



POLICY BRIEF

Europe's Engagement in Afghanistan Post-2021

Uncertainty, Pragmatism, and Continued Partnership

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This policy brief explores European engagement with Afghanistan in 2021 and beyond. It discusses how the scheduled 2021 U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan may impact European interests – and how it will limit future European policy options. It explores the potential drawbacks of the European Union’s current stance on Afghan peace talks, as well as difficulties of planning while European capitals seek greater clarity on an increasingly unilateral U.S. policy. A stable Afghanistan is vital to Europe’s long-term security concerns, and recommendations offer a way forward.

The European Union (EU) and European states have contributed significantly to the stabilization of the Afghan government and society since the U.S. and NATO intervention in late 2001¹. While European engagement with Afghanistan dates to the immediately post-colonial era, with, for instance, a German role in reconstruction in the 1930s, modern relations have mainly been defined by the U.S. call to action. From 2001, NATO-members maintained troop contributions at the insistence of the United States (or else gradually withdrew). But since the refugee crisis of 2014-15, sparked in part by the Syrian conflict, but also including large numbers of Afghan refugees fleeing intensified fighting, many European states have needed little convincing that Afghanistan’s stability is in their interest.

Europe’s challenge in Afghanistan: Planning Amid Uncertainty

Now, as American military presence and diplomatic influence in Afghanistan trend toward disengagement, and the just-begun Afghan peace process already experiences turbulence and threats while fighting continues across the country, European policymakers grapple with several questions. If peace talks manage to produce a political settlement to the war, what shape it might take, what role the Taliban might assume in a new political order, and what could that mean for European aid and investment? What does the likely reduced US presence and engagement in Afghanistan after its military drawdown

(and the possibility of full withdrawal until May 2021) mean for future European security assistance? There is little clarity on what new alternative frameworks or partnerships the EU may engage with. Finally, many European governments seek to commence the return of Afghan refugees as soon as feasible, but violence levels remain as high as in previous years of conflict.

Europe’s planning engagement for Afghanistan is subject to the peace talks’ outcome between representatives of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Yet European positions on the peace talks can have a long-reaching impact on future policy formulation.

Many EU and European governments remain uncertain as to what exact shape and scope their policies toward Afghanistan may take, after a drawdown of U.S. and NATO military presence – though there are many Afghans and Europeans who ask Europe to “answer the call,” to help address the needs and challenges that will clearly remain. In fact, European policymakers are quite clear: without a continued “umbrella” of U.S. military might, their governments are practically incapable of continued military presence or in-person assistance. European donor governments and NATO troop-supporting states all appear to seek further clarity on the future trajectory of the Afghan conflict, its potential for escalation as well as political settlement, and the composition of a future Afghan government before staking out long-term trajectories of engagement and support of their own.

¹ The project “From Uncertainty to Strategy: What are the odds for future win-win scenarios in Afghanistan’s Neighborhood?” is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) to develop and discuss likely scenarios for Afghanistan’s neighbors, policy adjustments, and the need for a comprehensive strategy among European foreign policymakers. This brief is part of a series authored by Andrew Watkins and Dr. Timor Sharan to discuss the implications of the US withdrawal and the ongoing Afghan Peace Negotiations on existing policy tools, strategic interests, and challenges for key stakeholders in- and outside of Afghanistan. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>

Principles vs. Pragmatism?

The European Union’s “principled stance” on the Afghan peace process, as it has been popularly referred to, has also been critically characterized as a “wait and see” posture. This, some observers say, has fed the uncertainty surrounding longer-term European engagement. The EU Council’s conclusions on the peace process, issued in May, and the declaration that future aid will be conditional on Taliban and Afghan government adherence to preserving the human rights and personal freedoms guaranteed in the UN charter, was meant to demonstrate firm resolve and unbending support for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan heading into negotiations. The implications of these conclusions are far-reaching into the future. European options for engagement will be shaped by the realities on the ground, including limited avenues once NATO’s footprint has lifted. Insistence on human rights adherence could further limit European influence and impact on what would surely remain a challenging post-conflict environment.

Some EU officials have asked whether or not the conditionality of aid should not go further, questioning if long-term commitments should not be more directly tied to ongoing trends in the peace process and hinting at the upcoming November conference in Geneva. But some Afghan officials and activists have begun to challenge the EU’s stance, asking if conditionality of assistance and development might actually prevent EU funding and support from reaching Afghans who need it most, allowing it to be held hostage by an intransigent Taliban? Conditioning support presumes to recognize its value and a strong desire to ensure its continuation on the part of all stakeholders, including the Taliban. But if the Taliban determine they can survive and operate in a post-US or post-peace environment without European funds, the EU’s conditionality could be rejected, and its ability to support and to influence Afghanistan would be significantly diminished.

EU diplomats have said that the Taliban not only seek control of Afghanistan but control over a functional state incorporated in the international system. At least one official has argued that the EU’s financial largesse in Afghanistan, which is its largest beneficiary in the world, would be nearly impossible to replace (thus giving European donors leverage over the group). Yet this reasoning continues to be met with skepticism from Afghan political figures and remains an open question—one the EU and its member states should address well before convening in Geneva.

The European partners of Afghanistan also face practical limitations on their future policy tracks. The potential for future NATO engagement remains murky, an ambiguity that underscores an area of tension between the U.S. and European partners. NATO’s member states were not comprehensively consulted or convened during U.S. steps to usher Afghan parties to the negotiating table. Discussions and long-term planning within NATO about the future of security assistance to Afghanistan are steered by the United States’ outsized role

in the organization. Ultimately, the logistical impracticality of operating a substantial NATO mission without U.S. participation closes the door on most options over the longer term – making “in together, out together” less of a choice and more of a necessity. No feasible options appear to exist for continued NATO security assistance in the event of a full U.S. military withdrawal.

Will there be sufficient domestic appetite among European polities to ensure the continuity of funding and support to the Afghan state? EU funding alone totaled 1.4 billion EUR over the last five years, not counting member state support, but billions more would be required to offset a United States funding drawdown. Current discussions among European diplomats suggest it may prove difficult simply to obtain commitments to maintain current funding levels—much less filling a vacuum left by the U.S. Some of these questions have been addressed fairly comprehensively by European stakeholders, while others remain unanswered. Some European officials have been upfront about the “sense of tiredness” regarding the Afghan conflict felt by many (if not all) political parties and demographics across the continent. It has been bluntly acknowledged, at least by one senior official, that conditionality of aid could begin to overlap with this sense of popular fatigue if Afghanistan’s conflict or its peace process took a turn for the worse.



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Afghan Concerns and Potential Future Turns

The EU’s principled position on the newly commenced peace talks, and its notable contrast with the U.S.-led approach, has attracted a great deal of attention from Afghan elites. But this position has also drawn attention to the outsized involvement of particular EU member states in Afghan affairs, including Germany, and their parallel role as bilateral donors—even their aspirational role as brokers in the peace process. At times, individual states have taken different stances than the EU’s common line, sometimes in private diplomatic engagements, other times taking positions on Afghan affairs seemingly to signal domestic audiences. When it comes to Afghanistan policy, the range of different interests and levels of interest among European states has prompted more than one Afghan official to question if it is possible or wise to characterize the future of “European” engagement as unified or coherent.

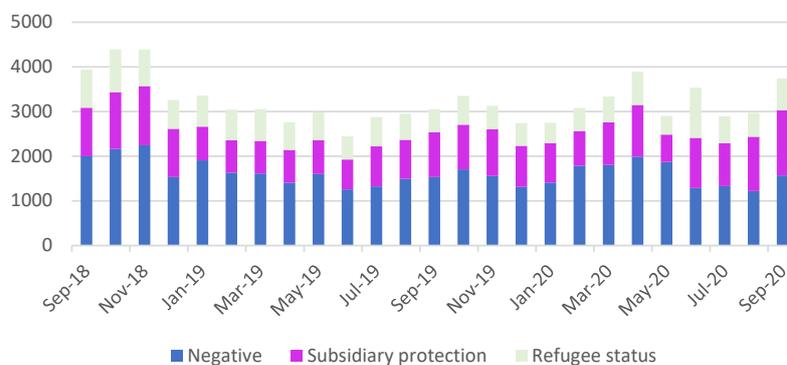
Also, the critical issue of refugees and returnees in Europe remains a largely avoided topic in conversations between European and Afghan stakeholders, in spite of the growing acuteness of European concerns and dire conditions for Afghans themselves. In 2019, Afghan citizens accounted for the highest number of non-EU persons seeking asylum in EU countries. This is in large part due to a significant rise in the number of Afghans fleeing the country as the conflict intensified; the number of Afghans rose 85% from 2018. While little has been said publicly about future refugee/returnee policy, the EU’s

May conclusions contained a worrying hint as to European expectations. It reaffirmed commitment to the path laid out in the “Joint Way Forward”, signed in Brussels in 2016 and set to expire this October, a declaration that seeks to facilitate the deportation of Afghans whenever feasible. The Joint Way Forward is being renegotiated in the shadow of the upcoming Geneva conference and at a precipitous time for the nascent peace talks, potentially adding even more pressure in terms of conditionality and compliance.

A number of scenarios mark the way forward in Afghanistan’s political and security environment. If in spite of the many challenges, negotiations proceed and a political settlement is reached between warring Afghan parties, there are two paths: one would result in a new power-sharing arrangement that European states believe they can work with, while another result may fall short of expectations when it comes to human rights. If the EU and its members hold to their currently stated conditions, the EU’s long-term relationship toward Afghanistan will only be determined as this new governing order takes shape. Concurrently, many European paths for engagement depend on what course the United States sets in the country and the region; a potential U.S. withdrawal will restrict European options, regardless of its implementation, impact on the ground, and any desire to intervene.

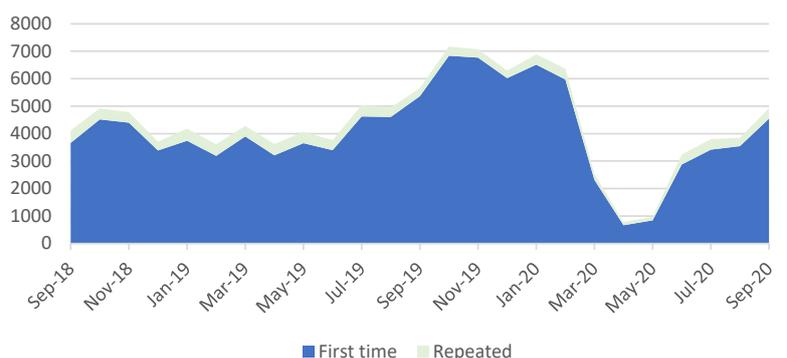
First-instance decisions on Afghan Asylum Applications lodged in EU+ countries

Source: European Asylum Support Office



Afghan Asylum Applications lodged in EU+ countries

Source: European Asylum Support Office



Recommendations

- Any end to NATO's mission will challenge the current division among donors between security assistance and development support. While there may be little appetite for a robust EU/CSDP mission, member states need to address the importance of the security sector and adjust its policies (as state fracture and national fragmentation will threaten European interests).
- Develop a straightforward narrative and strategy of EU engagement in Afghanistan that would make it more resilient to external shocks (in contrast to "in-together, out together")
- Re-evaluate the EU-internal approach to Afghan peace talks, especially how donor support initiatives may impact the process, for example, the timing and the implications of the Geneva conference or the renegotiation of the Joint Way Forward.
- Continue insisting on the conditionality of support to Afghanistan in the future, but initiate an open and comprehensive exchange with Afghan stakeholders about the criteria and implementation of this conditionality, in order to avoid perceptions that any actor might "hold EU aid hostage."
- Support Afghan institutions' efforts to increase aid effectiveness amid reduced levels of support and put more effort into coordination among donors to avoid duplicating aid efforts.

About the authors

Andrew Watkins is a researcher and analyst of Afghanistan's conflict and prospects for peace, and is deeply engaged in conflict prevention. He has previously worked in Afghanistan for the United Nations, the humanitarian community, the U.S. government and as an independent researcher.

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About the cover photo

Then-German Defence Minister, now President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen at the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, March 26, 2018. Michael Kappeler/Pool via Reuters

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