



# **Neighbors Abhor a Vacuum**

## Regional and Key Partner Engagement with Afghanistan After 2021

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April 2021

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# Foreword

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The conclusion of the U.S.-Taliban agreement in February 2020 remains a watershed moment for Afghanistan's international relations, matched only by the April 2021 U.S. announcement of an unconditional withdrawal from the country by September this year. While it hardly came as a surprise to observers and U.S. attempts to disengage from its longest war had been numerous, the agreement did little to reduce uncertainty about the nature of the disengagement, its repercussions on the ground, implications for the engagement of other allies as well as regional security.

To maintain and expand the current momentum for a peaceful settlement to the Afghan conflict, credible buy-in is key but should not be taken for granted or understood as a linear or uniform process. 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. What 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 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.

A trilateral approach to the abovementioned questions helped to inform the European debate about Afghanistan

and its neighborhood and to inform Afghan decision makers about positions and perceptions of key players in the region and beyond. In ten virtual events convening more than 150 active and former officials, experts and civil society representatives, project participants were encouraged to compartmentalize and mitigate conflicts with a negative spillover effect into the Afghan theatre and beyond, while at the same time addressing interdependencies and external factors. A particular focus of the project was aimed at increasing particularly Afghan agency in these discussions, establish and strengthen durable networks and understanding between those seeking sustainable peace and stability as a precondition for development and wellbeing for all Afghans.

This report is a synthesis of nine policy briefs discussing 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. Moreover, it identifies and explores themes like "hedging", "responsibility" and "conditionality" redefined and put into policy on all sides of Afghanistan's borders in the past decade. Thereby, it helps a policy-oriented audience particularly outside of the region to understand and grasp the regional security complex surrounding Afghanistan and outlines future-oriented policy recommendations on how to move European engagement forward in the next years. 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.

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FES Afghanistan  
April 2021

# Introduction

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In February 2020, the United States signed a political agreement with the Taliban that laid the foundation for the withdrawal of Western military presence from Afghanistan after nearly two decades of intervention, state-building, and financial support. This agreement (and subsequent U.S. diplomatic activity and military drawdowns that progressed until the end of the Trump administration's term) drew a wide range of critiques from Afghan leaders including President Ashraf Ghani, donor nations and NATO partners, and regional states. Events prompted all invested actors to seriously consider the impact of a potential sea-change in U.S. engagement. While the Biden administration announced in April its intent to unconditionally withdraw military forces (prompting the same move from NATO), much remains unknown about the future extent of US and European security assistance. Afghanistan's future beyond 2021 is highly uncertain. In light of the past year's events, this

thematic report synthesizes the findings of a project exploring the scenario-building and policy planning on Afghanistan of several regional states, as well as the European Union and the Transatlantic (or NATO) engagement, in anticipation of the U.S. military exit and reduced U.S. assistance in the future. This project facilitated discussions among a diverse set of active and former officials, policy opinion leaders, scholars, and subject-matter specialists of nine different powers that neighbor or are engaged in Afghanistan's regional security complex. These discussions, additional expert consultations, and a thorough literature review laid the groundwork for a series of nine policy briefs that outline neighboring states' approaches to the political, economic, and security challenges likely to grip Afghanistan and the region in the coming years.<sup>1</sup>



*Political map of Southwest Asia. Source: Mapsland*

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<sup>1</sup> The countries and organisations studied were the European Union (which also included individual member states as well as several non-EU European nations), Russia, Uzbekistan, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Iran, China and the United States. See these Policy Briefs on <https://afghanistan.fes.de/e/from-uncertainty-to-strategy>.

Neighboring states' perspectives and incentive structures are distinct; there are stark differences on views of Afghanistan's future, how to engage with the country and its fractious political landscape, and how to meet the challenges that could extend across the region. Some of these views stem back to longstanding threat perceptions and detrimental zero-sum thinking. Other assessments seem to have evolved in the past few years, or even more recently, in response to the shift in U.S. policy. Yet, several common themes have emerged as well; many states invested in Afghanistan's future share similar concerns, forecasting, and even domestic political limitations. For all of the uncertainty surrounding the U.S. and other partners' exit, the current moment is perhaps the first in which regional states have reached an implicit consensus on security, stability and economic connectivity since the Western intervention in 2001.

Perhaps most universal is the unwillingness of regional states to commit to – and in some cases even plan for – policies on Afghanistan that extend too far into the future. Over the last two decades, Afghanistan's neighbors have adjusted their postures in reaction to U.S.-led NATO military engagement and its inconsistent, often ambiguous Afghan policies. Neighbor, near-neighbor, and donor states have spent much of the last year waiting for the U.S. government to determine and implement its status in the country. Put simply, every nation involved in the region's affairs will likely shape their Afghanistan policy differently depending on whether – and to what extent – the United States executes a withdrawal of its military and financial support. This posture is predictable, considering how the region saw Afghanistan through the prism of U.S.-led NATO military engagement in the last two decades. The potential American withdrawal triggered concerns, and early-stage policy discussions, of disengagement by other invested nations. Likewise, it prompted several states to begin "hedging their bets" by diplomatically engaging with the Taliban insurgency and other Afghan stakeholders to mitigate their post-U.S. military exit risks.

All of the above makes plain the need for regional powers to establish new economic, diplomatic, and security frameworks, for which formal discussion and dialogue should begin as soon as possible. External actors' reactivity to U.S. policy has raised questions of which

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states might begin to fill the vacuum of an American departure, to what degree, and what new regional dynamics might emerge as a result. The European Union finds itself in a dilemma, with several member states genuinely concerned about regional stabilization (and the impact of any lack thereof). However, these concerns are complicated by divergence from the United States' interests and the unequal weight Washington has in the framework of the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan. But the uncertainty inherent in this transitional period need not deter European and regional powers from preparing for a range of potential challenges, recognizing the possible convergence of regional interests in Afghanistan, and committing to meet them together.



*The Khyber Pass in northern Pakistan. © Jonathan Wilson*

# Trajectory of Disengagement

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## Washington's Gravitational Pull

In the latter half of 2018, the United States initiated a policy shift with far-reaching ramifications for Afghanistan and the surrounding region. After close to a decade of quixotic attempts to draw the Taliban into peace talks, the U.S. made a critical concession: sitting down with the insurgent group for bilateral talks without involving Kabul, a previously insisted-upon condition. Other major donors, including NATO partners, were likewise excluded and kept poorly informed. After more than a year of direct negotiations, the U.S. and Taliban reached a political agreement in February 2020. This deal was anchored around a timeline promising foreign military withdrawal – including the forces of all NATO mission contributing states. In exchange, the Taliban pledged not to host or support terrorist groups that threaten the U.S. and its allies and to initiate talks with the Afghan government.

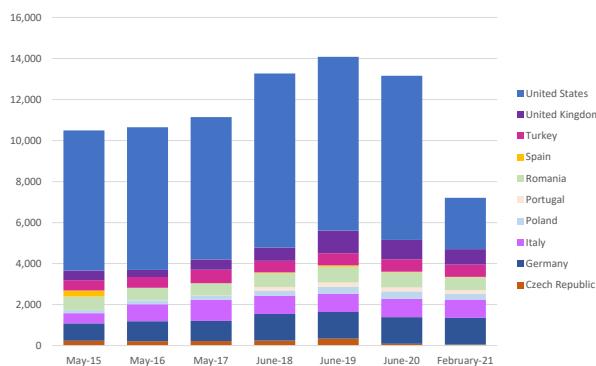
Since September 2020, the two Afghan parties to the conflict have begun negotiating. Still, they thus far only have achieved slow, minute progress on preliminary rules and procedures – all while violence continues across the country with deadly consequences for civilians, notably including targeted attacks on journalists, civil society activists, judges, lawyers and religious scholars.

All of these developments took place as the clock wound down on the U.S.-Taliban deal's deadline for foreign troop withdrawal, meant to be completed by 1 May 2021. On 14 April, U.S. President Biden finally confirmed what so many had speculated and anticipated over the past year: the U.S. would not only withdraw its remaining military troops (in coordination with NATO mission partners), but would do so unconditionally by September.

From the start, voices within Afghanistan, among NATO partners, other major donor states and allies, and American foreign policy circles have criticized the U.S. approach. They argue that it robbed the Afghan government of its leverage and forced it into negotiations at a distinct disadvantage, all while raising the international profile and legitimacy of the Taliban. Even advocates of the U.S. approach to shepherd a political settlement expressed concern later in 2020, as Trump ordered the military to continue making a series of successive drawdowns (from 13,500 to 8,600 U.S. troops, then down to 4,500 and finally to 2,500 by January 2021) despite evidence the Taliban had yet to act on some of its key commitments in the agreement with the U.S.

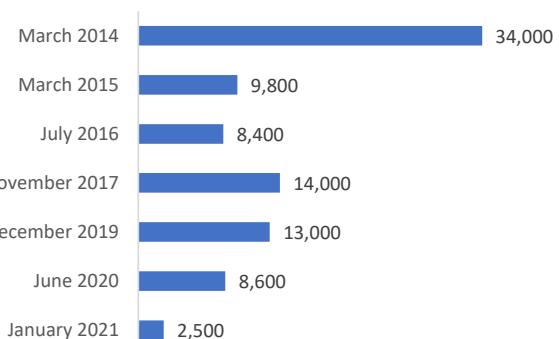
Concurrently, the U.S. sent a succession of signals to the Afghan government that it was growing more

Figure 1. NATO Member State Troop Contributions 2015-21 (selection), Resolute Support Mission



Source: [NATO](#)

Figure 2. US Troop Levels in Afghanistan (2014-21)



Source: [AP, SIGAR, Reuters](#)

willing than any time since 2001 to draw down its financial commitments – vital to the funding of the Afghan security forces. In March 2020, in response to an escalating political impasse over Afghanistan's disputed presidential election results, the U.S. threatened political leaders with a \$1 billion cut in aid if the dispute was not swiftly resolved and preparations for peace talks commenced. At other points, the U.S. has harshly judged the Afghan government's consolidation of power under presidential offices and issued other critiques in rare public reproaches. This stance of reproach culminated in reports from January and March 2021 that the U.S. put forward bold proposals to establish an interim government with leading Afghan politicians and the Taliban.<sup>2</sup> And in spite of U.S. rhetoric about continued partnership, their post-withdrawal commitments remain an open question.

### **Disengagement Domino Effect**

All of the above has triggered a falling-domino effect of sorts, especially among other donors and supporters of the Afghan government. As it became increasingly apparent over the last year that the Trump administration was determined to significantly downsize the many forms of support it provides to Kabul, other donors including the EU began to discuss – largely privately, but with public debates taking place in several European state parliaments – how this might limit their options for providing support in the future. Several states, some officials have hinted, may even view U.S. disengagement (and the impossibility of maintaining the status quo without American support) as a firm political cover to finally draw down commitments of their own. This was evident in the lead up to the November 2020 Geneva Conference, wherein many donors debated postponing or canceling the conference until 2021 (presumably when partners would have a better sense of the long-term orientation of the U.S.' Afghanistan policy, and as a result, a sense of their own). Though the conference took place in the end and did not witness as dramatic of a

drop in pledges as many had feared, the customary four-year term for pledges was drawn down to three, while the U.S. and U.K. scaled them down to a single year (with renewals contingent upon re-evaluation).

There is also uncertainty about NATO military presence and forms of large-scale military assistance that requires troops based in the country. The U.S.' failure to closely consult with its NATO partners before entering its political agreement with the Taliban has frustrated allies. However, in spite of the frustrations this engendered in NATO's more assertive member states, the alliance's leaders and European politicians have adopted a mantra and guiding principle of "in together, out together." Amid the variety of European and NATO member perspectives on the optimal future of security assistance in Afghanistan, the infeasibility of mounting complex NATO operations without U.S. participation (and the security umbrella U.S. forces inherently provide) seems to be the decisive, limiting factor. Suppose the U.S. proceeds along its current trajectory of drawing down military presence until its withdrawal is complete. In that case, NATO will have little choice but to follow suit, regardless of its member states' policy preferences.

Increasing uncertainty about the U.S./ NATO military timeline and Western disengagement has created policy confusion, concern, and quick adjustment among Afghanistan's neighboring countries and regional players, complicating the "regional security complex." For instance, Russia, Iran, and China have all stepped up explicit, formal diplomatic engagement with the Taliban (bringing their official interactions on par with the quiet, backroom interactions that have been taking place for several years longer). Russia even sponsored an "intra-Afghan" peace conference between the Taliban and dozens of Afghan opposition politicians in 2019, which the Afghan government declared a "betrayal."<sup>3</sup> Even India, historically apprehensive when not outright hostile to the Taliban, has begun publicly debating the

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to Khalilzad's detailed outlines for this proposed interim government, vehemently opposed by President Ashraf Ghani and his top officials, Secretary of State Antony Blinken wrote a bluntly-worded letter to Ghani exerting intense pressure for him to follow a fast-tracked, U.S.-preferred approach to peace. See Thomas Gibbons-Neff, David Zucchino and Laura Jakes, "U.S. Pushes U.N.-Led Peace Conference in Letter to Afghan Leader," The New York Times, 8 March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Hamid Shalizi, "Kabul sees Taliban-Afghan opposition talks in Moscow as betrayal," Reuters, 4 February 2019.

merits of approaching the insurgent group. As equally a historical sanctuary and supporter of the Taliban, Pakistan has stepped up its public engagement with Afghan opposition leaders. In October 2020, Islamabad hosted President Ghani's chief rival and head of peace efforts Abdullah Abdullah, sometime-rival and Foreign Minister Hanif Atmar, the Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament, and former anti-government insurgent Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, all with the ceremony of state visits.

All of the above has had the effect of disheartening – even delegitimizing – the Afghan government at precisely the time it seeks to shore up legitimacy on the international stage, in the opening rounds of talks with the Taliban. The phrase encouraged by the United States and adopted by many partner states to describe those talks for most of 2019 and the first half of 2020, “intra-Afghan negotiations,” was the Taliban’s preferred term. The term permitted the Taliban to deny it was essentially sitting across from an Afghan government the group has never recognized. Many governments have gone further than this language: in late 2020, several European states signaled their interest in a more diversified peace process among Afghan political leaders, pressing for President Ghani to share peacebuilding space with Abdullah and others. In February 2021, at a moment when the U.S.-led process was stalled, Russia announced it planned to resume the Moscow track of intra-Afghan talks, decried as “betrayal” by President Ghani and his officials two years ago.

### **Hope or Doubt under Biden**

The new U.S. administration has somewhat altered the policy path initiated by Trump and his senior officials, and there may still be a potential extension of Western assistance to the beleaguered Afghan government (military, financial, and otherwise). But as of this report’s release, Washington’s announcement that it will unconditionally withdraw military forces may only heighten regional states’ preparations for worst-case scenarios (as outlined in the section below). Moreover, President Joe Biden has long favored minimalist policy objectives in Afghanistan. Biden’s longstanding national security inclinations, along with a difficult-to-measure yet tangible shift in U.S. and European foreign policy

paradigms, make it more likely than not that the general trajectory of U.S. disengagement from Afghanistan continues in the medium and longer-term. And as the U.S. goes, European states will be inclined or obliged to follow.

Indeed, testimony of several senior European officials suggests that impatience regarding Afghanistan reflects two sides of a coin: not just fatigue of officials disappointed with the limited efficacy of the Afghan state and its progress in anti-corruption, rights and development, but also a broader sense of fatigue among elected politicians and their constituencies. A number of these officials have conceded privately that despite European governments’ humanitarian and human rights concerns (and fears that the U.S.-ushered peace process has set the stage for deterioration of both), it would prove difficult for those governments to publicly make the case for allocating continued high levels of financial assistance. Beyond the logistical and security concerns of perpetuating a NATO mission in a post-American Afghanistan, many current donors have political reasons to tend toward disengagement as well. In late March 2021, Germany’s parliament extended the legal mandate for participation in NATO’s Afghanistan mission by less than a year, and while some senior officials declared conditions on the ground were not yet fit for withdrawal, Angela Merkel hedged, framing Berlin’s willingness to remain as contingent upon whether allies (meaning the U.S.) deemed it necessary.

It is worth recalling that for many years prior to U.S.-led peace efforts and withdrawal planning, a number of troop contributing nations had already departed the mission, downgraded significantly or had been on the receiving end of U.S. pressure to remain.

# Regional Responsibilities

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As described above, the trend of disengagement has left observers of Afghan regional affairs (as well as Afghan officials) asking: how will regional states fill the security vacuum that U.S./ NATO forces will leave, and how will pre-existing regional dynamics and tensions shape the country's politics and violence? Scholars and specialists on several regional states describe widespread reluctance to engage in intervention on a comparable scale of the last two decades, but eagerness to nonetheless manage concerns (such as border control, counterterrorism, regional balances of power) and reap any possible benefits of re-shuffled economic interconnectivity. These concerns and benefits could serve as collective organizing principles but would require new initiatives or sharp breaks from conventional wisdom.

## Northern Border Watch

Russia's primary interests in Afghanistan center on preventing transnational terrorist groups from moving into Central Asian states (and onward into Russia); this perspective, along with its own bloody twentieth-century history of intervention, forestalls any possibility that Russia would extend its conventional security commitments further south of its current Central Asian stations.

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Instead, Russia – which appears focused on several “worst-case” or pessimistic scenarios for Afghanistan’s medium-term future – is likely to invest in individual Afghan stakeholders in the country’s northern provinces. In the event of further Western disengagement and any resulting political destabilization, rather than wait to determine which player(s) will ultimately wrest power in Kabul, Moscow will almost certainly seek to establish a low-cost buffer zone along as much of the border as possible. It will especially seek to garner influence in communities with less-prolific patterns of support for the Taliban or other regional extremist groups. At the same time, Russia has increasingly engaged with the Taliban (both via direct contact and through increased outreach to Iran and rapprochement with Pakistan), implementing a strategy of hedging as early as NATO’s substantial troop drawdown in 2014 (see more in section below).

It is unclear how the policies of the Central Asian states will shift and ultimately fall into line with a security-first, worst-case Moscow-backed approach, though the region’s initial response to COVID-19 gives some hint. As the outbreak spread globally (in particular from the epicenter of Iran), Tashkent and other capitals rapidly and wholly locked down their borders, refusing to allow the transit of even essential emergency commodities into Afghanistan for well over a month (only later lifting restrictions due to the domestic pressures on their own agricultural sectors). In the event of a rapidly deteriorating political or security situation, areas of the northern border could very well experience a similar temporary freeze. However, Uzbekistan’s outward-facing optimism regarding the Afghan peace process, and its efforts to facilitate peaceful reconciliation even within its own borders, illustrate the range of responses northern neighbors are likely to offer.

## Zero-Sum Strategies in South Asia

Similarly to Russia, although policymakers and analysts in India voice alarm over nearly every potential direction the Afghan conflict and its politics may take in the medium term, there appear to be hard limits to Indian security assistance – which would fall far short of an in-

country troop presence. Instead, New Delhi has amplified narratives meant to convince Western powers currently reinforcing the Afghan government to remain for the sake of stability and security, especially when it comes to the continued need for a robust regimen of regional counterterrorism.



*Afghan money changers gather to deal with foreign currency at a money change market. © REUTERS/Mohammad Shoib*

Broadly, India's influence in Afghanistan appears likely to wane regardless of whatever specific scenario unfolds. As a result, its approach to Afghanistan will have less to do with contributing to future stability and is far more likely to hinge on longstanding strategic thinking that seeks to deny Pakistan as much influence and capacity to inflict harm as possible. Likewise, Pakistan appears set – whatever the final measure of Western disengagement and the results of Afghan peace efforts – to continue pursuing policies toward Afghanistan that are difficult to separate from its perennial goal of stymying Indian influence. The stance both South Asian nations often take toward each other's role in Afghan affairs is almost certain to remain a critical hindrance to a constructive, efficient approach that might benefit regional stability broadly.

### **U.S. Out, Iran In?**

Much speculation in the last year or two has focused on Iran's influence over potential proxy forces in Afghanistan, notably the fighters of the Fatemiyoun Brigade recruited to fight for Tehran's ally regime in Syria (but also including elements of the Taliban in the southwestern part of the country, and some armed groups in the north). Yet the most recent reports have suggested that Fatemiyoun fighters are largely absent from militias springing up within ethnic-Hazara communities, and the history of Iran's engagement in Afghanistan is one of restraint and careful consideration of overreach.<sup>4</sup> Analysts and Western officials already describe Herat and its environs as having fallen under the sphere of Iranian influence some time ago, but this reach has limits. Iran is almost certain to extend support, even protection and arms if need be, to fellow Shiite and ethnic-Tajik communities – yet there is little evidence to suggest Iran will attempt to expand its reach in Afghanistan to the extent its proxies have engaged across the Middle East. This is particularly true in the event of a worsened security situation in Afghanistan; Iran is unlikely to risk crisis there during a period it already finds itself taxed by events in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

However, Iran will be important to watch as regional states adjust to U.S. disengagement from Afghanistan, since the outsized American role in security arrangements and diplomatic initiatives anchored in Kabul almost always left its adversary Iran on the outside looking in. Iran managed to establish a working relationship with the Afghan government and is well-placed to extend support, as long as political stability would serve Tehran's interests. This dynamic is also reflected somewhat in Russia and China's stance toward Afghanistan, though less acutely. The adversarial turns in their relations with the U.S. has rarely escalated to the point of impacting affairs in South-Central Asia.

<sup>4</sup> See Sune Engel Rasmussen and Ehsanullah Amiri, "Afghanistan Braces for Worst as U.S. Troop Withdrawal Accelerates," Wall Street Journal, 19 November 2020; for historical perspective see R.K. Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," Middle East Journal, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2004), and Barnett Rubin, "A new look at Iran's complicated relationship with the Taliban," War on the Rocks, 16 September 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Otherwise, Turkey is likely to fall into a similar pattern as other regional states: while Ankara has contributed to the NATO mission in Afghanistan, its political investments have almost exclusively been rooted in the country's ethnic Uzbek community, a pattern likely to hold.

Regional states seem unlikely to assume holistic responsibility for Afghanistan's stability – and security challenges appear likely to instead be addressed within the sub-national geographic zones of influence that bordering states will strive to establish, isolated from their root causes.

### **Refugee Flows and Ripple Effects**

There is a convergence of interests on some of the key ramifications of instability and worse-case scenarios in Afghanistan, including that of Afghan refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant labor flows. Any disruptions to the political status quo or worsening of conflict conditions could set off a large-scale wave of displacement that would ripple across the region and along the geographic pipeline migrants travel to reach Europe. In this sense, approaches to Afghanistan's and the region's security overlap with EU-Turkey relations and a host of pre-existing tensions over the burden-sharing of mass displacement (not only from Afghanistan).<sup>5</sup> One of Pakistan's strongest interests in Afghanistan's stability is the potential impact a worsening security environment might have on displacement; the same goes for Iran. Therefore, despite both powers' strong preference for the U.S. to exit the region entirely, both have publicly advocated against a sudden or ill-considered military withdrawal. European and other wealthy donor states are even less likely to continue contributing to the Afghan government at current levels if, under a hypothetical deterioration of security and the unfolding of large-scale regional displacement, available funds are redirected into refugee aid and relief programs outside of Afghanistan.

### **Peace Process and Scoring Points?**

While regional states seem unwilling to openly posture as successors to the role the U.S. has played in propping up the Afghan state, many have proven interested in playing prominent roles in ushering the peace process forward. Moscow slow-pedaled its alternative track of dialogue for nearly two years, in a somewhat surprising show of deference to the U.S.-led process, but in early 2021 began to reassert its desire to be seen leading international facilitation of a post-American future in Afghanistan. Tashkent has lobbied for a potential role as host of the Afghan peace talks. It is now counted among the "Facilitator Five" by the U.S. (which also includes Germany, Norway, Indonesia, and Qatar playing various supporting roles). The EU has attempted to distinguish itself from the U.S. and highlight differences in their policy preferences toward peace. Despite the resulting complications, this seems to have introduced longer-term European options to engage with Afghanistan (see the next section for further detail).

This focus on peace talks reflects the degree to which uncertainty is dominating many states' Afghanistan policy. With so little known or even possible to predict about the composition and orientation of a future Afghan state, external powers have leaned into short-term engagement. Almost as if in response to the region's dependency on U.S. actions over the next year, diplomatic efforts presently emphasize influence on near-term events.



*German soldier © t. kœhler*

# Hedging Bets

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The United States' determinative role (and the extent of its disengagement) has curbed planning timelines of regional and donor states. This has compelled nearly all engaged external actors to hedge their current positions, to provide flexibility in a range of potential future scenarios and utilize their assets/options to improve interests or reduce risks. The Afghan government has done so as well.

## Diversifying Kabul's Security Assistance Portfolio

For the majority of 2019, as the U.S. conducted bilateral talks with the Taliban, the consensus of Kabul officials rejected the feasibility of any meaningful agreement between their chief patron and their existential adversary. Once it became clear those talks would culminate in the February 2020 deal signed in Qatar, and as the terms of that agreement were widely assessed as unfavorable to the Afghan government, the mood among many in Kabul oscillated from denial to expressions of frustration and sentiments of betrayal. The obvious and immediate question became: if the U.S. can no longer be considered a reliable patron and ally, which power(s) might take its place? Afghanistan's leadership has struggled to answer this question satisfactorily; it has shifted to the pursuit of a "multi-polar" regional diplomacy, with overtures to every neighboring state that could perhaps be characterized as hedging as well. Yet Kabul's shuttle diplomacy and engagement have produced few stark shifts in the stances of regional powers to date.

Speculation among some Afghan officials has centered on Russia and/or China becoming future providers of development financing and security assistance, given the scale of their economies (in Russia's case, at least its defense sector) and a track record of subsidizing client

states. Both nations are notorious for their realpolitik approach to foreign assistance, with none of the conditionality or benchmarks for governance that the EU and other Western states claim will grow stricter in the coming years. Yet Moscow and Beijing have both demonstrated considerable reserve thus far, in largely abstaining from engagement with Kabul that the U.S. might deem interference. This restraint is especially notable for Moscow when contrasted with Russia's dalliances with other U.S. military partners in conflict zones (such as the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces).

Moreover, while Russia has extended military assistance already, gifting Kabul several shipments of basic small arms, so much of the Afghan security forces are modeled – and logically dependent – on U.S.-NATO military foundations that it would be extremely difficult to completely trade out one patron's pipeline of equipment, arms, and maintenance for another.<sup>6</sup> Kabul would likely only pursue such a definitive transformation after losing all hope of any residual U.S. or NATO presence. But critically, Moscow and Beijing's reserve has been paired with hedging behavior of their own. As both capitals have observed the U.S. attempt to extricate itself from



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<sup>6</sup> Notably, these complications become more significant when scrutinizing the most valuable strategic elements of Afghan security forces: its still-nascent air force and its cadre of special operations forces, which are even more strictly modeled off of (and dependent on) U.S./NATO.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting one of the more controversial instances of alleged Moscow engagement with the Taliban emerged in 2020 reports that Russian agents had offered the Taliban and other insurgents cash bounties on U.S. troops; later reporting painted a lack of consensus in the Western intelligence community as to the veracity of these accusations, and even if true, this activity does not appear to have taken place on a scale that would strategically shift the dynamics of the conflict.

Afghanistan, each have deepened their diplomatic interaction with the Taliban.<sup>7</sup>

Both capitals appear to harbor doubts that the current Afghan government might survive a further drawdown of Western support and have openly discussed a range of “worst-case” or pessimistic scenarios for Afghanistan’s long-term security environment for several years now. Russia and China’s hedging behavior is even found on display in policy determinations dating back to 2014-15. The U.S. drawdown from over 100,000 uniformed troops to less than 20,000 revealed capacity gaps in the Afghan forces and strategic vulnerabilities in Kabul’s position. Soon after, Moscow and Beijing reinforced neighboring regions (or those of Central Asian states under Russia’s security umbrella) with increased border security measures, still standing as a testament to early pessimistic predictions. Beijing, for its part, has been expected to expand its economic reach into Afghanistan for most of the past decade but has declined to do so proactively or comprehensively. The security environment, already a detriment to investment and interconnectivity in years prior, is even more tenuous (and discouraging) today.

### Diplomatic Disengagement

Other neighboring states have begun hedging their Afghanistan policies via “diplomatic disengagement,” preparing for worse-case outcomes well before the trajectory of peace and conflict are clear.

Afghan officials have made much of the legitimacy bestowed to the Taliban by the high-level outreach of nearly every regional state (save for India). The insurgent group’s messaging has confirmed its confident posturing as a “government-in-waiting” over the past year. Less commented on has been the long-term negative impact of India, Pakistan, and Turkey’s charm offensives on Afghan opposition stakeholders. This outreach, based on individual powerbrokers rather than Afghan institutions, has the potential to destabilize the current political order, undermining confidence at a time the Islamic Republic’s team of negotiators is attempting to project unity in peace talks and to shore up international legitimacy. Matching Pakistan’s outreach to regional powerbrokers, Delhi extended late 2020 invitations to several figures, including the notorious former First Vice President and

now Marshal Rashid Dostum, for lavish state visits. This charm offensive seeks to augment and diversify Delhi’s already-strong ties to Kabul’s national security sector and senior officials, including First Vice President Amrullah Saleh.

Islamabad continues to tout its instrumental role in bringing the Taliban to the table with the U.S. in early 2019. However, it has done little since to visibly pressure or persuade the insurgents to reduce violence in Afghanistan, or to offer compromises on governance and power-sharing. Considering how great an impact



*Afghan President Ashraf Ghani (R) meets with Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan at the presidential palace in Kabul. © REUTERS/Mohammad Ismail/Pool*

Pakistan could have by changing its sanctuary relationship with the Taliban, Afghan officials regard this inactivity with suspicion and outright hostility. However, with the Taliban more diplomatically engaged than ever, Islamabad is less likely than ever to risk eroding its relationship with the group, especially given the multiple scenarios in which the Taliban may improve its political or military standing. Though the context of Pakistan’s relationship to Afghanistan’s conflict is unique, the essence of its hedging approach is quite similar to most regional neighbors.

The European Union’s stance on critical aspects of peace efforts, as well as support for holding 2019’s presidential elections, seems to have given the impression, especially to President Ghani and his administration, of greater EU foreign policy autonomy than may exist. The EU’s strong rhetorical solidarity with the Afghan government has encouraged some in Kabul but with few tangible

results. Early Afghan overtures and inquiries with NATO's command and individual European states, seeking to perhaps retain a NATO mission even in the event of a U.S. withdrawal, were answered with vague expressions of support. Yet over a year after the U.S.-Taliban agreement was signed, there have been no concrete offers to ramp up assistance (for all of the reasons detailed above). Even with the ambitious U.S. proposal in March to convene an international conference to build consensus on Afghanistan, last November's Geneva conference demonstrated that merely maintaining the levels of support required to sustain the Afghan government will prove challenging.

### **Conditionality as Hedging**

The EU's position reflects another form of hedging. For many in Brussels and capitals across Europe, less conversation is devoted to scenarios of state collapse than to concerns that peace talks might reach an agreement that welcomes the Taliban back into political power to the detriment of human rights or humanitarian conditions. Since the U.S.-Taliban agreement, the EU has released several statements outlining strong conditions for assistance to any future, post-peace Afghan state, insistent on rights and freedoms of women and minorities as well as a commitment to transparent representative government. On an initial reading, these statements seem to project resounding support for President Ghani and the Islamic Republic – and they do, in near-term developments of the peace process. However, in long-term strategic planning, this stance permits European powers an easy off-ramp: in the rather likely event that the Taliban, the current Afghan government, or a future power-sharing coalition fail to meet all of their conditions, the EU or any of its members will have ample justification to downsize, or at least diversify and divest, support.

In one sense, stances on conditionality reflect the general uncertainty of the present moment, but also the deep-seated concerns Western policymakers have about the legitimization and future role of the Taliban. The EU is not alone; even in the United States, which has propelled the current process and raised the Taliban's international profile, the Trump administration garnered a host of criticism for the way it developed relations with the insurgent group. Influential members of the U.S.

Congress have signaled resistance to providing aid and assistance to a future Afghan government that includes the Taliban – much less one dominated by the group.

This new focus on conditionality highlights which regional states desire strict conditions and on what points, which have become evident since peace efforts began in earnest. Though New Delhi has not announced anything explicitly, it seems quite unlikely to continue its current level of cooperation and support to Kabul if the Taliban were to become a dominant party in a new Afghan state. The EU did make its conditions explicit, outlining a demanding series of principles and benchmarks that any future Afghan government would be required to meet to maintain current levels of aid – with specific measures for the Taliban to abide by, were it a partner in that new state. On the other hand, as noted above, Russia and China are renowned for a much less conditional approach to international aid and development. Iran appears to have come to an understanding with the Taliban despite their complex history. Central Asian states would cooperate to the greatest extent possible, otherwise following the lead of larger regional powers. Pakistan's conditions of providing future aid and cooperating economically are not transparent or entirely perceptible, but they would lean in favor of any institutionalized role for the Taliban.

Before Biden's announcement of a planned withdrawal in April 2021, the reality is that the United States foreign policy sphere was itself hedging during the transition of presidential power. As soon as Biden's transition team began focusing on foreign policy issues, several Beltway insiders began to call for an enduring counterterrorism mission (and consequently, at least some level of continued support to the current government in Kabul). Nevertheless, Washington will not be able to hedge as long as other external players. The Taliban expected the U.S. to finalize their military departure by May, and there is almost no chance the group will sincerely participate in a peace process in the near-term future. Even the Biden administration's decision to 1) attempt to jumpstart (or jettison) the flagging Doha process, 2) continuing to insist the U.S. remains committed to its partner, the Afghan government, 3) and refusing to clearly state its position on a military withdrawal by May constituted a form of last-minute hedging.

# New Frameworks?

The incentive structures and patterns of behavior outlined above, various shifts in political dynamic, and attempts to stall decisions on new policy for Afghanistan point to the urgent need to establish and engage with new regional frameworks for dialogue and cooperation.

With concrete limits to how NATO and the EU might support Afghanistan in the event of U.S. disengagement, invested nations will need to explore creative new pathways to provide assistance, perhaps most productively by taking part in trilateral and multilateral dialogues with neighboring states and Kabul. Suppose NATO is unable to sustain a presence in the country without the United States. Therefore, the EU will need to consider the importance of supporting and encouraging reform in the security sector. The EU has always been able to hold military assistance at arms' length, allowing NATO and its member states to address strategic security considerations through separate institutional efforts. That division of responsibility will lead to a substantial drop in Western influence in Kabul, if not re-calibrated.

Suppose European states wish to continue influencing the Afghan conflict and the peace process meant to resolve it. In that case, they may need to do so by drawing their Afghanistan policy into its relationships with states in South and Central Asia in a new and innovative way. Already recommended by some experienced observers, Afghanistan could serve as a lightning rod in Western relations with India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, and even Russia, China or Iran.<sup>9</sup> Collective concerns and a common desire to maintain the stability the country's status quo has provided to the region, could be addressed by the EU helping to facilitate fresh discussion long stalled by traditional threat perceptions.

If not, it is clear that other states are willing to step forward and shape Afghanistan's future according to their fairly strict national interests. Russia's invitation to rejuvenate its own sponsored track of dialogue in the

event of a stall or collapse in the Doha-based peace talks is one of the more obvious proposals, but not the only one. While much press attention in March was devoted to the U.S. proposals to reinvigorate the peace process, including inviting the United Nations to mediate talks between the two conflict parties, China began looking to the UN as a player in Afghanistan's future much earlier. In 2020 Chinese representatives to the United Nations Security Council raised the prospect of updating the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's mandate and even its armed protection footprint, in light of the potential changes to the country's security situation. While the suggestion failed to bear fruit at the time, the notion is likely to re-emerge in future convenings at the UN, especially in the event of deteriorating conflict conditions. Given the hurdles to rallying regional states to collective action on Afghanistan and the recent state of dysfunction among the UN Security Council's permanent five members, a more prominent role for the UN in Afghanistan is desirable in the abstract – but difficult

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<sup>9</sup> Although the article's recommendations revolve around a U.S.-centered diplomatic approach, for a nonetheless useful outline of a potential regional framework see Barnett Rubin, "There Is Only One Way Out of Afghanistan," Foreign Affairs, 9 December 2020.

to envision being implemented. More likely would be an insistence by the Chinese that future UN assistance to Afghanistan explicitly acknowledge its Belt and Road Initiative, a running petition for several years.

Specifically, the EU might be able to initiate dialogue with those regional powers whose relations with the U.S. have grown too adversarial in the last few years to realistically expect fruitful exchange on Afghanistan. To take the most challenging example, European states could prove essential to any meaningful Western dialogue with Iran on the country's future and the region's evolving dynamics. There is no pre-existing platform at this stage. However, Europe's role in keeping the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) alive, and its ability to facilitate diplomatic engagement with the U.S. on this front, might offer building blocks for early-stage dialogue on Afghanistan.

In later stages of an Afghan peace process, or in the event the process falters upon U.S. disengagement, the EU will be well-placed to engage with Russia – which has already noted its eagerness to step into any “peace vacuum.” There are few feasible points of concrete cooperation, and substantive bilateral talks on an issue such as Afghanistan have little precedent in EU-Russia relations. However, officials and observers do not view the notion of European-Russian engagement on Afghanistan as impossible (and this would, if nothing else, be unique compared to Moscow's discussions with regional states).

As a relatively neutral power in historical tensions between India and Pakistan, and with the capacity to contribute to large-scale infrastructure, resource management, and connectivity projects, the EU could encourage non-zero-sum relations in South Asia. The EU's pre-existing bilateral relations already invoke Afghanistan, and its advocacy could be increased. This would indirectly yet fundamentally stabilize any possible scenario for Afghanistan's future.

Central Asian states are likewise already engaged by the EU on a bilateral basis, in dialogue that includes Afghanistan's fate. EU support and cooperation could serve as a useful lever to bring Central Asia into a regional framework that addresses neighbors' various interests.

As yet, EU-Turkey engagement on Afghanistan is surprisingly underdeveloped. However, Afghan affairs will only grow more relevant to Turkey's relationship with Europe in the event of continued Western disengagement; diplomatic architecture established to address the Syrian refugee crisis's impact on European states would likely be utilized to similar effect in the event of mass external displacement from Afghanistan.

EU engagement with China on Afghanistan, considering the gap between their general approach to foreign policy and, in particular, given European concerns about the future of Afghan human rights, might be even more far-fetched than productive exchange with Russia. Nevertheless, the EU has proven willing and able to shape its relations with China in bold new ways, even over the past several months.



*Regional stakeholders convene at the 8th Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, December 2019. Source: Hoa.gov.af*

The most difficult challenge may be in discouraging regional states from pursuing a prisoner's dilemma approach to Afghanistan's impact on regional security. Neighbor and near-neighbors are likely to prioritize the stability of geographic zones near their borders, even at the expense of preserving a centralized Afghan state. It is unclear if the U.S., the EU, or any bloc of concerned states would be able to persuade neighbors to defer their first-order security concerns in the interest of preserving a stable, sustainable dynamic – both within Afghanistan and among regional states.

# Outlook and Recommendations for European Policy Makers

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*Wakhan River. © Makalu*

- The EU has less political leverage than the U.S. with either the Afghan government or Taliban, but is also free of the growing political baggage Washington has accumulated since its attempts to initiate peace efforts. The EU's member states should reach internal consensus and dedicate sufficient diplomatic capital to building substantial leverage on Afghanistan policy among regional states in its pre-existing bi-, tri-, and multilateral engagement.
- The EU's relationship with the U.S. on Afghanistan will be most functional and effective, regardless of the differences between their preferred approaches, if the U.S. engages in open, collaborative communication with European allies. Washington must pay more than lip service to its message of transatlantic solidarity.
- Russia's public statements on Afghanistan in early 2021, and the prospect of reviving the divisive Moscow dialogue, is a reminder that regional states, through "wait and see" attitudes, have largely refrained from active obstructionism of U.S.-led peace efforts. The EU should lobby Afghanistan's neighbors to continue exercising restraint as long as there are international efforts to support a unified, peaceful Afghanistan.

This call for neighbors to "do no harm" should specifically include discouragement of diplomatic engagement with individual Afghan stakeholders. States that seek broad and inclusive political outreach with Afghan actors should instead engage with organs of the Afghan government such as the High Council for National Reconciliation, which many diverse political figures participate in.

- One notable exception to exercising restraint is the near-universal call, from Afghans and international supporters alike, for Pakistan to act decisively in pressuring the Taliban to seriously embrace the compromises and end of violence that any lasting peace requires. The EU should translate its leading trading partner status with Islamabad into

political leverage and apply it to Afghanistan's peace process. This could augment U.S. and U.K. efforts, potentially even helping restore EU-U.S. relations when it comes to Afghan peace.

- The EU should quickly determine its own internal consensus regarding the United States' bold proposals for an international conference and an interim government arrangement to fast-track Afghan peace efforts. It should also establish firm internal consensus on preparedness to commit to supporting Afghanistan in post-withdrawal scenarios, as independently of U.S. plans as possible. The strict conditionality for providing future support that the EU outlined in 2020 may be put to the test far sooner than member states anticipated.
- The EU could play a unique role in serving as a broker and mediator of dialogue on the many different conditions that neighboring and regional states have suggested they will apply to providing support to Afghanistan. If a lack of clarity on external assistance is one factor that negatively impacts the Afghan government's legitimacy, the EU could spur and shepherd international dialogue to seek greater clarity – and even alignment of international language on conditionality.

The Doha agreement between the U.S. and Taliban can serve as a vehicle for many nations' counterterrorism concerns and conditions but falls short in terms of human rights, governance, migrant issues, and more. Are there other existing frameworks that bring together collective regional conditionabilities?

- The EU has championed an "Afghan-owned, Afghan-led" peace process, rhetorically confronting the U.S. at various stages of its preferred approach to peace. The EU should go further, constructively supporting this ideal by helping to integrate more Afghan voices into the international dialogues and diplomatic engagement that takes place in the coming year(s).

On a national level, the EU can continue, even increase, its support to grassroots Afghan peacebuilding. Its scale and broad scope of development funding gives it a unique reach to help connect these initiatives to international efforts.

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Children playing football in the city's outskirts, Herat, July 2012, FES/Aref Karimi

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