



From Uncertainty to Strategy? Implications of the U.S. withdrawal for Afghanistan's neighbors and key partners

Timor Sharan, Andrew Watkins

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Preface

The withdrawal of U.S.- and NATO-Forces constitute a watershed moment for Afghanistan's international relations. It is accompanied by tremendous uncertainty about the nature of overall disengagement, its repercussions on the ground as well as regional security. In this situation, credible regional buy-in for a political settlement is critical but should not be taken for granted or understood as a linear or uniform process.

Domestic and regional dimensions of the conflict are inseparable

For the last forty years, Afghanistan has been entrapped by one of the world's most violent conflicts. However, it was never Afghanistan's war alone. On the one hand, international interventions, from UN resolutions to troops from dozens of countries on the ground, foreign assistance to conflict parties or cross-border humanitarian aid, have always played a significant role – at times, mitigating, at times, increasing the suffering of the Afghans.

On the other hand, the conflict crossed borders, and its spillover effects are felt throughout its neighborhood and beyond. There is hardly a more abundant and broader dispersed Diaspora worldwide than the Afghan one. Millions of people have fled the country into neighboring countries, and the country's ongoing economic and governance fragility continues to place it at the center of South and Central Asian drug trafficking.

Reducing violence in Afghanistan and finding a path towards a negotiated settlement between the conflict parties is expected to improve the lives of Afghans and neighbors alike, as it is seen as the number one impediment for economic development and growth. Presumably, only an Afghan state at peace could finally turn to essential issues like demographic and environmental pressures – and contribute in a meaningful way to sub-regional initiatives addressing transborder challenges.

What to expect – and how to react?

While it is widely acknowledged that the U.S. withdrawal is a crucial factor in a shifting security environment in Asia, the direction, outcome, and implications for regional security are

not so clear yet. Which are the scenarios that Afghanistan's neighbors are bracing themselves for? Or the opportunities they seek to benefit from? How will a U.S. withdrawal influence current dynamics of alignment and conflict between Afghanistan's neighbors? What would various scenarios imply for European interests and policymaking in the region?

The policy briefs identify perceptions, attitudes, and uncertainties among Afghanistan's neighbors and key regional and international players about the anticipated outcome of the intra-Afghan talks and current as well as future conflict dynamics. What are the scenarios regional players bracing themselves for, and how is this influencing their policies?

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) and partners inside and outside Afghanistan, among them the Afghanistan Policy Group, to develop and discuss likely scenarios for Afghanistan's neighbors, policy adjustments, and the need for a comprehensive strategy among European foreign policymakers. Throughout 2020 and early 2021, the project identified concerns, expectations, aspirations, and uncertainties among Afghanistan's neighbors and key regional and international players about the anticipated outcome of the intra-Afghan talks and current as well as future conflict dynamics. FES is grateful to all the interlocutors who shared their valuable insights and everyone who contributed to this project.

We are enormously indebted to the authors of this report and previous project publications, Andrew Watkins and Dr. Timor Sharan, whose insights, analytical rigor, and companionship were essential from the very first step of this project. We hope you enjoy the read and look forward to further engagements!

Dr Magdalena Kirchner
Resident Representative



POLICY BRIEF

Afghanistan and the Transatlantic Relationship

The Future of U.S.-European Cooperation

Andrew Watkins, Timor Sharan

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This policy brief explores evolving U.S. policy of supporting Afghanistan in partnership with NATO and other European states. It outlines U.S. domestic politics and how this may shape the potential U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, explores scenarios of how a withdrawal might impact the country, and seeks prospects for future cooperation among Afghanistan’s partners.

The United States has engaged and intervened in Afghanistan’s conflict, off and on, dating back to 1979.¹ After working through Pakistan to fund and supply weapons to mujahedin fighting against occupying Soviet forces in the 1980s, U.S. attention drifted when the U.S.S.R. dissolved, leaving Afghans on all sides effectively abandoned by the external support of the last decade. This vacuum ushered in a period of bitterly intense civil war, only curbed after the Taliban rose to power and replaced unrestrained conflict with harsh authoritarian rule. Since late 2001, the United States, together with European and international allies, has ushered in a new Afghan state and social order, stabilizing Kabul and other urban centers even while it struggled to contain a growing insurgency.

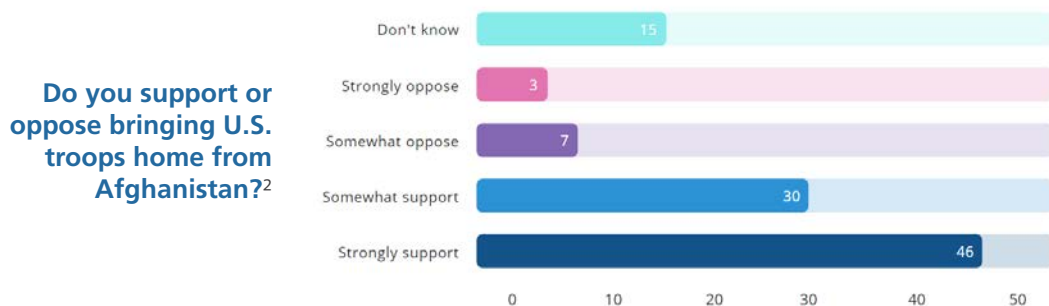
American Politics, Afghan Conflict

As American policy appears to trend toward disengagement once again, questions loom over European policy responses toward the country and the region: has the U.S. approach to a peace process disrupted transatlantic cooperation on

Afghanistan, and if so, how can this be rectified? Is there any potential for Europe to step into the security assistance vacuum that would be left by departing American troops? If not, will the current levels of security (and development) assistance provided by European states remain feasible in the future?

One key factor that complicates these questions is the uncertainty surrounding the U.S. presidential election and the potential impact change in administrations may have on policies toward Afghanistan. Before election day, speculation has built over how a Joe Biden administration may shift away from the course charted by U.S. President Donald J. Trump. But many observers of U.S. politics and policymaking warn that the overall trajectory of American disengagement may transcend party lines—and may only vary by degree, timing, and conditions. As a vice president active in foreign policymaking in the Obama White House, Biden was the most prominent voice calling for downsizing of NATO’s mission in Afghanistan, seeking minimal ambitions and military footprint already over a decade ago.

American Views of the US Military Presence in Afghanistan



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² See <https://www.charleskochinstitute.org/news/new-poll-3-in-4-americans-want-troops-home-from-afghanistan-iraq-favor-less-defense-spending-less-military-engagement-abroad>

In recent weeks, career U.S. military and national security officials have pushed back against several statements on Afghanistan policy by Trump’s political appointees. These public rumblings signal dissent within the U.S. government on its own Afghanistan policy, also indicated in August, when for a brief period, the U.S. was both pushing to have a number of Taliban prisoners released from Afghan jails and simultaneously lobbied to keep them detained. The U.S. military’s pushback against a rapid withdrawal that might not wait for a negotiated settlement reveals a dynamic that is likely to remain, regardless of November’s election result. It also appears similar to the dynamic that emerged in the U.S. Syria policy, which led to several years of political maneuvering that complicated military and diplomatic efforts, sapped local partners’ trust, and wrought chaos in the situation on the ground.

These dynamics have fed a strain of discussions on Afghanistan being held in Washington, revolving around a key question: “does zero troops really mean zero?” The question reflects political and policy-level considerations as American foreign policy figures consider the implications of a looming withdrawal even as fighting continues, and the just-commenced peace talks have yet to gain traction.

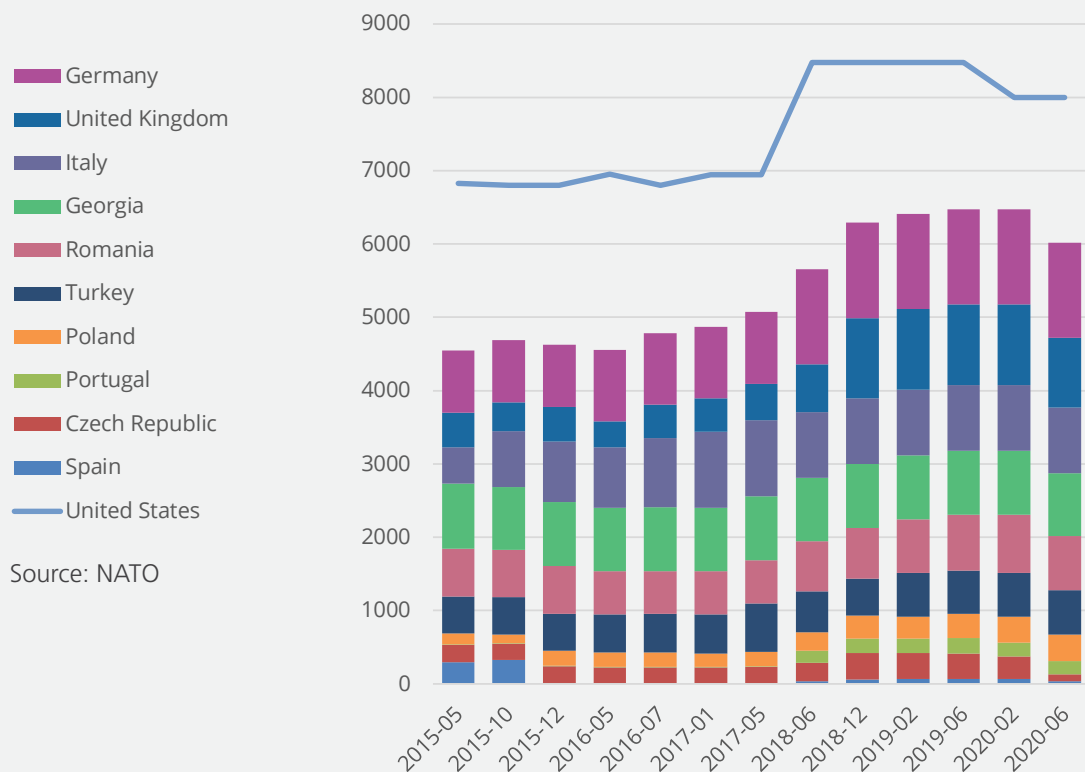
NATO in the Wind?

The U.S. strategy to reach peace negotiations included a unilateral commitment that entailed a timeline of withdrawal for all military forces of NATO member states, not just American troops—which has become a critical source of tension between

the U.S. and its European allies. While the public line amongst NATO members quickly settled on “in together, out together” after the 29 February deal was announced, German and other European officials have voiced frustration with the lack of consultation underpinning the U.S.’ approach—a friction that has extended well beyond Afghanistan over the past four years. There seems to be little question among U.S. officials that an American withdrawal would prompt European disengagement as well; despite NATO ally frustrations, the organization’s reliance on the U.S. infrastructure and security umbrella is clear.

Critiques have extended beyond the style of U.S. diplomatic efforts, with some stakeholders expressing concern that more has not been done to establish and formalize a regional framework agreement to accompany the negotiations between Afghan parties. While the U.S. has engaged in shuttle diplomacy across the region in hopes of building and maintaining momentum in support of direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and it has dedicated attention to a number of trilateral dialogues between Afghanistan and neighboring states, the U.S. has done much less to bring European partner and donor states together with regional nations—and to date, there is still no Track I regional dialogue established. Some U.S. officials have noted that diplomatic difficulties with international stakeholders (including Russia, China, and Iran) mean that while the U.S. should instigate regional efforts, it may not be best placed to administer over them.

US and European Troop Contributions, NATO Resolute Support Mission



Despite frustrations, more than one European official has admitted that without U.S. involvement and infrastructure, unique even among NATO allies, the prospects of providing future security assistance are effectively voided. Both European and American officials agree on the implausibility of a lasting military footprint, absent the U.S. The domestic political “fatigue” on Afghanistan, recently referred to by some European officials, only underscores the infeasibility of perpetuating anything like current security assistance levels. The mantra “In together, out together” may breed resentment in some corners of Europe. Still, if the U.S. opts to move forward with a total withdrawal, there appear to be few conventional alternatives.

The Afghan government continues to publicly maintain that it does not understand the U.S. government’s policy as one of total withdrawal, even as the U.S. president issues social media announcements precisely suggesting that. Simultaneously, a less official discourse among Kabul officials and elites has begun exploring alternatives to U.S.-led assistance and support. This has included probing NATO and select member states for their willingness to maintain or even augment current levels of support but also outreach to regional countries. This activity stems from the uncertainty surrounding the U.S.’s next steps, what it might mean for peace negotiations, and how parties to the conflict may react.

Possible Scenarios for U.S. Withdrawal

- **“Zero means zero”:** The U.S. continues to adhere to the terms of its agreement with the Taliban irrespective of conditions at the negotiating table or in the Afghan conflict, completing a total withdrawal along the same rough timeline as anticipated by the Doha agreement (May or midyear 2021). Under this scenario, NATO troop presence would be effectively obliged to withdraw as well, with European security and development assistance likely falling under intensive scrutiny as a result. Given the history of U.S. intervention and how strongly U.S. military presence correlates with higher levels of financial security assistance, under this scenario, the Afghan government would need to anticipate and account for a sharp drop in foreign funding. While other donors might pledge to maintain funding at current levels in the face of such a reduction, “filling the gap” left by the U.S. is highly unlikely. Such a reduction could have potentially catastrophic effects on the conflict and security environment across the country.
- **“Payment on Delivery”:** The U.S. employs the departure of its last remaining troops as leverage against the Taliban (and possibly the Afghan government) in order to push for progress in peace negotiations. It only finalizes a withdrawal after the two sides reach a political settlement to the war. In this scenario, the military drawdown could very well usher in the same drop in funding from the U.S. and other Western donors, but perhaps without the same negative security impact in Afghanistan (or on transatlantic relations). This scenario would also ideally include a greater degree of consultation and collaborative strategizing between the U.S. and its NATO partners.
- **Reverse course:** The U.S. political leadership may decide to retract its commitment to withdrawal troops, citing the continuation of Taliban violence across the country or its continued ties with Al Qaeda and other extremist groups. Doing so would almost certainly stall and collapse the current framework of peace talks, which the Taliban entered primarily based on the assurance that foreign troops’ departure was imminent. As a result, the Afghan government would look both to the U.S. and NATO for continued current support levels to continue fighting the war. It is not clear how European donors and NATO allies would react to such a reversal, or calls of continued high levels of security assistance and aid, after being confronted with an obligation to withdraw earlier this year. Such a reversal could potentially unfold after some of the more catastrophic effects of the first scenario take place, whereby European states would likely be impacted by the spillover effects of an intensified Afghan civil war.

Recommendations

- Regardless of which policy approach the U.S. government takes, European states will need to stake out independent positions on Afghanistan, ideally before the dust settles from any U.S. political transition. The sooner NATO members and other European donors outline their near- and medium-term approaches and commitments, the more it will assure the Afghan government.
- European states supporting Afghanistan should develop specific (and unified) positions on security assistance, clarifying the precise implications “in together, out together” will have on financial and advisory assistance without any military presence in-country.
- The U.S. should immediately increase intra-NATO dialogue at the highest possible levels, incorporating allied interests and concerns into its strategic approach to peace and conflict in Afghanistan.
- The U.S. should formulate clear expectations and demands regarding what their international partners (including non-NATO allies and donor states) may do to influence the Afghan government and peace process while leverage still exists, such as pledges, security cooperation, even migration policies. U.S. policy has allowed other international stakeholders to take a “back seat” and remain ambiguous, which could be rectified beginning with close allies.



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

U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper (L), NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (2nd-L), Afghanistan's Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah (2nd-R) and Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani (R) arrive for a joint news conference in Kabul, Afghanistan February 29, 2020. REUTERS/Mohammad Ismail

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POLICY BRIEF

Europe's Engagement in Afghanistan Post-2021

Uncertainty, Pragmatism, and Continued Partnership

Andrew Watkins, Timor Sharan

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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.

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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.



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.



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.

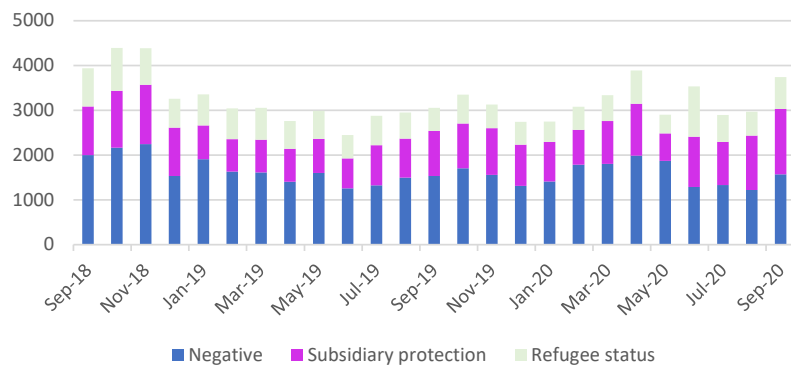
Also, the critical issue of refugees and returnees in Europe remains a largely avoided topic in conversations between European and Afghan stakeholders, in spite of the growing acuteness of European concerns and dire conditions for Afghans themselves. In 2019, Afghan citizens accounted for the highest 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.

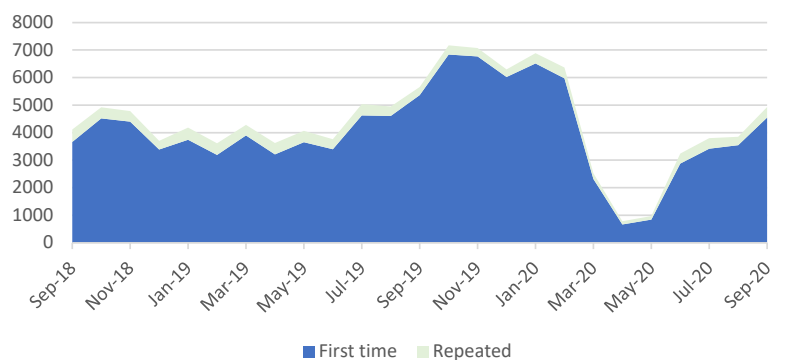
First-instance decisions on Afghan Asylum Applications lodged in EU+ countries

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

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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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POLICY BRIEF

Meeting in the Middle? Russia, Afghanistan, and Europe

Timor Sharan, Andrew Watkins

This policy brief explores Russia's engagement with Afghanistan in 2021 and beyond. It discusses how the scheduled 2021 U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan could affect Russia's regional and domestic interests. It examines Russia's future engagement with Afghanistan, exploring scenarios, implications, and the need for policy adjustments in Kabul, Moscow, and other European capitals. It also reviews potential convergence areas for closer cooperation with European partners concerning Afghanistan.

Russia's strategic orientation toward Afghanistan can be traced to the nineteenth century when Russia regarded Afghanistan as an arena for great power plays on its southern border - first with the British and then with the United States during the Cold War.¹ In the last four decades, Russia's strategic rationale towards Afghanistan has been guided by the bloody experience, and eventual failure, of the Soviet invasion in 1979. Since the collapse of their client regime in 1992, Russian policy elites have viewed Afghanistan as a security threat with subsequent spillover effects, including radical Islam, terrorism, drugs, and instability. In the early years of the U.S.-led NATO intervention in Afghanistan, Russia saw the mission as a stabilisation factor for the region. However, since the 2014 U.S. military drawdown, Russia has engaged all sides in the Afghan conflict to reduce the risk of destabilisation for itself and Central Asia. Given the great power competition between the U.S. and Russia and the potential threats originating from Afghanistan to Central Asia, Russia will almost certainly be a dominant player in the complex geopolitics of Afghanistan after a post U.S. military withdrawal.

Russia in Afghanistan: An Ambivalent Policy

Russia has viewed Afghanistan through the lens of a U.S. strategic security interest that must be undermined to prevent NATO expansionism. At the same time, strained relations between the U.S., the EU, and Russia on other global issues (e.g., from NATO enlargement to the proxy war in Ukraine and Syria) have indirectly wedged Moscow's policy towards Afghanistan. As such, Russia's current posture towards the U.S. presence in Afghanistan can best be described as ambivalent.

While Moscow sees the long-term presence of NATO in Afghanistan as a serious threat to its regional interests, it has also warned against the risks of a sudden and hasty U.S. military exit which might destabilise regional security, especially in the fragile Central Asian states. Russia's primary security interest in Afghanistan is to curtail the spread of terrorism and radical Islam, including ISIS, into Central Asia and Russia.



The Caucasus and Central Asia. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

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Russia has historically perceived Central Asia as within its sphere of influence and acted as the stabiliser in the region; instability has often corresponded with Russian lack of capacity or dedication of resources. The ousting of Kyrgyz prime minister Kubatbek Boronov by demonstrators in October 2020 is evidence of the fragility of these states and this relationship. Moscow's posturing as a superpower – reflective, if nothing else, of Russian self-perception in the emerging global order – suggests it will also protect these countries from security threats originating from Afghanistan. Indeed, over the past two decades, Russia's hands-off relationship with Afghanistan has been supplanted by an increasingly hands-on approach to assisting Central Asian states with their border security.

Moscow has enjoyed good relations with the Kabul government while supporting the Taliban with finances and arms and expanding its contacts with ethnoregional strongmen and elites in the country's north.² By playing all sides in the Afghan conflict, Russia aims to enhance its regional weight and ultimately protect its future security interests in the event of state collapse or a Taliban takeover.

Russia's future policy towards Afghanistan is intertwined in its complex geopolitical dynamics with the U.S., the EU, and Pakistan and its broader relations with China, Iran, and Central Asia. Russia's ties to and its intelligence agencies' cooperation with Iran in Afghanistan and beyond are likely to further complicate these dynamics. In part, Russia has pursued a rapprochement policy towards Pakistan to mitigate China's influence on the region through its relationship with Islamabad. Russia's relationship with China around crucial energy projects in Central Asia is another dynamic in play, albeit a constructive one so far.

While Moscow sees the long-term presence of NATO in Afghanistan as a serious threat to its regional interests, it has also warned against the risks of a sudden and hasty U.S. military exit which might destabilise regional security, especially in the fragile Central Asian states.

Possible Scenarios in Afghanistan: The view from Moscow

Moscow policy planners see Afghanistan's future in the following three broad scenarios in light of the outcome of ongoing negotiations and the scheduled U.S. military exit in 2021.

- **A Stable and Legitimate Government:** A scenario in which the Afghan state survives in its current form, and the Taliban is incorporated into the constitutional framework once NATO leaves. This scenario presents an excellent opportunity to international partners, including Moscow to consolidate stabilisation within the region and focus on regional economic and security cooperation and integration between Central Asia and South Asia, which would benefit all.
- **Stable, but NOT Appealing:** In this scenario, the moderate and reasonable government is dismantled. More aggressive and radical forces with no commitments to human rights and the existing constitution take over, most probably the Taliban with pockets of ISIS operations in different parts of the country. The EU and the U.S. are likely to shift their focus to development aid and diplomatic efforts. Russia's cosyng up to the Taliban and northern powerbrokers in Afghanistan might reduce security risks for Central Asia. Still, it might also lead to a range of other problems (e.g., drug trafficking, refugees).
- **Russian engagement with the Taliban and elements in the north is likely to increase fragmentation and unintentionally exacerbate the potential for civil war.**
- **The Civil War Scenario:** In this scenario, NATO forces withdraw from Afghanistan, and regardless of the outcome of an ongoing peace settlement, the war continues. The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the Afghan state collapse in the absence of American and European military and financial support. International donors would likely have little appetite to continue supporting the ANDSF. The U.S. is historically consistent in cutting back substantially on financial aid after withdrawing its military from a region or partnership. EU engagement might be limited to humanitarian aid. In this scenario, all-out war is expected, with regional players supporting competing local forces to enhance their geopolitical security interests. For Russia, the risk of destabilisation of Central Asia is vast. And yet, Russia has little appetite to fill in the gap by sending troops to Afghanistan, not just because of its failed experience in Afghanistan but because Moscow is already engaged on several fronts – Syria, Ukraine, and Libya – and lacks further resources. Russia's preferred strategy is likely to be containment of conflict within Afghanistan's geographical boundaries by sponsoring and arming strongmen in the north.

² Gibbons-Neff, T., (2017), "Russia Is Sending Weapons to Taliban, Top U.S. General Confirms", *The Washington Post*, 24 April 2017; Rowllatt, J., (2018), "Russia 'Arming the Afghan Taliban', Says US", BBC, 24 March 2018.

Finding Areas of Convergence

Afghanistan has every potential to become an arena for proxy power competition. This can be avoided if the EU, U.S., and Russia work jointly on potential issue-based areas of cooperation.

- **Regional Geopolitics:** There is real potential for the EU, U.S., and Russia to resolve Afghanistan's regional security complexities. However, they must show flexibility in looking beyond the horizon to the long game, shifting away from seeing Afghanistan through the lens of American security interests to turning the region into a hub of regional economic cooperation and convergence between Russia and Afghanistan and Central and South Asia.
- **Counterterrorism:** The counterterrorism agenda is a unifying area where EU, U.S., and Russian interests converge. Despite the discomfort, Russia could agree to a residual counterterrorism presence in Afghanistan.

- **Stability in Afghanistan:** the EU and Russia could work together to guarantee that an inclusive and stable government emerges after a peace settlement. The EU and Russia share the same concern about a sudden U.S. military exit in 2021, which could leave a vacuum for radical Islamist groups, including ISIS, to fill and expand their operations beyond Afghanistan.

Regardless of the outcome of the peace process, as Western presence and leverage diminish, we expect a more proactive Russia in Central Asia out of fear of spillover effects from Afghanistan. Russia has already taken "proactive measures" towards such an outcome by reinforcing Central Asian militaries' combat potential through the Collective Security Treaty Organization and has utilised the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Anti-Terrorist Structure, located in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to fight terrorism and drug networks in Central Asia. Russia has already established a military presence in three Central Asian countries and has, among other things, an aviation base in Kyrgyzstan.

Recommendations

- The EU should develop a strategy for consistent and meaningful issue-based engagement with Russia on Afghanistan, including vital common platforms such as counterterrorism and economic integration of Central and South Asia.
- Moscow can play an essential role in the ongoing peace process. Its rapprochement strategy towards Pakistan and its close relations with Iran should be capitalised on by the U.S. and EU countries supporting the peace process. Moscow should be treated more like an "equal" partner in the Afghan peace process and must be engaged with. However, given the scenarios mentioned above, Moscow may also spoil the process by prematurely recruiting regional strongmen-type figures to build a buffer zone around the northern border. Russia can use its leverage to change the incentive structure of the Taliban and other national stakeholders.
- The U.S. strategy of greater engagement with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in the Afghan peace process is encouraging. The EU and the U.S. should also encourage Russia to take a more active role in, and publicly offer its blessing to, the Afghan peace process.

About the authors

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About the cover photo

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and members of Taliban delegation take part in the multilateral peace talks on Afghanistan in Moscow, SERGEI KARPUKHIN / REUTERS

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POLICY BRIEF

Stabilization and Connectivity Uzbekistan's dual-track strategy towards Afghanistan

Timor Sharan, Andrew Watkins

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This policy brief explores Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan in 2021 and beyond, in light of the ongoing U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The brief discusses how increasing uncertainty surrounding the nature and timing of the U.S. withdrawal could affect Uzbekistan's regional and domestic security. It examines Uzbekistan's future engagement with Afghanistan, highlighting key convergence areas around which Europe and Central Asia could cooperate in Afghanistan and find opportunities for broader engagement beyond the current peace process.

Before the nineteenth century's Russian colonisation of Central Asia and the 'Great Game,' Afghanistan and Central Asia had long been seen by outsiders and residents as a single cultural, civilisational and political space. Geopolitical tensions between the Russian and British Empires interrupted these historical ties for a century until the rise of Afghanistan's communist regime in the 1970s and the Soviet invasion of the 1980s. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the subsequent independence of Central Asian countries, and the civil war in Afghanistan divided the region once again: Afghanistan became perceived as a security threat from which Central Asian countries must protect themselves.

Since 2016, President Ashraf Ghani's vision of making Afghanistan the "transit roundabout" of the region, and similar proposals from the new Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who advocates for indivisible notions of regional security, stability, and prosperity, have raised new possibilities of convergence between the two countries and beyond. This converging space also presents a new entry point for the European Union (EU) to facilitate deeper regional economic reintegration, all the more important given the signs of U.S. interest in withdrawing from Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan and the Afghan Peace Negotiations: Engaging All Sides

Since 2016, Uzbekistan's leadership and their initiatives have contributed to opening up the country broadly, as well as bringing about closer ties with Afghanistan. This proactive policy

has led to a more dynamic relationship with Kabul, rooted in infrastructure and connectivity schemes and projects. Tashkent is playing a constructive role in the Afghan peace process, working alongside a handful of leading global and regional players attempting to stabilise Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan has begun reaching out to both sides of the conflict, maintaining warm relations with Kabul and gradually developing closer ties with the Taliban. At times this has been somewhat of a tightrope act and not without complication. In reaction to Tashkent's August 2019 state reception of figures from the Taliban's political office, Kabul issued a statement warning that similar future invitations would undermine peace efforts.²

Two days after the opening of the Doha-based Afghan peace negotiations in September 2020, the head of the Taliban's political office, Mullah Ghani Baradar, offered public assurances to Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries regarding threats to their security and economic interests.³ The Taliban's promises were remarkably detailed, with references to specific incidents and directed squarely at fears of spillover and cross-border violence. Baradar has even promised to look favourably on any proposal to move the talks to Samarkand. In return, Tashkent has continued to extend diplomatic legitimacy towards the Taliban, an approach that appears to be aimed at reducing risks stemming from the possible scenarios discussed below.

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 neighbours, policy adjustments, and the need for a comprehensive strategy among European foreign policymakers. This brief is part of a series authored by Dr Timor Sharan and Andrew Watkins 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>

² Qishloq Ovozi, (2019), "Uzbekistan Experiences the Pitfalls of Peacemaking in Afghanistan", Radio Free Europe, 24 August 2019.

³ Umida Hashimova, (2020), "Beyond the Intra-Afghan Talks, Uzbekistan Sees a Bright Future", The Diplomat, 21 September 2020.

Space for Cooperation: Complementary Interests

There is genuine space for collaboration and cooperation between the EU, U.S., Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan, driven by complementary, rather than competitive, positions: all parties seek to establish new dynamics to preserve regional stability, pending the likely U.S./NATO disengagement from Afghanistan. After the 2014 U.S. military drawdown, the Afghan government under President Ghani has pushed for regional economic and trade integration, working closely with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Today, this orientation is taking place amid a recalibration of foreign relations meant to ensure Kabul's political survival, and now comes with active encouragement from the U.S. and EU. For the EU, encouraging Kabul's regional approach dovetails neatly with 2019's joint EU-Central Asia communication that promised partnership for resilience, prosperity, and interconnectivity.

Deepening Economic Cooperation

Tashkent foresees vast economic and political opportunities in Afghanistan, especially after a peace settlement, which is intertwined with its aspirational dream of establishing itself as the dominant power in Central Asia and beyond. This is evidenced by its offer to host future intra-Afghan talks, which could provide Uzbekistan with the potential to burnish its image as an up-and-coming regional power, garner international recognition and prestige, and allow it to influence Afghan politics. Tashkent already enjoys some economic power with its neighbour: in 2019, the total value of exports from Uzbekistan into Afghanistan surpassed half a billion dollars, with the potential for that amount to triple by 2024. Given the fertile ground of an already existing relationship, Uzbekistan's hopes and the EU's stated goals in Central Asia, the EU could easily fold its various regional engagements into broader Central Asia-Afghanistan-South Asia initiatives and dialogue, assisting Tashkent and Kabul alike.

While Tashkent is open to EU and U.S. encouragement and engagement, it is also positioning itself as a partner for Chinese regional interests – and Western powers need to appreciate this multipolar approach to diplomacy and development. Uzbekistan hopes to serve as a transit hub for Russian and Chinese goods and, to a lesser extent, domestic products, with several railroad projects underway. The Uzbek national railway now extends beyond the border crossing of Hairatan into Afghanistan, connecting with the critical city and commercial hub of Mazar-i-Sharif. There have been plans to extend this line to Herat city in western Afghanistan, bordering Iran, which would connect Central Asia to ports on the Persian Gulf. Moreover, the construction of an Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway – for which Uzbekistan has promised financial contributions – will provide Uzbekistan further leverage to influence access to South Asia, Iran, and the Middle East. This will also allow Uzbekistan to pursue an export- and tariff-oriented economy with access to major international transportation corridors, including the ports of Chabahar in Iran and Gwadar in Pakistan.

Tashkent's vision can only be achieved if the war in Afghanistan concludes peacefully – which in today's context, means a lasting peace settlement between Kabul and the Taliban. Uzbek policymakers understand that a peaceful Afghanistan can best serve their economic interests in developing the multinational construction of energy lines, railways, major connectivity projects, and other infrastructure.



Major international rail routes in Central Asia, 2019

Source: Martin Russell, "[Connectivity in Central Asia, Reconnecting the Silk Road.](#)" EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, April 2019, accessed September 12, 2019.

Strengthening Security Cooperation

President Mirziyoyev's concept of indivisible regional security guided the 2017 Samarkand and 2018 Tashkent regional security conferences, with the latter fully focused on Afghanistan. Unlike Russian attempts to influence Afghanistan, Tashkent's engagement has not reflected Moscow's pessimistic assessment of the Afghan peace process and the inescapability of the worst-case scenario of state collapse.⁴ Indeed, Uzbekistan is notable in the region for the near-absence of public discussion of worst-case scenarios. Its diplomatic language instead focuses singularly on the potential benefits and incentives of a possible "peace dividend." In private conversations, Uzbek policymakers have been critical of Russia's push for institutionalising the Collective Security Treaty Organization further, which they see as more of a platform for expansionism rather than an effective way to fight terrorism. They fear that Russia is concerned about Central Asia pulling away from its domain of influence, and might exaggerate threats about Afghanistan's instability so as to inflate the need for Central Asian countries to rely on Russian security assistance.

⁴ See the [Russian Policy Brief](#) as part of this series.

Still, religious extremism and radicalisation remain significant challenges for Uzbekistan and Central Asia, and the country's leadership has not lost sight of potential spillover from Afghanistan. Destabilising forces such as the Haqqani network, Al Qaida, ISIS and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) continue to endanger regional security. For years, and even as it engages more deeply with the Taliban, Uzbekistan has taken a pro-active policy towards transnational jihadist groups. The government has already begun signalling its willingness to engage, potentially even reconcile, with IMU and ISIS fighters in Afghanistan and Syria, encouraging them to return to their countries of origin. The same attitude underlies Tashkent's approach to the Afghan peace process: Uzbekistan would like to see not only the reintegration of ex-Taliban combatants but broad de-militarisation and control of small arms in Afghanistan.

The results of this reintegration-oriented, optimistic set of policies remain to be seen. Notably, Tashkent's approach extends beyond the focus on border control and counterterrorism that defines other Central Asian states under Russia's security orbit; the EU could encourage this strategy more widely across the region. As noted above, it is not clear to what extent Uzbekistan is preparing for worst-case scenarios that may unfold in Afghanistan after a U.S.-NATO military withdrawal or the Afghan government's possible erosion of international support. What is clear is that Tashkent has avoided public speculation about many of the concerns other states are actively debating.

Recommendations

- The EU and Uzbekistan could collaborate more effectively to promote enduring stabilization in Afghanistan. They could build on their shared interest and engagement with the Afghan peace process to explore longer-term priorities and concerns. Given its decisive role in supporting Afghanistan as well as its regional diplomacy, the EU is well-placed to encourage connectivity between Central Asian and South Asian forums and initiatives.
- Utilising several pre-existing regional diplomatic formats, the U.S. and the EU should further encourage and leverage economic reintegration and "interregional cooperation" on issues-based subjects impacting Central Asia, including climate change and the implications of COVID-19 on regional development and security. These formats ought to move beyond multi-stakeholder consultations and should ultimately introduce a collaborative mechanism to encourage concrete implementation of shared goals. In one positive step, Central Asian states have already invited Afghanistan to upgrade its role in the EU-Central Asia High-Level Political and Security dialogue (HLPSP) from a guest and observer to that of a full-fledged participant.
- Presently, Central Asian countries are competing with one another over trade, transit, and energy routes to gain the interest of investors. The EU Strategy on Central Asia and Afghanistan should build on recent positive developments and reflect on new opportunities by pushing for "interregional connectivity". It is essential that Afghanistan is included in this long-term planning and benefits from these initiatives.
- Tashkent's plan to convene a regional conference on connectivity next year (as a follow up to the Bucharest 2019 EU – CA connectivity conference) is an excellent opportunity to progress discussions on cooperation. The EU should ensure that additional issues, e.g. physical infrastructure, integrated border management and trilateral projects for training and education of Afghans in Central Asian educational institutions (with particular focus on women) in line with the new EU Strategy on Central Asia will also make it on the agenda.

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About the cover photo

Uzbek soldiers walk to the Friendship Bridge outside the southern town of Termez, December 12, 2001. REUTERS/Shamil ZhumatovAS

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POLICY BRIEF

A New Playbook? Europe, India, and Afghanistan beyond 2021

Timor Sharan, Andrew Watkins

This policy brief examines India's engagement with Afghanistan in 2021 and beyond. It discusses how increasing uncertainty about the nature of a U.S withdrawal could affect Indian's interests in Afghanistan and the region.¹ It also details scenarios for which New Delhi needs to prepare and policy options available to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan. As their strategic partnership gains traction but uncertainty looms large, this brief also explores areas in which India and the EU could address joint interests in Afghanistan.

India's Afghanistan policy has been shaped by its rivalry with Pakistan. New Delhi and Kabul have enjoyed a very close relationship since India's independence in 1947. Afghanistan voted against Pakistan's membership into the UN and, subsequently, during the Cold War, supported India's non-alignment policy. Going against its strict principle of non-alignment during the Cold War, New Delhi embraced the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, seemingly to balance Pakistan's increasing support for anti-Soviet *mujahedin*.² Since then, India has repeatedly supported Afghan actors it sees as useful in balancing or stymying Pakistan's influence, including aid to the Northern Alliance that rallied against the Taliban during the 1990s (some Northern Alliance figures continue to receive Indian backing today). Since 2001, New Delhi has pursued a proactive and expansionist Afghanistan policy beyond obstructing Pakistan. India has been aiding the country financially to the tune of over 3 billion dollars in the past 18 years, including large-scale infrastructure projects, technical training programmes, and new trade corridors that expand Afghanistan's landlocked options.

The Peace Process, Withdrawal, and India's Concerns

Uncertainty around NATO's potential military exit has left New Delhi pondering how to preserve its interests best. India faces a tall order if a withdrawal takes place, raising several concerns: one is whether India will be able to support a friendly Afghan state without substantial buy-in from Western nations. Another is the question of how far India might go to prevent a Taliban takeover that could grant Islamabad further *strategic depth* - enabling regional militants to stage attacks on India. New Delhi has vehemently warned the U.S., the EU, and other allies against a hasty withdrawal, emphasising that the Taliban have not delivered on most of their commitments to the U.S.-Taliban deal signed on 29 February. These include an understanding to reduce violence and a series of promises to limit the activity of terrorist groups, including Al-Qaida. It has also cautioned that Pakistan has made no formal commitment to eliminate Taliban sanctuaries on its soil, enabling the group to return to war quickly at any point, regardless of progress toward a peace settlement.



The multipurpose Qargha Dam was constructed on Paghman River, the major tributary of Kabul River, inter alia with Indian financial support. Kabul, Afghanistan April, 2020. FES/Mariam Alimi

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 neighbours, policy adjustments, and the need for a comprehensive strategy among European foreign policymakers. This brief is part of a series authored by Dr Timor Sharan and Andrew Watkins 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>

² By 1990s, there were seven Sunni and one Shia Jihadi groups were operating from Pakistan, aided by the U.S., Saudis and others.

New Delhi is concerned that without such assurances, it could find itself exposed to severe asymmetric threats, including in the disputed territory of Kashmir. To date, India's approach has therefore focused on aggressively lobbying the U.S. for a conditions-based and "responsible" exit and on persuading NATO to at least leave an international counter-terrorism contingency force behind that could function as a stopgap in the post-withdrawal environment in Afghanistan.

Also, New Delhi has intensified its outreach and engagement to key Afghan stakeholders, including regional strongmen. India is banking on its traditional support for non-Pashtun constituencies in Afghanistan and their leaders who occupy key positions in the Afghan government to diversify its influence. To this end, Abdullah Abdullah, Abdul Rashid Dostum and former Governor Atta Mohammad Noor have received official invitations to New Delhi in a "charm offensive". India has also promised additional financial commitment to Kabul and the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) in case of continued war.



To date, India's approach has therefore focused on aggressively lobbying the U.S. for a conditions-based and "responsible" exit and on persuading NATO to at least leave an international counter-terrorism contingency force behind that could function as a stopgap in the post-withdrawal environment in Afghanistan.

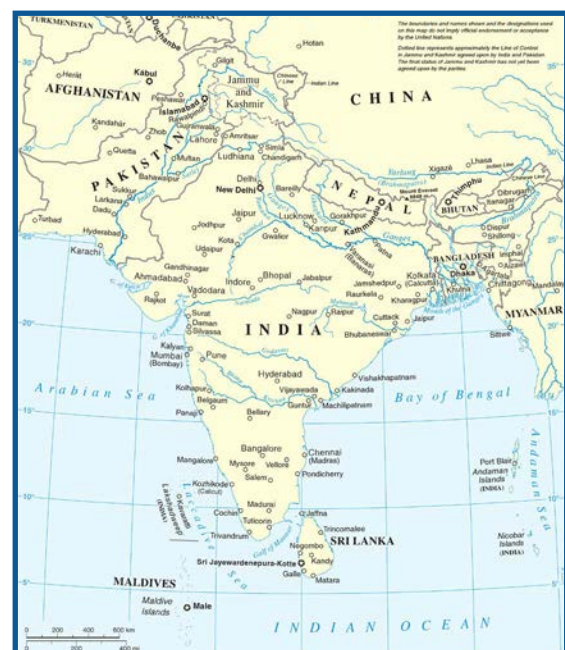


Evolving Geostrategic Context: India Losing out?

As it has more than once since 1979, New Delhi finds itself scrambling to respond to a rapidly changing strategic environment in Afghanistan, this time shaped by the U.S.-Taliban deal and the potential emergence of a regional power vacuum. From India's perspective, the U.S. reliance on Pakistan's support to mediate and deliver a peace settlement has been even more fraught. The idea of Pakistan assuming a prominent role in a post-war Afghanistan troubles New Delhi (and Kabul), well beyond immediate threats. Thus far, the peace process's framework and progress have disadvantaged the Indian government as well as the Afghan; the outcome is widely seen as likely to limit Delhi's strategic diplomatic, economic and political manoeuvring space in the region. After American disengagement, any rebalancing of power may even threaten India's global power ambitions, as it will likely include Russian and Chinese repositioning.

New Delhi faces a dilemma: while it seeks to preserve diplomatic, security, and economic interests in Afghanistan and within the region, it seems highly likely to lose ground in the near future, regardless of which one of the outlined below unfolds. This is because Pakistan has positioned itself and its influence over the Taliban as central to the Afghan peace process, ensuring that if it succeeds or fails, its ability to shape Afghan affairs remains. The zero-sum thinking that defines much of India-Pakistan tensions means that Pakistan's continued influence is a loss for India. Moreover, Delhi's economic integration investments, established with the intent of bypassing Pakistan and dependent on a fragile regional equilibrium, may well come under pressure regardless of the outcome. A Taliban-dominated government might opt out of trade arrangements preferable to India, while an expanded civil war could easily render the logistics and security of regional trade defunct. Thus, Delhi's strategic approach toward Afghanistan can best be characterised as seeking to minimise risks.

New Delhi has a range of options to shield its interests, many of which are likely to prompt reactions across the region; one path includes stepping up the financial support, arming, and training of Afghan security forces to ensure its sustainability. Conversely, as it has happened in the past, India may feel compelled to support armed resistance outside of the state's armed forces, if at some point, it deems the Taliban to have gained a dominant position. This option would have regional ramifications as well: India could partner more closely with Iran and Russia, with which it shares some compatible regional interests, and which are both likely to increase their support for intra-Afghan powerbrokers; if not, these efforts might wind up in competition.



Map of South Asia
Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#)

A Common Regional Vision? Taking Ownership of the Region's Problems

India and the European Union have enjoyed common goals and principles in post-2001 Afghanistan around democratisation, the rule of law, fighting terrorisms, and the promotion of peace and stability. In practical terms, both have "put their money where their mouth is," providing substantial aid to the Afghan state. The July 2020 *EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025* highlights common security threats and regional concerns, encouraging stronger cooperation on shared objectives, including counter-terrorism.³ Building on this mechanism and the recent *Joint Communication* to regularise and structure their consultations, both sides could broaden and deepen political cooperation on peace, stability and prosperity in the region. To date, however, there has been little institutionalised and structured coordination on Afghanistan beyond communiqués.

Shared values and Principles



Shared democratic values anchor EU-Indian cooperation towards development and security objectives in Afghanistan. There is a convergence of multiple goals between Delhi and Brussels in terms of the peace process, including political stability, minority rights, and sustaining gains of the past 19 years. This has been evident in the EU's and India's position on recent elections, the peace process, and broadly their support for the current political order. In the future, they could jointly lobby and pressure regional and international stakeholders to uphold these values and gains to help Afghans preserve them.



Regional integration and inter-regional cooperation

India is an important trade partner for the EU, ambitious to emerge as a major economic power. Yet regional security dynamics and instability have prevented India from reaching its potential to access and connect with Central Asia economically. As India's strategic partner, the EU could also help mediate between India and Pakistan to create incentives for greater regional economic integration.



Political stability in Afghanistan and the Region

India is focused on ensuring the stability of the current political order in Afghanistan and preventing state collapse or the Taliban's monopoly of power. India and various EU countries could cooperate on development and stabilisation even in the event of a continuing U.S. military withdrawal. If they choose, they have the resources to "stay the course" and at least partially fill in the "aid gap" that is only likely to grow in coming years, evident from the funding decrease in the 2020 Geneva Conference.

Possible Scenarios in Afghanistan: The View from India

At this point, New Delhi is concerned about all potential outcomes of the ongoing peace process and the composition of the future Afghan state. For broader stability of the regional security environment and a strong position vis a vis Pakistan, its primary objective is to convince NATO and the U.S. to maintain some form of contingency force in Afghanistan, likely based on a rationale of counter-terrorism. Even this option is fraught with the risk of destabilisation, as a much smaller international presence might not prevent the government from fracturing under increasing Taliban momentum. Failing that best-case though still unsatisfying outcome, India would likely grapple with future scenarios in the following ways:

- **A Stable and Internationally Legitimate Government:** This scenario would see the Afghan state survive approximately in its current form, including the Taliban in a power-sharing arrangement. It is perhaps a preferred scenario for India if power brokers of the current regime remain able to protect and assure some of Delhi's interests. However, both the Taliban and Pakistan have indicated they will demand a "cleaning house" in Kabul in any final peace settlement.⁴ India's ability to influence such a future government, at least in the near term, would rely on Taliban power-sharing with key figures backed by India – which may prove difficult for the Taliban and Pakistan to accept.

³ In July 2020, the 15th EU-India Summit held on 15 July 2020, endorsed a new "EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025", as a common roadmap to guide joint action and further strengthen the EU-India relations for the next five years.

⁴ "Pakistan's FM Qureshi Gave Opinions About the Prisoner Release, and a Retired Pakistani General Called for a Regime Change in Kabul", ToloNews, September 2020.

- **A Stable but Taliban Dominated Regime:** In this scenario, the Afghan government is either removed or collapses and the Taliban rule the country with little commitment to human rights and today's constitutional principles. A Taliban-dominated government could potentially become a Pakistan client state or would at least be more hostile to India. India would likely lose anticipated returns on its economic and infrastructure investments in Afghanistan and find itself isolated in the region. Kashmir's security environment could become even more vulnerable at a time when border tensions with China are rising. To undermine such a future state, India might re-align itself with other regional players like Iran. Indian officials have been ambiguous, however, about New Delhi's reaction to a scenario where the Taliban welcome constructive relations with India, whether it would accept such overtures in good faith or reject them out of hand.
- **A Civil War Scenario:** The state fragments without a stable new order emerging and conflict expands. In this scenario, all-out war must be expected, with neighbouring countries supporting rival factions and groups and potentially carve up Afghanistan into regional buffer zones, reminiscent of periods during the civil war in the 1980s and 90s. Faced with the potential of a Taliban-dominated government, some security officials in Delhi might cynically prefer this scenario, assisting non-state powerbrokers in Afghanistan's north and central highlands to tie down the Taliban and undermine the geographic scope of their – and Pakistan's – influence. In this situation, India could increase support and perhaps even send arms to Afghan allies, likely including remnants of the Afghan security forces, and might cooperate with other regional players. It would almost certainly not send boots on the ground, risk-averse to any potential for casualties or international intrigue.

Recommendations

- For mutual advantage in stabilising Afghanistan after a Western military withdrawal, both India and the EU should move from their current exploratory phase of bilateral cooperation on Afghan development and security issues to an implementation phase. EU engagement with India on strengthening security cooperation, including counter-terrorism, could even benefit regional stability. Indian support for the Afghan security and defence forces, always hotly regarded with suspicion by Pakistan, may be less vulnerable to criticism or adverse reactions if enshrined in a multilateral architecture.
- Building on their signed Strategic Partnership, EU and India should take a regional approach to the Afghan issue and explore the possibility of setting up a joint financial assistance fund for Afghan peace, and post-peace settlement stabilisation and prosperity in Afghanistan. India's resources make it a prime candidate to join the EU as a primary donor state to an Afghan government that will continue to require substantial, even existential levels of support.
- It would be mutually beneficial if India engages more prominently with Iran and Russia diplomatically, given the EU's limited ability to influence those two actors' regional interests. Carried out in conjunction with a closer EU-India working relationship, the two should maximise diplomatic leverage of a newly established donor bloc and discourage other powers from pursuing destabilising approaches in Afghanistan.
- In the areas of migration and tourism, India should further liberalise its visa policy, especially medical tourism and investment visas to Afghans. For many Afghans, India is one of the primary, often the only, destination for high-quality medical treatment. Such people-to-people exchanges are a necessary condition for continued and sustainable good relations between the two countries.

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

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (C) signs a guest book, next to Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani (2nd R), during the inauguration of Afghanistan's new parliament building which was built with the Indian government's financial assistance, in Kabul, Afghanistan December 25, 2015. REUTERS/Omar Sobhani

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POLICY BRIEF

Neighbours in a New Normal? Pakistan and Afghanistan beyond 2021

Timor Sharan, Andrew Watkins

This policy brief explores Pakistan's engagement with Afghanistan after a U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan. It discusses how increasing uncertainty surrounding the nature of the U.S. withdrawal affects Pakistan's internal and regional security. It asks which scenarios are the most realistic ones and calls for short and mid-term policy adjustments in Kabul, Islamabad, and European countries. It examines Islamabad's future engagement with Afghanistan, highlighting the challenges and prospects for cooperation between the parties beyond the peace process and identifying which factors need to be addressed in EU and regional strategies to mitigate possible conflict effectively.

Relations between the two countries have been strained since Pakistan's independence in 1947 when Afghanistan cast the only opposition vote against Pakistan's admission to the UN.¹ Pakistan's Afghanistan policy has been India-centric and in recent decades driven by two main objectives: (1) achieving strategic depth in Afghanistan by utilising the large Pashtun population to ensure a relatively friendly government in Kabul and (2) avoiding a strategic encirclement by India and undercutting India's increasing diplomatic and commercial presence in Afghanistan and the region.² Delhi's on-and-off support to Baloch and Wazir separatist movements inside Pakistan with Afghanistan's help has only further fueled suspicions and threat perceptions. Additionally, Kabul has long disputed the status of the 1893 Durand Line as the official border.³ During the Soviet intervention, Pakistan provided sanctuaries and arms to Sunni Mujahedeen groups to launch attacks in Afghanistan. With the withdrawal of the Soviet Union, Pakistan facilitated several failed political settlements among the warring groups, including the Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and Peshawar accords, eventually ending up politically and militarily siding with the Taliban until 2001. Pakistan has taken credit for aiding the 2019 U.S.-Taliban deal and has positioned itself as central to the Afghan peace process, given its leverage over the Taliban.

A Genuine Change or Window Dressing?

Pakistan's post-2001 policy towards Afghanistan has been opaque and contradictory, especially in its covert support for the Taliban, raising deep suspicion in Kabul and elsewhere

about Pakistan's motives and ambitions. Pakistani officials stress that both countries have a historic opportunity to seize the momentum of the intra-Afghan talks and urge Kabul to look beyond the "blame games" that have too often dominated their relationship. Within the region, there is also a general sense that for the first time in modern history, there is a strategic convergence of interests among Pakistan, Iran, and Russia on a shared vision for Afghanistan around regional economic and trade integration. There is a realisation that the region itself should take a more significant role in addressing the Afghan war rather than leaving it to international players and that further de-stabilisation of Afghanistan is not in any nation's interests.

Yet since 2001, the Afghan government has consistently maintained that Pakistan's fundamental incentives and guiding principles have not changed. In addition to concern about India's expansion, Pakistan's Afghanistan policy has been and remains aimed at thwarting domestic threats with a divide-and-conquer strategy of backing some militants against others. Despite Pakistan's dire economic situation and long-term circular debt problem, Kabul believes that Pakistan is unwilling to reorient its policy because of these factors, asserting that Pakistan's rhetoric of change is nothing but window dressing and posturing for Washington. Afghan officials have noted that previous combinations of inducements and deterrents, including the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009, commonly known as the Kerry-Lugar Act, which provided billions of dollars to the country, failed to convince Pakistan's leadership to re-think or re-shape their national security policy.

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>

² Qandeel Siddique, *Pakistan's Future Policy Towards Afghanistan: A Look at Strategic Depth, Militant Movements and the Role of India and the US* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, August 2011).

³ In the 1893 Agreement, the Afghan side conceded significant territories, part of today's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan provinces in Pakistan.

While the Afghan side receives friendly signals from their Pakistani civilian counterparts, Kabul officials privately point out that they are yet to see these translated into action and communicated to Pakistani security agencies. Islamabad has been privately communicating to Kabul and other Afghan domestic players that it has learned from its 1990s mistakes and that it seriously wants a stable western neighbour, to avoid instability and its repercussions, including mass refugee flows. Islamabad policymakers point out that there is a new realisation in Islamabad around the following key issues.

- Pakistani officials appear to be departing from the previous strategy of only supporting ethnic Pashtuns in Afghanistan and expand their relations with non-Pashtun ethnic groups, including Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks in the North and Central Highland. Recent visits by Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the Chair of the High Council for National Reconciliation, and Mir Rahman Rahmani, the Lower House Spokesperson, and others are part of this new strategy. Non-Pashtun

Afghan politicians have also tried to reach out to Islamabad informally, speaking of broadening relationship around economic cooperation, mutually beneficial trade relations and other issues.

- Policymakers in Islamabad recognise Afghanistan's potential as a connecting hub for regional integration and economic cooperation rather than viewing the country as a buffer zone and source of "strategic depth" which could only be attained through a security policy. As such, officials have also indicated that they seek to disentangle the Afghan issue from India, and more specifically, the Kashmir dispute, which would be very much welcomed by Afghans.
- Broadening Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, many believe, goes beyond geopolitical dynamics and the peace process to other issues, including border management, tariff rationalisation, a more liberal transit agreement, and the repatriation of Afghan refugees and others.

Possible Scenarios in Afghanistan: The View from Pakistan

Islamabad has privately expressed concern about the repercussions of a sudden U.S. exit from Afghanistan, recalling the 1992 post-Najibullah state collapse in the aftermath of which Pakistan asserts it has carried most of the burden. Officials have noted that Islamabad also prefers a "responsible" U.S.-withdrawal from Afghanistan, a position shared by Kabul and other regional and international countries, including the EU. A recent NATO meeting in October also emphasised the need for a structured and conditions-based withdrawal of troops.

Of the three broad scenarios under frequent discussion, Pakistani policymakers are optimistic about achieving one of the first two options below.

- **A stable and internationally legitimate government:** This scenario would see the Afghan state survive in approximately its current form, which would include the Taliban in a new power-sharing arrangement. However, policymakers in Islamabad, including generals, have hinted that they might not work with the current administration and that, more generally would prefer a new government that is not close to India. Kabul takes these statements as proof that Pakistan's policy, if any, has not changed towards Afghanistan.
- **A stable but Taliban-dominated government:** In this scenario, the current government in Kabul is collapsing and the Taliban, with little commitment to human rights and existing constitutional principles, take over. In this scenario, Pakistan could exploit the situation to work towards establishing a client state in Kabul, with the Taliban leading it but possibly including some provincial powerbrokers, especially from the north and the central highlands.
- **A civil war scenario:** This is the least favourable outcome for Pakistan and other regional players. If the peace settlement fails and international forces continue to draw down, the war would likely continue and escalate, with regional players including Pakistan supporting rival domestic forces to assert their security interests. Other countries such as Iran, India, and Russia might enter the game, turning the country towards greater bloodshed and division. This would have disastrous humanitarian consequences, with Pakistan and Iran having to shoulder most of the spillover, including the refugee crisis, as they did in the 1990s. Despite these negative impacts, Pakistan would still likely engage, in line with the zero-sum strategic thinking that prioritises denying India influence above almost all else.

A Common Regional Vision? Taking Ownership of the Region's Problems

Given the complex, multi-faceted nature of the challenges, both Afghanistan and Pakistan should take steps to improve their relationship in ways that support the peace process and go beyond short-term peace-making. Both countries should work jointly on potential areas of cooperation in the short-to-medium term. These include working on border management, refugees, trade and economic connectivity, and terrorism.

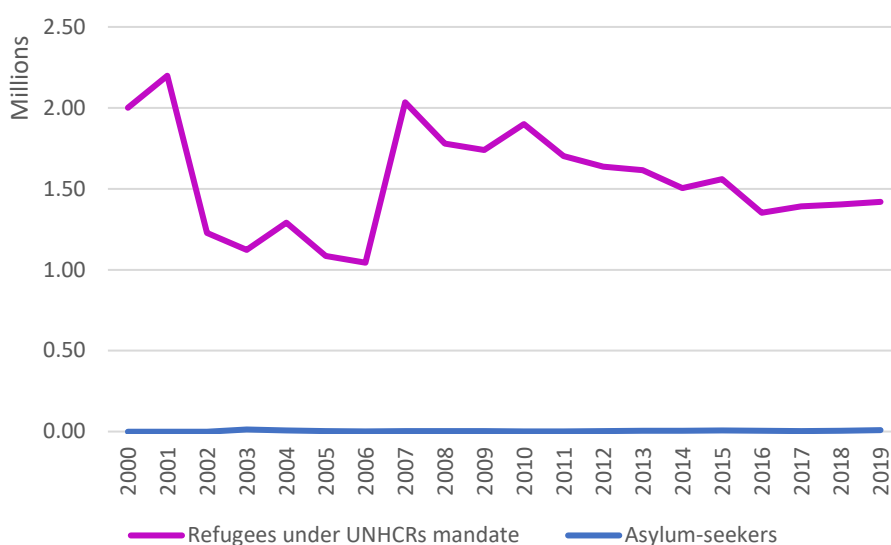
- Regional Security:** The US departure presents an opportunity to improve Afghanistan's regional security dynamics because Iran, Pakistan, China, Russia, and other regional actors will no longer perceive a potential threat from a long-term US footprint in Afghanistan. This may allow for a shift in focus from security to economic integration. If followed through, Pakistan's possible decoupling of the Afghan issue from India is promising. Russian rapprochement towards Pakistan since 2013, if continued, is likely to reduce the risk of more significant regional tensions in the post-NATO exit.⁵
- Repatriation of Afghan Refugees:** Presently, Pakistan is hosting around three million registered and unregistered refugees on its soil – a critical factor in future bilateral relations.⁶ Both countries, with the help of the EU's expertise and relevant UN agencies, should work together to develop a practical and coherent set of policies and effective solutions for the repatriation of Afghan refugees, including mobilising sufficient financial and political resources.
- Economic Integration and Trade:** To resolve its internal problems – especially around the struggling economy, energy shortages, climate change, and infrastructure

development – Pakistan needs stability in Afghanistan. This would enable economic connectivity, including key energy projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) power project, and railway projects. As the EU and the U.S. have publicly suggested, future investment in Pakistan is likely to be contingent on good relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan and stability within the region.

- Counterterrorism:** Pakistan has come under immense pressure, international and domestic, to address militant Islam and terrorist groups operating from its soil, notably via the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). The first condition of the United States' agreement with the Taliban is a commitment to counterterrorism. In practical terms, both the Afghan government and the Taliban have spent years battling the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Countering ISKP could be an important area of convergence for both sides of the war, in addition to Pakistan and international actors.
- Investment and medical tourism visa:** Afghans have welcomed Pakistan's recent relaxation of its visa policy especially for medical and business purposes. Pakistan remains one of the primary destinations for medical treatment for many Afghans. Further liberalisation of the visa requirements for all Afghans, especially long-term and multiple-entry visas, would help further improve relations between the two countries. Such people-to-people relations are a necessary condition for building friendly relations between the two countries.

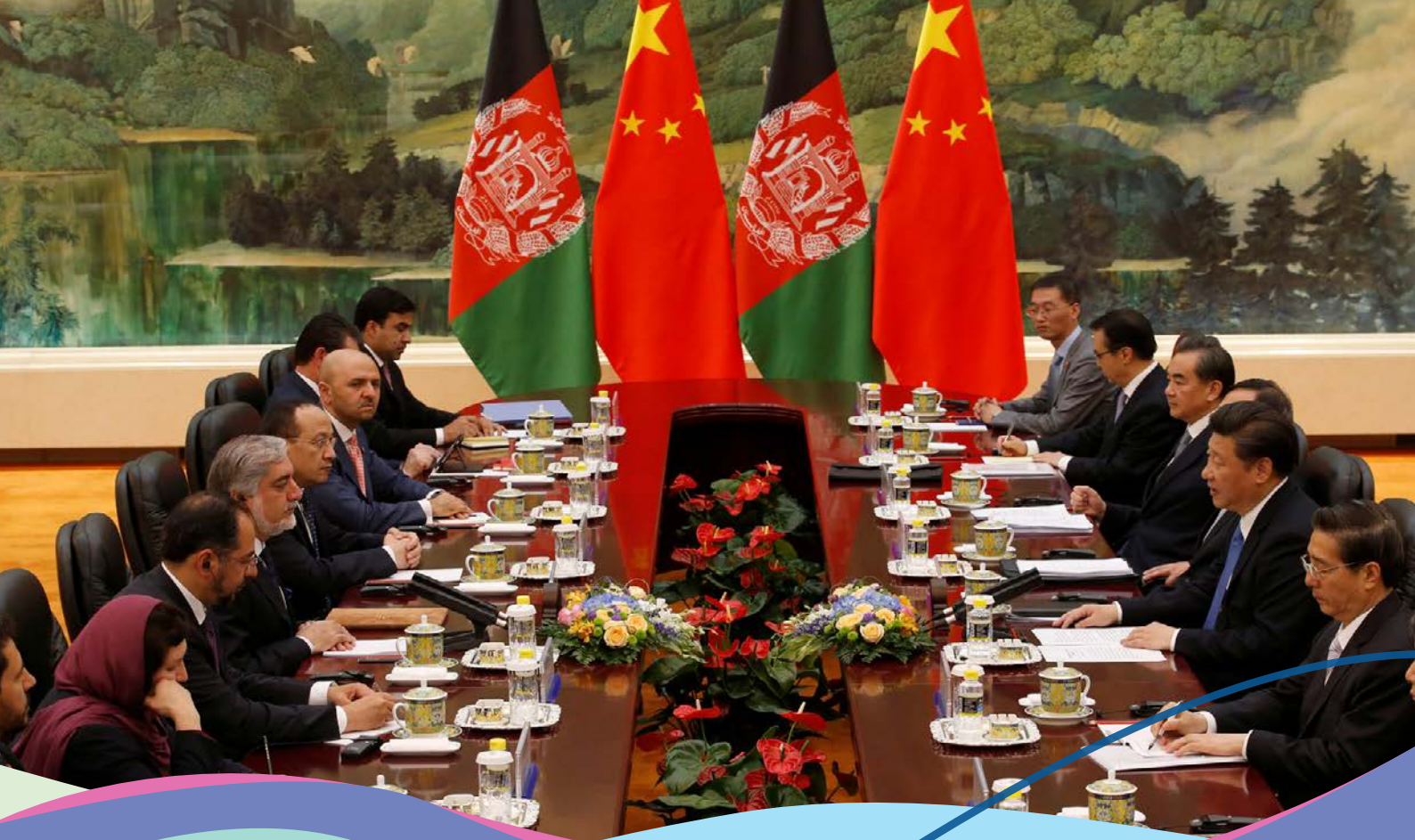
Afghan refugees and Asylum seekers in Pakistan (2000-2019)

Source: [UNHCR](#)



⁵ See "Meeting in the Middle? Russia, Afghanistan, and Europe" Timor Sharan, Andrew Watkins, FES, December 2020.

⁶ "Pakistan Situation of Afghan Refugees", European Asylum Support Office, May 2020.



POLICY BRIEF

Afghanistan Beyond 2021: Inroads for China's Regional Ambitions or Security Spillover?

Timor Sharan, Andrew Watkins

This brief explores China's engagement with Afghanistan after a U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan. It outlines how increasing uncertainty surrounding the nature of the U.S. exit and its shift in policy impacts China's national and regional security and economic ambitions. Both China and the European Union have increased their efforts to support intra-Afghan reconciliation. Beyond 2021, which conditions for development and security cooperation are anticipated in Kabul, Beijing, and European capitals? What are China's expectations of Afghanistan's international partners, and those partners' "concerns" or "doubts" about China's intentions? In which areas is trilateral coordination most critical and likely to be successful in achieving common goals?

China and Afghanistan signed the bilateral Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression Treaty in 1960, outlining a Cold War-era relationship centred on economic engagement.¹ Since then, China's ambitions in Afghanistan have remained anchored in the economic sphere; the burgeoning superpower has so far limited its engagement in Afghan political and security affairs. In 2006, both countries reaffirmed their 1960 Treaty founded on principles of "good neighbourly" relations in which China would engage Afghanistan and its neighbours to support stabilisation. In large part, China has deferred to Pakistan, its closest and most important regional ally in South Asia since the 1960s, to guarantee its security and economic interests in Afghanistan. But since 2014, with the prospect of the U.S.-led military drawdown and the potential for a security vacuum to ensue, Beijing increasingly appears to register Afghanistan as a priority on its western borders. If the U.S./NATO withdraw fully, China might well seek to bring Afghanistan closer under its economic and political scope of influence, having alluded for years to including the country under its multi-billion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative.

China's Increasing Economic and Diplomatic Leverage

China has sizeable economic and diplomatic leverage over Afghanistan and the region yet has exerted little for immediate political aims in Kabul. Instead, Beijing has been positioning itself as the up-and-coming dominant economic power in

South and Central Asia, posturing prudently so long as the U.S. remains anchored in the region militarily. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a planned network of land and maritime trade routes meant to span across the Eurasian landmass, has injected massive investment in Pakistan and Central Asian states. This has also created imbalances, even dependencies, in their bilateral relations. In Pakistan, China has committed to invest \$62 billion in the so-called Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor alone, one of the Belt and Road Initiative's six corridors.² In August 2020, China signed a strategic partnership agreement with Iran on trade, politics, and security, giving Beijing a strategic foothold in the Persian Gulf.³ In Afghanistan, a consortium of Chinese state-owned enterprises secured the concession to the country's biggest copper mine in 2008.

These deals and China's close relations with Pakistan are likely to reshape the region's political landscape in favour of China, to a degree that is difficult to forecast if the U.S. and its Western partners continue to disengage from Afghanistan. These huge mega-projects could give Beijing the necessary leverage to compel others, including Afghanistan, to help contain or even eliminate potential threats to its security and stability. It is worth noting that Pakistan, and the Taliban which it holds influence over, has taken little visible action against groups China considers a threat – leaving it an open question as to what extent Beijing has pressed the issue with them, and how effective it might be.

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>

² Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2020, "Integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative: Review, Analysis and Prospects," *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, August 2018.

³ Alam Saleh and Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas, 2020, "Iran's Pact with China is Bad News for the West", *Foreign Policy*, 9 August 2020.

Beijing's Security Concerns and Position on Afghan Peace

Should Western military engagement in Afghanistan end in 2021, China's approach may be guided more than anything by concerns about security threats emanating from Afghanistan, including transnational terrorism and violent religious extremism.⁴ Beijing's most targeted fears are threats that might instigate unrest in its northwest Xinjiang province; specifically, it shows great interest in tracking the presence and activity of ethnic Uyghur jihadists, a small but distinct demographic of foreign fighters hosted by the Taliban.⁵

Ideally, for Beijing, a stable buffer zone could ensure that groups such as the East Turkistan Independence Movement (ETIM) do not use the territory of Afghanistan and Central Asian countries as "forward positions" to infiltrate and launch secessionist activities in Xinjiang.⁶ A worst-case scenario outcome of a failed peace process and hasty Western withdrawal – the collapse of the state and subsequent civil war– could turn Afghanistan once again into a safe haven for international terrorist organisations, and risk lawlessness along the country's borders with neighbouring states – including restive western China. Beijing seems to have anticipated the potential for such negative scenarios to unfold over the longer term for some time; it began making overtures of security assistance, though on a very small scale and via initiatives which have largely failed to materialize, to Kabul as early as 2013. By 2019, reports broke that the Chinese military had established a rare base at the far

western edge of its territorial reach, perched in the mountains adjacent to Tajikistan, Afghanistan and its own frontier.⁷ Such gestures are both unprecedented but also remain quite passive and purely defensive in nature for now, especially in comparison to the engagement of Afghanistan's other neighbouring states.

Beijing's public position on the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan has been subtly supportive of U.S.-led efforts. In line with Pakistan, China has conspicuously not joined a number of European states, other nations and international bodies to press the Taliban into an immediate ceasefire. To the extent it has raised issues, China prefers an "orderly" and "responsible" exit from Afghanistan and has warned NATO and the U.S. against a hasty withdrawal. It has also voiced concerns about the U.S. approach to peace talks concerning its neglect of a more formal regional dimension. For now, China might even look favourably on the presence of U.S. counterterrorism forces in Afghanistan.

That said, the country has sought, like most other regional powers, to establish an increasingly firm dialogue with the Taliban's political office. It had opened relations with the insurgent group years earlier, but these have grown more open since the U.S. has engaged the Taliban in high-level negotiations. Its stance toward the peace process effectively reflects the strategic assessment Beijing undertook during the U.S./NATO military drawdown of 2014, when it judged the potential for Taliban ascendancy and/or political disorder.⁸



⁴ See AAN paper on China for previous Chatham House discussion of China's policy towards Afghanistan. Climbing on China's Priority List: Views on Afghanistan from Beijing - Afghanistan Analysts Network - English (afghanistan-analysts.org)

⁵ See for instance F. Brinley Bruton and Tony Brown, "U.S. targets Chinese Uighur militants as well as Taliban fighters in Afghanistan," NBC News, 8 February 2018.

⁶ Paul Stronski and Nicole Ng, (2018), "Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 February 2018. See also CICIR article.

⁷ See Gerry Shih, "In Central Asia's forbidding highlands, a quiet newcomer: Chinese troops," Washington Post, 18 February 2019.

⁸ See Yun Sun, "China's Strategic Assessment of Afghanistan," War on the Rocks website, 8 April 2020.

China's position in Afghanistan, given its emphasis on trade, regional connectivity and long-term investment and counterterrorism, has not been subject to dramatic fluctuations on account of current events, not even the U.S. efforts to withdraw from the region. Furthermore, China's engagement with Afghanistan is not likely to be seriously impacted by any future tensions in U.S.-China relations, even if these relations worsen. While the potential for collaboration is made difficult, both countries have refrained from bringing Afghanistan's conflict into the fray of other competition and contentious issues elsewhere in Asia.⁹

China's recent engagement has been defined by restraint and unfulfilled expectations, especially harboured by some Afghan political leaders, hoping China might enable some diversification of Kabul's dependency on foreign support and perhaps even influence Pakistan positively.¹⁰ But China's diplomatic reach is expanding in the region, and a more assertive China seems likely in the near future. In one small signal of what may lie in store, China has, in the past several years, begun to play diplomatic hardball with the U.S. in the UN Security Council, including annual extensions of the UN mission in Afghanistan.¹¹

As the U.S. military withdraws - on whatever timeline that may be - and a great deal of Western funding and support likely reduces as well, Kabul will have to review its relations with China from top to bottom, especially in light of close China-Iran and China-Pakistan ties. These ties are likely indicative of which regional players and positions China will support in the event of a political, economic or security vacuum in the future.¹² China's "non-interference" approach, when it comes to investments around the world, suggests that engagement in Afghanistan would largely adhere to its historical track record of supporting Pakistan and other regional partners.¹³

Working Together on Converging Interests

The EU and China both have economic incentives to promote regional trade and connectivity. Although Afghanistan has not yet been inducted into the list of Belt and Road Initiative participants, Chinese officials have strongly hinted at the possibility of including Afghanistan by extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan.¹⁴

At present Afghanistan's inclusion in the BRI appears likely to happen; this will be particularly important in the event that a peace settlement is reached and Pakistan has newfound influence in Kabul. The BRI route could also connect China to Europe, cut shipping time and costs, and challenge Russia's geographic advantage in moving commodities. Beijing has already set up the Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Turkmenistan railway line. As the

land route into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Afghanistan also provides several trade routes. China is expected to continue aiding Afghanistan through grand infrastructure projects, as well as more mundane budget and logistical support. Chinese-led financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank are likely to play a more active role if NATO leaves - as the likely reduction in financial support from Western-backed institutions will leave space to expand influence. Such efforts would likely become complimentary with (or even begin to overshadow) EU connectivity plans across Central Asia, such as the European Investment Bank's €70 million commitment to the Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000), which enables electricity transmission between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan with Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁵

Both the EU and China would like to see a stable Afghanistan and avoid a worst-case scenario in which Afghanistan falls into civil war and becomes a safe haven for international terrorism. The EU might have greater space than the current U.S. administration to approach China and urge it to influence Pakistan to pressure the Taliban's leadership into accepting substantive compromises in the peace process. China has had direct contacts with the Taliban and has maintained open diplomatic relations for some years, but this seems to have taken place in consultation with Islamabad - in line with deference to Pakistan's interests in the region. Whether the EU will have more success in indirectly pressuring Pakistan via China than the U.S. remains to be seen. But recent inroads between Europe and China, as evidenced in a trade deal inked in December 2020, provide an opportunity at the very least.

The Afghan peace process has been missing an integrated regional mechanism. Since the process was kickstarted in late 2018, the U.S. has alienated critical regional players, Iran, India, Russia and China and relations are souring on several different fronts. The new U.S. proposed "Afghan Peace Agreement" plan has envisioned a regional framework, which is welcomed by Afghanistan's neighbours including China. The Quadrilateral Coordination Group between Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the U.S. as a platform has failed to make inroads of any substance. Given the intractability of some issues between the above powers and the U.S. facing multiple crises, the EU and China could step in and play key roles filling the regional dialogue gap, especially given Beijing's close relations with Pakistan and Iran. Beijing's leverage in the Chinese-initiated Shanghai Cooperation Organisation might even prove useful enough to engage Russia and the five Central Asian Republics meaningfully. However, it would be challenging for the EU to bring China's engagement with the Afghanistan peace process in sync with its own priorities on human rights and governance values. This effort would require quite creative diplomacy.

⁹ U.S. Institute of Peace China-South Asia Senior Study Group, "China's Influence on Conflict Dynamics in South Asia," December 2020.

¹⁰ See Vanda Felbab-Brown, "A BRI(dge) too far: The unfulfilled promise and limitations of China's involvement in Afghanistan," Brookings Institution, June 2020.

¹¹ For the past several years, the Chinese delegation on the UN Security Council has attempted to include explicit language endorsing its Belt and Road initiative in the annual renewal of the UN mission in Afghanistan's mandate. See Michelle Nichols, "U.N. Security Council overcomes Chinese veto threat to renew Afghanistan mission," Reuters, 17 September 2019.

¹² China's approach to regional issues already aligns in protection of local partner interests, especially Pakistan's, according to a number of American experts. Ibid.

¹³ Jason Li, "Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics: How China Justifies Its Non-Interference Policy," Stimson Center, 27 August 2019.

¹⁴ Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2020, "Integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative: Review, Analysis and Prospects," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, August 2018.

¹⁵ European Commission, Joint Communication, "Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy," 19 September 2018.

Recommendations

- The EU and China should play a more active role in utilising their convening power and positive relations with Pakistan to influence the Taliban's approach to the peace process and immediately get the Taliban to commit to the reduction of violence, if not a full ceasefire. Furthermore, they should convince Islamabad to close Taliban sanctuaries on its soil.
- Both the EU and China should explore the possibility of cooperating on a new formalised and inclusive regional mechanism—including, critically, Iran and India, which would be vital to include in any regional forum, in spite of its recently worsening tensions with China. The forum could focus in the near term on the ongoing peace process and stabilisation, and transition when appropriate to longer-term economic and security cooperation.
- The EU and China should jointly facilitate trust-building efforts between Afghanistan and Pakistan by encouraging the resolution of other long-boiling quarrels between the two countries, including border disputes, trade disagreements, and repatriation and management of Afghan refugees.
- The EU should employ its existing diplomatic channels with Chinese policy makers to advocate for a sustainable and comprehensive development and stabilization approach in Afghanistan beyond limited counterterrorism and economic aims.
- Any expansion of EU-China coordination on development in Afghanistan will require navigating stark differences between their two foreign policy stances on human rights. Yet that has not prevented the two from deepening cooperation elsewhere, as recently as late 2020. Creativity and leveraging diplomatic “momentum” could lead to fruitful exchange, perhaps even feeding into discussion of mandates and future assistance efforts in the UN.

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About the cover photo

China's President Xi Jinping (3rd from R) and Afghan Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah (4th from L) attend their meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, May 17, 2016. REUTERS/Kim Kyung-Hoon

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(FES) Afghanistan

Website: www.afghanistan.fes.de

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POLICY BRIEF

All Quiet on the Eastern Front? Iran's Evolving Relationship with an Afghanistan in Transition

Timor Sharan, Andrew Watkins

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The planned U.S. military withdrawal has triggered significant uncertainty about Afghanistan's stability and security and the international community's future engagement in the region. In a post-withdrawal scenario, which conditions are anticipated for development and security cooperation in Kabul, Tehran, and European capitals? What is Iran's expectation, position and leverage in Afghanistan? In which areas is trilateral cooperation possible and where are common goals likely to be achieved?

Afghanistan is one of Iran's most important neighbours, not only because of its long-shared border and rich cultural, historical and linguistic ties but also on account of geopolitics and economic exchange.¹ Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's approach to Afghanistan has been far more prudent than its foreign relations extending westward. Still, it has often been overshadowed by hostile relations with the U.S., to an extent even during the country's Soviet invasion. After the 1998 murder of Iranian diplomats in the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif, Tehran deescalated a crisis that nearly led to war with the Taliban, then ruling in Kabul. Soon after that, Iran initially offered support for the NATO military intervention in 2001. Yet in the following years, Washington's rhetorical and covert confrontations with Iran soured the early steps of what might have been a strategic "re-set".²

Over the past two decades, Iran has followed a coldly pragmatic strategy toward Afghanistan, multifaceted and often seemingly contradictory.³ This (risky) policy of "strategic hedging", as one commentator puts it, included support for political stabilisation in Kabul while expanding ties with the Taliban, even arming its fighters, to subtly stymie U.S. counterinsurgency efforts. Recently, Iran has begun defending Kabul's sovereignty in its messaging on the Afghan peace process: via conciliation and confrontation both covert and overt, Tehran's position seems to shift according to what may maximise efforts to frustrate the United States.⁴ In

response to the planned U.S. military withdrawal, Iran may well pursue a more ambitious Afghanistan strategy. By continuing to cosy up to Kabul, Iran could simultaneously leverage its softer power with several different Afghan actors and even ramp up support for local armed proxies, potentially tipping the country's fragile political equilibrium.

Iran's Diverse Leverage in Afghanistan

Since 2001, Iran has maintained and extended its influence amongst various Afghan stakeholders, several which have come to control strategic parts of the state and security institutions. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Iran supported Shia factions of mujahedin resistance fighters, one part of a host of efforts to force the Soviets out. Iran's contribution also sought to balance the dominance of an exclusively Sunni "government-in-exile" sitting in Pakistan, sponsored by its foes: the host country, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. During the civil war of the 1990s, Iran backed the Rabbani Government, primarily dominated by ethnic Tajiks. After the government's collapse in 1996 and confronted with a hostile Taliban regime, Iran facilitated the establishment of the anti-Taliban coalition (often referred to as Northern Alliance).⁵

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 neighbours, policy adjustments, and the need for a comprehensive strategy among European foreign policymakers. This brief is part of a series authored by Dr Timor Sharan and Andrew Watkins 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>

² In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, relations between Washington and Tehran had begun to thaw, with Iran playing a constructive role at the 2001 Bonn Conference and offering support for the U.S. military campaign against the Taliban.

³ See Bruce Koepke, (2013), "Iran's policy on Afghanistan: The Evolution of Strategic Pragmatism", *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, September 2013.

⁴ Maysam Behraves, (2019), "What Does Iran Want in Afghanistan?", *Aljazeera*, 4 February 2019.

⁵ In August 1998, when the Taliban captured the strategic city of Mazar-i-Sharif, they killed eight of its diplomats and a journalist at the Iranian consulate.

In contrast to pre-2001, Tehran treats its relations with the Taliban as an additional element of its strategic leverage-kit to undermine U.S. interests, maintain influence in Afghan politics and minimise risks to its own regional standing. Iran has covertly aided elements within the Taliban, particularly those based in Western Afghanistan.⁶ Mullah Omar's successor, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, returned from a trip to Iran in May 2016, when he was killed in a drone strike in Baluchistan, close to Pakistan's border with Iran. In the last three years, Iran has publicly acknowledged such contacts and even hosted the Taliban for talks in Tehran, recently in January 2021.⁷ However, Iranian officials argue that this policy is driven by threats posed by the Islamic State and to aid the struggling Afghan peace process.⁸

Iran exerts significant soft power in Afghanistan. It has committed more than half of a billion USD towards Afghanistan's reconstruction since 2001 and attended the November 2020 Geneva Conference. Iranian officials maintain that it could have contributed more, but the U.S. sanctions have prevented it from being more generous. Overtaking Pakistan, in 2017-2018, Iran became Afghanistan's biggest trading partner and exported around two billion USD (22 per cent of the Afghan consumer market share) despite sanctions.⁹ To consolidate its strategic economic influence, Iran has invested in some key trade and transit infrastructure projects in Western Afghanistan. The Khawf-Herat Railway, completed recently, and the Chabahar port, give Iran faster commercial transport routes and the possibility of regional connection and access to Central Asian markets.¹⁰

Tehran has consistently used officially registered Afghan refugees as additional foreign policy pressure toolkit to push for its interests in Afghanistan – or even simply in its conflict with the United States.¹¹ According to official estimates from 2014 until early 2020, around 3.5 million Afghans were living in Iran – of these, just over 950,000 were registered Afghan refugees and 2.5 million were undocumented migrant workers.¹² Many registered refugees are second and third-generation residents who partially have access to health, education and employment. In May 2019, the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister warned that Iran would consider deporting Afghan refugees if the U.S. continues to apply further sanctions on Iran.¹³

Finally, another factor weighs over Iran's influence in the country, which profoundly concerns many Afghans. Since 2015, Iran recruited Afghan Shia refugees into paramilitary formations



Iran's precedent with its eastern neighbour often trends toward prudence. However, its foreign policy has grown more assertive overall, and a post-American Afghanistan might pose too tempting a power vacuum.



to join the fight against ISIS in Syria, promising young Afghans a path to legal and social recognition in Iran.¹⁴ Now known as the Fatemiyoun Brigade, these formations were recently offered by Iran's foreign minister to support Afghanistan's security forces. This proposal alarmed and offended many Afghans worried about the impact such an arrangement would have on sovereignty and the security environment. It is unclear if Iran would deploy or empower these fighters if the situation in Afghanistan worsens considerably, and if so how and to what aim. Iran's precedent with its eastern neighbour often trends toward prudence. However, its foreign policy has grown more assertive overall, and a post-American Afghanistan might pose too tempting a power vacuum.

Iran's Expectation and Position on the Afghan Peace Process

Iran is closely watching the Afghan peace talks and is attempting to mitigate the impact of several potential outcomes on its regional standing. Iran has done what it can to engage with the process. Despite being largely shut out of the process by the U.S., Tehran has reached out to the Taliban's Doha and Quetta leadership and has hosted Taliban delegations. Yet unlike some

⁶ Yochi Dreazen, "Exclusive Iran teams with Taliban to fight Islamic State in Afghanistan", *Foreign Policy*, 26 May 2016.

⁷ Ayaz Gul, (2021), "Iran Hosts Taliban to 'Exchange Views' on US-backed Afghan Peace Process", *Voice of America*, 26 January 2021.

⁸ "Transcript of TOLONews Interview with Iran's Javad Zarif, *TOLONews*, 21 December 2020.

⁹ The main exports are electricity, construction materials, food and fuel. See "Iran Biggest Trade Partner of Afghanistan in 2017-2018", *Financial Tribune*, 8 April 2018 (<https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-domestic-economy/84309/iran-biggest-trade-partner-of-afghanistan-in-2017-18>)

¹⁰ In May 2016, India, Iran, and Afghanistan finalized the parameters of a trilateral agreement known as the Chabahar Agreement. Afghanistan will benefit by diversifying its list of partners beyond South and Central Asia, with a fully operational port potentially generating trade. Among the 500 companies licensed to operate in Iran's Chabahar, 165 are reportedly Afghan.

¹¹ Sirwan Kajjo and Mehdi Jedinia, (2019), "Iran Criticized for Threat to Deport Afghan Refugees", *Voice of America*, 15 May 2019.

¹² Note that numbers of refugees, immigrants and temporary migrant workers have changed dramatically over the past year due to COVID-19, but even the process of repatriation and returns proved politically contentious and several incidents at the border throughout 2020 threatened to impact relations between Kabul and Tehran. <https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-in-iran/>

¹³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/05/iran-nuclear-deal-ultimatum-europe-afghan-refugees-drugs.html>

¹⁴ Tobias Schneider, (2018), *The Fatemiyoun Division: Afghan Fighters in the Syrian Civil War*, Middle East Institute, October 2018.

other regional states, Iran's approach to Afghanistan does not seem likely to be ultimately driven by the talks' outcome (and the future dominant authority in Kabul). Tehran has consistently demonstrated a deep pragmatism and ease in fluctuating its relations with its eastern neighbour. Beyond reactivity, another consistent theme appears set to steer Iran's policy: whether the U.S. continues its disengagement trajectory and entirely withdraws its military from the region.

Iran has been a prominent critic of the U.S.-Taliban deal, calling it "flawed" in the absence of the Afghan government and other key regional stakeholders in the peace talks. Although Tehran has welcomed the intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha, it has also questioned the U.S. approach and the Taliban's commitment to the peace process, which is evident from the group's failure to reduce violence. Iran has too stressed how the U.S. ignored Afghanistan's sovereignty by making commitments on behalf of the Afghan government. Moreover, Iran has expressed its willingness to participate in future peace talks. Tehran has reiterated that a successful peace process requires an inclusive dialogue with all political segments of the Afghan society and an Afghan-owned and -led process with Kabul at the centre.

Iran asserts that the U.S.–Taliban deal has upset the political balance of power inside and outside the country, prompting the Taliban to negotiate and operate from a stronger position, which Tehran has said could jeopardise the opportunity of peace in Afghanistan. Aside from expressions of frustration at being shut out from a vital regional affair, Tehran has thus far suffered few tangible negative impacts. Its warnings of Taliban ascendancy ring somewhat hollow, given Tehran's track record of having increased its engagement with the group well before the U.S. pursued peace. Indeed, Iran seems set to gain a great deal if the process progresses and the U.S. achieves conditions it deems sufficient to finalise its withdrawal. Thus, Iran's stance toward Afghan peace seems to confirm that its posture is driven as much by opportunistic opposition to U.S. policy manoeuvres as anything.

Since 2019, President Ghani's rapprochement towards Iran has been well received- perhaps a reflection of how great the divide between Kabul and Washington has grown- and as a result, Tehran has aligned its key messages around peace according

to Kabul's agenda. In backchannel contacts, both countries have been flirting with the idea of signing a bilateral security agreement, with Kabul giving concessions to Iran in appointing key Iranian clients to strategic government positions. It is not clear whether this is just a flirtation to send a signal to the U.S., or a serious attempt to scale up a bilateral relationship far beyond any precedent in recent history.

Tehran has been calling for a timetable for NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan since 2003. However, they also now advocate for a "responsible exit" to prevent the collapse of Afghanistan's existing political structure and to ensure the Taliban does not seize power completely. Iran has also maintained that ceasefire should be a pre-condition to moving forward, a position Kabul has also lobbied for. Officials warn against attempts to replace the current administration with an interim government, cautioning that this could lead to a legal and political vacuum, and hence to disorder and violence, if not full disintegration. Tehran has also pushed hard to preserve the last decades' achievements such as women's and ethnic and religious minorities rights and for a more substantial and active role for the United Nations, e.g. by advocating for a UN Special Envoy for the Peace Process.

Despite all this, Tehran has begun to openly signal its ability to influence Afghanistan's peace process and conflict dynamics in potentially unhelpful ways (e.g. January's comments on the Fatemiyoun and a high-profile Taliban delegation hosted by Tehran). The timing coincides with the new U.S. administration's deliberations on whether it should adhere to the Doha agreement.

All of the above aligns with Tehran's theme of parrying U.S. policy shifts with its own. Other core interests have also guided Iran's pragmatic engagement in Afghanistan; its increased outreach to the Taliban certainly was caused, in part, by threats presented by the Islamic State since 2014/15. Although covertly, however, Iran was ramping up relations with the insurgent group well before then. Iran's concern that a quick exit might usher in a new wave of terrorist activity, difficult to contain, is likely genuine. But Iran's confrontational posture toward the U.S. is the only common thread running through many of the country's complex, contradictory positions on peace and Afghanistan's future.

Iran and the European Union: Achieving Common Goals?

Afghanistan may provide Iran with an additional political platform to engage with the international community, including the EU, on several broader converging interests. There is already a constructive working relationship between Iran and European powers – UK, France, Germany, and the EU as a whole – since the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, that can be revived by the incoming Biden administration. The EU has already said it will support a JCPOA convention, followed by a business cooperation convention on energy if the U.S. lifts sanctions.

With the U.S. withdrawal, and anticipating that under Biden, the potential for sanctions to be eased or even lifted, the EU, Iran, and Afghanistan, have an excellent opportunity to redefine their relations on key objectives and interests. These can include countering terrorism, economic and trade integration, cross-border immigration and narcotic smuggling management.

The EU could benefit from Iran's full potential considering its cultural-linguistic, economic and political leverage in Afghanistan to help with reconciliation, reintegration, and reconstruction efforts after a peace settlement. Iran can play a constructive role in taming some of the potential political spoilers and those within the Taliban that control violent means and weaponry.

Given the U.S. sanctions and Iran's inability to access world markets, Afghanistan has emerged as Iran's key trade partner. The EU and Iran could work closely in facilitating further regional economic cooperation and trade integration. Iran's key infrastructure projects are best suited towards this goal, but a more comprehensive and holistic approach is required with

the Central Asian countries, which the EU could take the lead in facilitating. Italy is working on completing the 4th phase of a railway, which will be linked with the Khawf-Herat railway connecting Iran with Central Asia through Afghanistan. Iran hopes to include Afghanistan in its plans to export 80 billion cubic meters of its natural gas annually to Asian and European countries by 2025 while also planning a boost in non-oil exports to Afghanistan. In a post-conflict scenario, Tehran could become an investor in education, technical and professional development, including healthcare and others.

Beyond the security agenda, Iran has cooperated in several regional and international forums and has shown that it prefers trilateral and multilateral arrangements to solve regional challenges. For instance, Iran has been a vital member of the Heart of Asia / Istanbul Process since 2011, aiming to foster cooperation and political dialogue between countries in the region. It has worked closely with Pakistan in the Afghan Solutions Strategy facilitated by the UNHCR to enable sustainable repatriation and reintegration of Afghan refugees. Since then, Iran has been a member of the International Contact Group on Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Both the EU and Iran suffer from narcotic trafficking with both being big consumers. EU could explore the possibility of facilitating a regional mechanism for border control and information sharing to manage and curb illicit transnational trade and drug smuggling across the Afghan borders. Both countries could invest in communities around the border and encourage people to cultivate alternative crops to poppies.



Afghan migrants are returning from Iran at the Islam Qala border crossing, Herat 2020. FES/Mohammad Aref Karim)

Recommendations

- For the ongoing peace process to succeed, there is a need for a more significant investment by the EU in a more formalised regional approach. Any such regional framework would be an excellent opportunity to engage directly with Iran. As Iran felt side-lined from the process by the previous U.S. administration, and it will take some time for the new Biden administration to thaw bilateral relations, the EU should help to fill the gap in the meantime.
- If the peace process fails and the U.S. military withdraws from Afghanistan, rivalry and strains amongst regional players are likely to intensify. Even if eased by Biden, the anti-Iran coalition the previous administration had pursued with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf countries, and Israel could linger and complicate regional dynamics. The EU should use its convening power and positive relations, particularly with the U.S., Pakistan, and India, to ensure that Iran's legitimate interests are addressed.
- The EU should mediate discussions between Iran and Afghanistan to solve other long-simmering disputes, including the historical disagreement over the Hari Rud River. The EU's role could also be more indirect, perhaps encouraging the UN to mediate Afghan-Iran water disputes over the Helmand and Hari Rud Rivers.
- Brussels should help boost intra-regional connectivity between South Asia and Central Asia via Afghanistan and consider inviting Iran to join efforts to encourage neighbouring states to liberalise tariffs and transit agreements.
- Iran should refrain from using Afghan refugees as a pressure point. Such a policy is likely to fuel negative public sentiments in Afghanistan. The EU should work with Iran and other UN agencies, including UNHCR, to develop comprehensive solutions to repatriation and support for Afghan refugees.
- Iran should also refrain from any encouragement or deployment of the activation of the Fatemiyoun fighters in Afghanistan. The country's history of externally-supported militias and armed factions is already far too full of negative impacts. As pragmatists in Tehran should remember, these often came along with spillover effects into neighbouring states.

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About the cover photo

Afghan money changers gather to deal with foreign currency at a money change market in Herat October 4, 2012. REUTERS/Mohammad Shoib

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POLICY BRIEF

Mediator in the Making? Turkey's Role and Potential in Afghanistan's Peace Process

Timor Sharan, Andrew Watkins

This policy brief reflects on Turkey's bilateral relations with Afghanistan amid the uncertainty about the nature of the US withdrawal and its impact on national and regional security dynamics. It outlines Ankara's interests and policy trajectories in its eastern neighbourhood and addresses the question why Turkey, hailed by many as a natural mediator in the Afghan Peace Process, has yet to come forward with a clear strategy. Moreover, focusing on shared concerns regarding displacement and migration, the brief explores the potential for enhanced cooperation between Turkey and the European Union in and on Afghanistan.

As a historical ally of Afghanistan and seventh-largest troop contributor to NATO's mission there, Turkey has been engaged in Afghanistan in a measurable and multi-faceted way.¹ Turkey has deep cultural and linguistic links with Afghanistan, as a significant percentage of Afghanistan's population is ethnically Turkic. Afghanistan was the second nation to recognize the Republic of Turkey after the Soviet Union, in 1921, both who still celebrate 1 March as Turkish-Afghan Friendship Day. In the 1930s, Ankara supported Afghanistan's modernisation efforts by sending development experts and training the Afghan military. Turkey actively opposed the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and supported the Northern Alliance during the Civil War in the 1990s, particularly the Junbish party of ethnic-Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum, who fled to Turkey after the Taliban takeover. In November 2001, Turkey became the first Muslim country to join the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan and currently runs NATO's Train Advise Assist Command – Capital in Kabul. In contrast to other NATO nations, Ankara appears willing to continue playing a role in Afghanistan. However, it has yet to come forward with a clear policy beyond President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's 2015 affirmation that "Afghanistan's problems are our problems, and their success is our success."²

Turkey's multi-faceted policy engagement in Afghanistan

Ankara has based its foreign policy towards Afghanistan on four objectives: 1) maintaining the political stability and unity of the country, 2) strengthening existing political structures and institutions, 3) supporting the stability of its security environment, and 4) restoring peace and prosperity by eliminating terrorism and extremism.³ Turkey makes a significant financial contribution to Afghanistan on a bilateral level and through the UN and NATO. Since 2001, Ankara has invested an estimated \$1.1 billion in security, health, education, and infrastructure.⁴ Until May 2019, Turkey had contributed close to

\$86 million to the Afghan National and Security Defense Forces through the UNDP-managed Law and Order Trust Fund.⁵ Like other donors, Turkey is gradually reducing its assistance. Its \$75 million pledge at the 2020 Geneva Conference for the next two years makes up for only half of its \$150 million commitment for 2018-20.⁶ Turkish officials envisage though that this level of financial support can be maintained and perhaps even increased in the eventuality of a political settlement.

Ankara's key policy priority in Afghanistan beyond 2021 is stability, tied to specific concerns about the regional spread of extremist groups. The country has suffered spectacular terrorist attacks at the hands of the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" (IS) in the last half-decade, with the threat of extremism compounded by the influx of millions of refugees and migrant workers from Syria and around the world, and a period of relatively open borders with more than one country mired in conflict. Turkey's deep engagement and trade relations with Central Asian states will rely on containing regional terrorism concerns to allow free movement and investment; its stake in NATO's Afghanistan mission can be seen as an indirect insurance policy on that investment and is not dissimilar from global terrorism concerns motivating other NATO members to remain in the country.

According to some senior Turkish policymakers and regardless of NATO's position on its future engagement, Ankara might maintain its financial commitments beyond 2020. Also, there have been reports that Ankara might consider extending its military presence regardless of a NATO withdrawal. There is some question as to whether a continued military presence without NATO partners would be feasible. However, Turkey has vested interests in Afghanistan's political landscape, and Ankara's recent experiences in unilateral interventions and cooperation with local forces in Libya and Syria may well influence a model of future security assistance in Afghanistan.⁷

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>

² Vinay Kaura, (2017), "Turkey Sees Expanding Role in Afghanistan", *Middle East Institute*, September 26, 2017.

³ See Republic of Turkey, [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website](#)

⁴ "Turkey to Provide Afghanistan \$75M in aid for Projects", *Daily Sabah*, 25 November 2020.

⁵ "Afghan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund, [NATO Factsheet](#), May 2019

⁶ "Turkey to Provide Afghanistan \$75M in aid for Projects", *Daily Sabah*, 25 November 2020: "Turkey pledges \$150M to Afghanistan", *Anadolu Agency*, 5. October 2016

⁷ "Syrian Mercenaries Sustain Turkey's Foreign Policy", *Deutsche Welle*, 30 September 2020.

Turkey's position in the current peace process: An ideal broker in name only?

Turkey's policymakers appear cautiously optimistic about the U.S.-initiated peace process, but also seems to harbour some doubts. Some officials have voiced serious concerns about the Taliban's willingness to make any substantive compromises, and whether the international community and the Afghan government have enough leverage to pressure the Taliban into compliance. Turkey has been in direct contact with the Taliban, but its primary course of action in the peace process has been to issue statements and signals empowering the Afghan government. Whether it is because of the many other economic and political issues requiring Ankara's attention or the prominence of other mediators like Turkey's ally Qatar, Turkey does not appear to seek a role in the Afghan peace process comparable to the one it holds in the Astana Process on Syria. However, it is worth noting that despite the erosion of bilateral relations between Turkey and the United States in the past decade, the U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad visited Ankara several times in late 2020 and coordination took place frequently.

Its congenial relations with Islamabad, Doha, and Kabul, along with a stable working relationship with Moscow despite its NATO membership, provide Turkey with an advantageous and influential position. And unlike Afghanistan's direct neighbours, bilateral relations with the Afghan government are not overshadowed by territorial or other disputes. Indeed, Turkey claims to be one of the very few countries engaged in Afghanistan that does not have a hidden agenda or a 'great game' at stake. One of the reasons this resonates with many despite the presence of Turkish soldiers on the ground for nearly two decades is Turkey's active membership in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). As a member of both OIC and NATO, Turkey could function as a bridge- and confidence builder, especially between Afghanistan's neighbours and international partners. Afghans have positively received Turkish troops, both in public and in training environments, in part due to the shared cultural ground of two majority-Muslim populations and common terminologies in Turkish and local languages. Unlike many other NATO countries, only once in the past 19 years was a Turkish official killed in a targeted Taliban attack in Afghanistan.⁸ In February 2020, Hizb-i-Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar publicly supported the idea that Turkey should host the intra-Afghan peace talks instead of fellow NATO-ally Germany and publicly sided with Erdogan in his rift with the French President Emanuel Macron over Libya.⁹

Turkey has been a mediator in tensions between Afghanistan and its neighbours also in the past, including border disputes between Iran and Afghanistan in the 1960s. In the past two decades Turkey has continued to invest in its diplomatic relations with Pakistan, the Afghan government and, albeit quietly, the Taliban. Ankara has successfully hosted several annual summits between Islamabad and Kabul in a trilateral effort to ease tensions and has established direct contact with the Taliban leadership, which was briefly discussed in early 2010 to open an office in Ankara.¹⁰ During his last trip to

Ankara in November 2020, Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, stressed the vital role Ankara can play in improving relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Many Afghan political leaders view Pakistan, a host and historical supporter of the Taliban, as the key to any lasting peace settlement and hope for Turkey to use its leverage over Islamabad accordingly. At the same time, Ankara has deepened its engagement with ethnic community leaders from northern Afghanistan over the last decade, notably, Abdul Rashid Dostum, who has regularly resided in Turkey (first in 2008/09 and then 2015-2017). However, Turkey's outreach has traditionally extended beyond ethnic solidarity; other prominent opposition figures such as Hekmatyar have visited over the past years.

Thus far, Turkey has yet to rise to some Afghan leaders' expectations, hoping it might play a more active role. Indeed, Ankara, unlike the EU, several European states, and several of Afghanistan's neighbours, has neither appointed a special envoy to engage on the peace process nor has its outreach to individual Afghan political figures translated into more concrete courses of action with the Afghan government or the international support network congregating in Doha. This may in part simply be due to a lack of bandwidth, given Ankara's many pressing regional challenges, a faltering economic environment and domestic political turbulence. But even at times of more favourable conditions, Turkish foreign policy has never upheld Afghanistan as a top priority or implemented ambitious aims.

The Heart of Asia Istanbul process: A need for a new regional mechanism?

The last decades of conflict have seen a succession of regional initiatives conjured up by international powers, including 6+2 (Afghanistan's neighbours plus the United States and Russia) and the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the U.S.). Several dialogues and forums have taken place in the last two years after the U.S.' initiation of talks with the Taliban jumpstarted the current peace process. While generating international interest and support statements for the Afghan peace, none of these initiatives has produced tangible action. An integrated regional mechanism to support the Afghan peace is still missing, which is particularly worrying given the state of U.S.' relations with key regional players including Iran, India, Russia – and not least Turkey itself.¹¹

The Heart of Asia Istanbul Process, launched in 2011, is the broadest-based initiative thus far, which has brought together 17 regional countries, plus 15 supporting countries and international organisations, among them the EU. It was initiated by Kabul and Ankara to promote regional security, economic and political cooperation centred on Afghanistan through dialogue and confidence-building measures.¹² Despite pledges to revive and upgrade the Heart of Asia platform to shore up regional coordination and confidence-building, critics point out that the process, a decade since the forum's inception, has been "declaration, but no implementation." Could a joint EU-Turkish initiative help revive the platform or develop a new regional mechanism for the Afghan talks?

⁸ "Turkish Soldier Killed in Attack on Embassy Vehicle in Kabul", *Associated Press*, 26 February 2015.

⁹ "Hekmatyar Blasts Macron's Remark Against Turkey", *Anadolu Agency*, 11 September 20120.

¹⁰ Ayaz Gul, (2019), "Turkey to Host Trilateral Summit on Afghan Peace", *Voice of America*, 4 January 2019.

¹¹ Diego Cupolo, (2021), "Under Biden, US-Turkey Relations Face Delicate Balancing Out", *AI-Monitor*, 20 January 2021.

¹² See the [Heart of Asia Website](#) for more details.

Is there room for EU-Turkey cooperation?

When it comes to economic development and political sustainability in Afghanistan beyond 2021, Turkey and EU seem primed to cooperate on the following areas: combating terrorism and transnational crime, health, migration and particularly education. Ankara-backed assistance for the health sector is substantial, as is private-sector investment. Turkey's efforts in education are implemented across Afghanistan. The Turkish government and affiliated non-profits manage schools on 17 campuses, more than 30-40 schools, are training more than 5,000 students, with plans to expand current efforts well into the future. These efforts also extend to women's education: Ankara is in discussion with Kabul to open an Afghan-Turk Women's University in Kabul.¹³

A common challenge shaping the EU and Turkey's Afghanistan policy is migration. Today, Afghans make up the second-largest group of migrants residing in Turkey and the largest number of

new arrivals to the Greek islands in 2019 and 2020. In the past years and particularly since 2015, the EU's reluctance towards Afghan asylum seekers has grown, and acceptance rates have decreased. Brussels has notoriously liaised with transit countries to keep refugees and migrants from several countries in Turkey; it has become an anchor with the potential to drag down EU-Turkey relations. This has impacted Afghans in Turkey as well. The stance appears set to continue, given the recently agreed on Joint Declaration on Migration Cooperation between Brussels and Kabul.¹⁴

Looking back at these policies, in March 2016 the EU and Turkey agreed that the latter would readmit all irregular arrivals reaching Greek coasts. In exchange, EU member states committed to admitting one Syrian citizen for every Syrian returned to Turkey, promised to speed up the process of visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens and increased financial aid for refugee reception in Turkey by €6 billion.¹⁵ Afghans, who face severe challenges to register as refugees in the first place, have been largely left

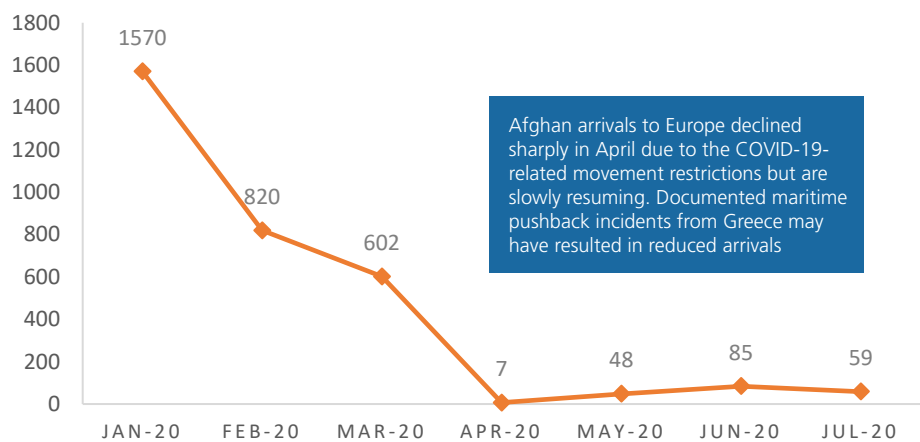
Afghan Refugees in Turkey



Source: [UNHCR](#)

Afghans arriving in Europe

Source: [Eurostat Database](#)



¹³ See [Speech of H.E. Ambassador Oğuzhan Ertuğrul delivered at the 29 October Republic Day Reception, Turkish Embassy in Kabul](#), 30. September 2019

¹⁴ "EU: Renewed deportation agreement with Afghanistan close to approval", *Statewatch*, 14 January 2021

¹⁵ "The EU-Turkey Deal: Explained", *Help Refugees*, 5 April 2018

out by subsequent projects for job creation, vocational training and resettlement.¹⁶ Thousands remain undocumented and in limbo, at permanent risk of arrest, detention, and deportation. Asked whether the EU and Turkey would consider expanding the 2016 agreements towards Afghan asylum seekers, officials either pointed to the intra-EU stalemate over a joint policy or the risk that policies encouraging a permanent settlement of Afghans in Turkey could trigger a nationalist backlash amid Turkey's economic challenges. Anticipating that the lack of stability, safety or development in Afghanistan will continue to force Afghans to leave their homes and country, both the EU and Turkey should revisit their coordination on migration to account for the new context in Afghanistan – home to the world's deadliest conflict.

Despite the shared interests in Afghanistan, there appears to be little high-level coordination between the EU and Turkey on Afghan migration, or efforts in the peace process and the future of development. While this lack of joint action cannot be understood in isolation from several contentious issues on the bilateral agenda, the potential U.S. withdrawal, which will prompt a NATO withdrawal and limit European and Turkish capacity in Afghanistan alike, should encourage both to look for alternative platforms and coordination mechanisms.

¹⁶ Izza Leghtas and Jessica Thea, (2018), "[You Cannot Exist in This Place: Lack of Registration Denies Afghan Refugees Protection in Turkey](#)", *Refugees International*, December 13, 2018

Recommendations

- Turkey and the EU should continue their commitment to institution-building, especially in key development sectors such as health and education sector and support sustainable economic growth to reduce displacement, if possible, in closer coordination with Iran and Pakistan.
- The EU, its member states and Turkey should use existing channels outside of NATO to coordinate their civilian and military efforts, given their aligned interests in Afghanistan. Momentum could be built to lobby the U.S. to sign onto a stricter conditions-based military and political disengagement from Afghanistan, coordinating more closely before drawing down any further.
- The EU and Turkey should upgrade the Heart of Asia Istanbul Process from its current, mostly symbolic status to an effective action-oriented mechanism or set up a new regional platform that includes regional stakeholders in the Afghan peace process. Ideally, this would take place in concert with the new U.S. administration, but without the U.S. dominating the forum – allowing space for regional players that may have adversarial relations with Washington. As recently deteriorating relations between Turkey and India could impede such efforts, mediation by the EU could be helpful.
- Turkey should cooperate with the EU to develop a comprehensive migration policy for Afghans, one that appropriately addresses humanitarian needs and acknowledges the very real risks in what remains the world's deadliest conflict zone. Based on shared experiences and successes since 2015, policies could include resettling a larger number of Afghan refugees to Europe, suspending involuntary returns, and creating economic incentives for host communities in Turkey, but also Iran, and Pakistan, to support improved legal security for Afghan migrants and the protection of their universal rights.

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About the cover photo

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani (R) and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan exchange signed documents before a joint news conference in Kabul October 18, 2014. REUTERS/Ahmad Massoud/Pool

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