almost-20-year presence there of the US and its allies influencing security considerations and security debates in Europe and America. With fatigue growing, the option to leave Afghanistan had become accepted as inevitable on both sides of the Atlantic, receiving ever-increasing support from policymakers and military planners. It had become obvious that the willingness to bear further costs was diminishing, especially in the United States which had carried the biggest responsibilities. In terms of cash, the US had spent more than US$2 trillion on military presence and assistance to the Afghan government, and its allies had added substantial reconstruction aid. However, the conflict resulted in serious loss of human life too. More than 3,500 US and allied soldiers were killed fighting the Taliban and other insurgents. And the Afghan toll was considerably higher, with 66,000 troops and 48,000 civilians killed since 2001.

Unsurprisingly, it was therefore increasingly clear that the two decades of experience with anti-terrorism, stabilisation, development, and state-building needed to come to a close. Indeed, the US and other partners were increasingly turning their attention to other

global issues and theatres, and there was growing consensus on the need to find an acceptable exit from Afghanistan and to hand full responsibility over to the Afghan authorities. In the end, it was largely the decision of the US to leave, as Biden thought that the deal made by President Trump in 2020 left him little room for manoeuvring.

What followed was horrific to behold for all directly involved and for the broader global audience. The total and instant collapse of the Afghan government and military had not been fully expected. Furthermore, the rather disorderly withdrawal of the allies and their Afghan collaborators put their entire two decades of effort into question, as well as the overall outcomes of our presence in the country. With the Taliban back in power, we have witnessed the return of violence and terrifying practices on the streets of Afghan cities and villages, with the persecution of opponents and of those parts of society that worked on making Afghanistan a better place. Human rights, especially women's rights, are again under enormous pressure. Yet there are other outcomes of our departure than just the increased level of violence in the country itself, and the violations of human rights.

Equally as important as the allies' departure from the country itself are the subsequent international and security implications – firstly, the immediate concerns about the lack of ability of the partners working in the region to coordinate now that our troops have withdrawn and their Afghan co-workers have been resettled.

Secondly, there are concerns about international leadership. In the US, the sharp criticism of the Biden administration has highlighted the weaknesses of US foreign policy strategy at a time when other urgent international issues and situations require strong, predictable, and trustworthy strategic leadership.

Thirdly, there are growing concerns about the future of regional security, without which there is a risk of serious international repercussions – not only in terms of international terrorism, which was the initial reason for our presence in the region, but also in terms of broader security dynamics in an already fragile region fraught with other tensions.

Fourthly, there are serious concerns about whether and how the democratic community can contribute to addressing the roots of instability, and to addressing the risks to international security, as well as the socio-economic sources of conflict and violence in other parts of the world in the future.

This chapter will outline the lessons that the international community, especially the EU and the broader community of democratic states, can draw from almost two decades of experience in Afghanistan.

What about our self-perception?

Before looking at the lessons we should learn from Afghanistan, it is worth exploring the paths of possible thinking that we, as Europeans, should try to avoid because of the risk of them leading to futile or even dangerous policy and political options. This is not the first time that we are faced with the dilemma of what kind of reaction we should endorse to ever increasing volatility in the world and our limited capacity to bring it under

control. A tempting conclusion from the Afghan experience – but also from other perceived causes of increased insecurity such as protracted conflicts in Syria, Iraq and parts of Africa, and from the expected multiplication of existing problems due to the impact of climate change – could be to turn inwards on ourselves, and to focus increasingly on our internal problems, while cutting the European Union and its citizens free from 'dangerous', unpredictable, and above all 'unsalvageable' places such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East or Central Asia. This reaction is indeed promoted by the narrative of many European populists and nationalists, who manipulate citizens' anxiety about an unknown and dangerous world, and make them believe that the best option would be to retreat to national states and to raise fences and walls – both physical and mental – for our protection.

Another tempting but false conclusion might be to advocate that Europeans should no longer be excessively interested in the fate of people living in desperate situations because we do not have the capacity to help them. However, if we accept this assumption, we can easily end up in a very nihilistic situation. For decades, Europeans have been staunch supporters of the multilateral order that is based on norms, rules, and also universal rights and values. Once we start undermining the universal nature of values and norms, we again retreat into the much smaller world of our own, inevitably making ourselves weaker and more vulnerable in the process. As this tendency goes hand in hand with a vision of solidarity being either local or global, Progressives should be even more alarmed. Populists and nationalists increasingly endorse solidarity as a principle that works only with the people you know, and with whom you share the same culture, interests, or geography – in other words, it only works with people within your family, town, city, or nation. Populists and nationalists also claim that extending solidarity to people in faraway communities with whom you seem to share nothing is futile and not in your self-interest, or is a sort of trade-off between helping either 'our people' or 'other people'. This kind of perspective can in turn be bolstered by the shock from Afghanistan, and it can present us with unpleasant and unacceptable dilemmas. As Jean-Marie Guéhenno has pointed out, "there is only a small distance between accepting that some people cannot be helped and thinking that they are not worth helping".[1]

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1   Guéhenno, J-M (2021) 'Three lessons for Europe from the fall of Afghanistan', European Council on Foreign Relations, August (https://ecfr.eu/article/three-lessons-for-europe-from-the-fall-of-afghanistan/).

Lessons from Afghanistan

The European Union should certainly avoid drawing the kind of lessons that populists promote from the Afghan fallout. This would only make us only more vulnerable to security risks from our neighbourhood, less relevant in making the world a more predictable place in which to live, and more dependent on others for our own resilience and safety. In general, we would give up on our agency and role in global affairs. But what, then, should be the lessons from our two decades in Afghanistan? It is striking that the EU has not provided any comprehensive, well-resourced or systematic analysis of the lessons Europeans have learned from Afghanistan – an analysis, for example, as extensive as the report of the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).[2] Although it is not the aspiration of this chapter to provide exhaustive analysis, the chapter nevertheless aims to suggest three areas where the European Union could build on the Afghan experience to improve the EU's capacity to bring stability to difficult areas and to build institutions that are indispensable for delivering sustainable development, the rule of law, and above all human dignity and individual rights.

Lesson 1. Winning hearts and minds – why we failed

The first lesson to be learned is that the European Union should not, indeed cannot, abandon support for democracy in the world after the Afghanistan debacle. We have made many mistakes in Afghanistan when it comes to reconstruction, state-building and establishing democratic institutions. Above all, both the US and its European allies underestimated the particular political culture, historical experience, and highly decentralised nature of social life in Afghanistan.

In 2001, the main goal in Afghanistan was to defeat international terrorists – Bin Laden, al-Qaeda, their supporters, and the Taliban. It is easy to forget that the Taliban's regime crumbled surprisingly quickly under the assault of US forces and their local allies, even though it was never fully defeated. There was then an immediate need to provide a strategic framework for our presence in Afghanistan as it quickly shifted from solely fighting international terrorist networks towards a more comprehensive effort to build new democratic Afghan institutions. By as early as mid-2002, it had become increasingly clear that the international presence in Afghanistan would last for longer than originally expected and that the general goals were to avoid chaos and build stability in a very fragile situation.

After two decades of state-building and laying democratic foundations for a country that had no prior experience with democracy, it might seem that the effort was not worth the costs and resources. Many may say that it was futile from the very beginning. This, however, is far from true as progress in numerous areas has changed Afghanistan and will make it more difficult for the Taliban to turn the clock back 20 years. Nevertheless, it needs to be admitted that both the US and its European partners made serious mistakes in terms

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2   SIGAR report (2021) 'What we need to learn: lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction', Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, August (www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/ SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf).

of strategies for building new institutions, in terms of the subtleties of the implementation of democratic norms, and in terms of reconstruction programmes.

First, it is true that the timeframe expected for the stabilisation and modernisation of Afghanistan was massively underestimated. Even if the circumstances were much more suitable for the introduction of formal democratic norms and institutions than they had been in Afghanistan, it would still take two or even more generations for democratic values and principles to take root in the society. From the beginning, it was clear that any support for building democratic institutions in Afghanistan after the original anti-terrorist phase would require several decades, with well-structured assistance implemented in the best way possible. However, more should have been done to elaborate and implement a well-thought-through strategy and long-term plan be-

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fore embarking on the process of state-building and stabilisation in Afghanistan. Instead, in 2001-02 the European Union was convinced that modern democratic institutions and foundations for sustainable economic activity could be erected swiftly and relatively effortlessly.

Second, there was the very superficial way that the European Union approached the notion of democracy and support for it in a country such as Afghanistan, which was known for its very complex society where many dynamics and influences intersected, creating an intricate network of relationships, allegiances, and loyalties. This was a difficult backdrop against which to build a democratic state operating from Kabul with central institutions. In the words of Oz Hassan from Warwick University, the mistake was that "the EU backed a shallow model of democracy that centralised the reconstruction project and legitimised top-down, elite-centric processes. The EU certainly supported many local democracy and governance projects, such as backing provincial council elections, an Independent Directorate of Local Governance, the UN's Afghanistan Subnational Governance Programme, and myriad community councils. Yet these programmes often empowered clientelistic networks of local elites that clashed with EU support for centralising constitutional powers with elites in Kabul".[3]

Another aspect contributing to the failure of the allies' strategies in Afghanistan was the way the country's reconstruction and development was managed, especially how funds were distributed and implemented. According to the SIGAR report of August 2021, there were enormous problems with the sustainability of the assistance provided.[4] In particular, the monitoring and evaluation of programmes was weak, and it was difficult to assess what had worked and what had not, with relevant information. In addition, American and

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3   Hassan, O. (2021) 'Reassessing the European Strategy in Afghanistan', Carnegie Europe, November (https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/11/17/reassessing-european-strategy-in-afghanistan-pub-85776).

4   SIGAR report, op cit.

American and European assistance was aimed at supporting central institutions, and it reflected their priorities while underestimating the scale of clientelistic networks and the widespread patronage system

European assistance largely followed the same pattern as it did with institution-building. This assistance was aimed at supporting central institutions, and it reflected their priorities while underestimating the scale of clientelistic networks and the widespread patronage system.

At the same time, there was a lack of information from the field that could have helped reassess the focus of the assistance programmes with improved knowledge of the needs and problems of individual communities or specific locations. To quote Hassan, "Europe's efforts failed to address local populations' priorities and inadvertently propped up patronage networks […] While the EU and the wider international community were trying to build a formally democratic system, the Taliban built informal parallel state structures".[5]

All these factors, combined with the corruption present at all levels of Afghan government, largely explain why we failed to win the hearts and minds of ordinary citizens, in whose view the international presence as well as the effort to build a stable and democratic Afghanistan could be seen as an episode – even though this episode took almost a generation. However, the mixture of the lack of long-term commitment, lack of sensitivity to local circumstances, and also lack of understanding of the needs and potential of the local population in different Afghan communities due to an overcentralised approach, contributed to the low level of local ownership and participation in the reconstruction, stabilisation and ultimately in the building of effective and sustainable Afghan institutions. This should be evaluated in more detail if we are to avoid similar mistakes in other regions such as the Sahel or the Horn of Africa.

Lesson 2. The security sector can deliver, but we need to make it sustainable

What the allies faced in Afghanistan was a typical asymmetric conflict where insufficiently equipped insurgents engage often better-trained and armed local forces that are supported by foreign military presence to wear down their willingness to continue in protracted conflict. In addition to the state-building effort, the main factor in the stabilisation of a country and in building a conducive security environment is time. Indeed, a well-known saying from the Afghan conflict is 'we had watches, but the Taliban had time'. Yet the reform of the security sector and providing effective security is a precondition for any other activity and for achieving any progress in terms of economic and social development or local political institutions. According to Guéhenno, there are at least two lessons that we need to learn from our Afghan experience.

First, providing limited military assistance can be relatively effective and can create a space for necessary reforms. In fact, "very limited foreign presence, combined with close

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5   Hassan, op cit.

air support for national forces, kept the Taliban at bay for several years and created a stalemate during which a more open society could gain strength. The exoskeleton provided by a limited foreign military presence enables a fragile army to stand its ground".[6] In addition, the presence of foreign partners can significantly boost the morale of local troops and make their fighting capacity much greater. Yet it is not possible to provide infinite military support without knowing the long-term goals for it. This triggers the question of how to objectively evaluate the progress of security sector reforms and to better define the steps for shifting more and more responsibility to local military authorities. In addition, we need to improve our understanding of the fact that the militaries of poor countries such as Afghanistan cannot afford to sustainably modernise their armies to the standards to which we are accustomed, and we need to bear this in mind from the very beginning of our engagement with them. We need to give much more ownership to local authorities when it comes to planning the reform process, but at the same time we need to carefully evaluate any malpractices and maladies such as clientelism and corruption that can seriously undermine local military capabilities.

Second, security reforms can again take one or even two generations to have any effect at all. External military support is often indispensable for giving local institutions time to be able to take root, and for the security sector to internalise all the changes that are required for it to take full responsibility for delivering on its mission. Moreover, there are other societal gains to be harnessed if the international presence is more predictable and long-term, with clear milestones laid down from the beginning. As Guéhenno points out, "contrary to what many now say about Afghanistan, much has changed for the better in the country. And it may have been misguided to insist on an exit strategy – driven by domestic political considerations rather than objective factors – considering the relatively low cost of a small military footprint and the potentially high cost of the Afghan government's collapse. Helping societies transform themselves is a generational undertaking".[7]

> Security reforms can again take one or even two generations to have any effect at all

Lesson 3. Understanding the nuanced and intricate regional power relationship

The entire 20-year story of our presence in Afghanistan can be seen as a paradox. The country has much higher strategic importance for regional powers, such as India, Iran, Pakistan or even Russia, China, or Turkey, than for the US or most European and other allies that have been involved in the conflict over the past two decades. And yet it is striking that these important parts of the regional power play were, for various reasons, not involved in the stabilisation effort. It might sound naïve to propose that a more regional approach should have been employed, knowing the tensions between these regional actors – for

6   Guéhenno, op cit.
7   Ibid.

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example, between Pakistan and India. Nonetheless it seems to be a fateful error not to grasp all the dynamics taking in place in the broader region surrounding Afghanistan, or to increase the diplomatic effort to involve other actors in finding a balanced and sustainable security framework.[8]

Afghanistan has shown that understanding the broader regional context is essential for putting in place effective strategies for the stabilisation of any country. If there are actors that benefit from instability, it is clear that we need to try to deal with them. Furthermore, the role of external actors – such as cross-border crime, drug-trafficking or smuggling – in activities that undermine the effort to build democratic institutions based on rule of law, needs to be addressed both diplomatically and with tailored practical measures. In addition, the intelligence cooperation needs to be strengthened to better understand the risks on the ground and to improve our knowledge of social and security dynamics in various parts of countries as diverse as Afghanistan, where neighbouring states and other regional actors can be involved.

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The European Union was not a key actor in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, it played a significant role in providing funds for the country's reconstruction, and it could have used this fact to engage more actively with regional actors in regional and multilateral talks. Working more closely with regional players would most probably not have prevented the overall outcome of the international presence in Afghanistan. However, it could have positioned the European Union as a more active player after the withdrawal of the US and its allies. If there is a possibility in the future to support progressive change in Afghanistan, the EU should work much more closely with regional actors in order to make these changes sustainable.

Conclusion

Afghanistan has provided the European Union with many lessons that can be used to improve our effort to bring stability and better prospects to fragile and volatile parts of the world. Despite voices calling for disengagement with these regions because of the alleged futility of any effort to improve the security there, the EU should firmly avoid this call. Instead, the EU should make a very detailed analysis of all aspects of our presence in Afghanistan, to understand better what went wrong in order to prevent the same mistakes in the future.

Europe's security is linked to the stability of regions such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and other parts of the world where peace and functioning

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8   In some ways, the regional dynamics will be shaped again by the political and security developments in Afghanistan since August. For example, the lack of representation of some minority groups can again enable Afghanistan's neighbours to support internal dissent. The fragility of the situation can be further exacerbated by the fact that the security interests of certain regional powers might be not taken into account with some parts of Taliban taking a more prominent role in the country.

institutions are in short supply. This chapter highlights at least three areas where lessons can be drawn from two decades of our mission in Afghanistan – institution-building and sustainable economic and social development in conflict areas; strengthening the security sector in fragile countries; and regional cooperation in volatile parts of the world. A common aspect is that if we are to succeed elsewhere when we failed in Afghanistan, we should be aware of the long timeframe that any endeavour of this kind involves. In fact, it is not for us to 'win' in Mali, Somalia, or other vulnerable countries or regions. Victory can be owned only by local actors and movements struggling for progress and a decent society, as well as peace and stability. While we can assist them in succeeding in their effort, we cannot impose the solution on their societies. Nonetheless, our presence and support – well-tailored, carefully planned and implemented – can create the space for these societies to transform and to find their own path towards a governance system that meets the needs of local populations and protects the rights of individual members of their community.

And yet there are certainly other lessons and experiences we can learn from Afghanistan. Many of them call for a more autonomous EU to be able to tackle security challenges independently after the Afghan debacle. In the future, there will undoubtedly be regions where we will have to be able to contribute to stability without relying on our US partners. But Afghanistan should not be the reason for the US and EU to drift apart. Instead, we should take our failure there as an opportunity to focus on the EU's weaknesses and capabilities so that we can discuss what we need to improve for better results in future missions.

Let me conclude with a few words about the EU's possibilities to help the Afghan people in their new reality on the ground. Helping the people who are now confronted with a brutal regime is an absolute necessity, even if we fail to achieve the other goals we expect. It is important that we seek to maintain engagement with the country, or to establish the possibility for this, even though we do not formally recognise the new Taliban regime in Kabul. We must be careful not to support the regime in any way, but we must try to find ways to support the population and particular communities. In addition, we must observe the human rights situation in the country closely, and we must provide practical support and assistance to people who face persecution for their beliefs and activities. Furthermore, the European Union must not be blind to the humanitarian needs of the people in Afghanistan in years to come. Even though we left Afghanistan physically last August, we should make it clear that we will not abandon the Afghan people from our distance.