
The European Union and Afghanistan - Prospects for peace

Introduction

On 28 May 2019, the European Union (EU) held a High Level Political and Security Dialogue with the countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). In addition, present at the table was Afghanistan, invited as a special guest. Afghanistan's participation to this dialogue, which focused on the EU strategy in Central Asia for partnership and development opportunities as well as counterterrorism and illicit drug trafficking, does not come as a surprise. In mid-May, the second Joint Committee under the EU-Afghanistan Cooperation Agreement for Partnership and Development met in Kabul, to discuss the ongoing progress in regards to the cooperation agreement signed by both the EU and Afghanistan in February 2017. One of the focal points of this agreement is the EU's assistance to Afghanistan in regional and international development, as Afghanistan's strategic geographic position places it at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, the country's relationship with its neighbours is crucial for its own development and the stability of the region as a whole. Furthermore, the stakes at play in Afghanistan like the migratory flows, heroin trafficking and the resolution of four decades of conflict, have naturally captured the interest of the country's Central Asian neighbours. And so, like a well-meaning mentor, the EU has taken Afghanistan, or rather Ashraf Ghani's government, by the hand and is trying to lead it on the path of reconstruction.

A difficult political climate

The EU has consolidated its effort to accompany the Afghan government in this crucial transitional phase through two principal agreements: the EU-Afghanistan Strategy and the EU-Afghanistan Cooperation Agreement. As seen with the example given above, the EU supports political dialogue and economic cooperation between Afghanistan and neighbouring countries and the wider region, as it believes that this is one of the ways to achieve the targets set out in its agreements with Afghanistan. And yet, the EU is not supporting the most important dialogue of the moment: the United States (US)-Taliban talks.

The EU has expressed its opinion that the peace process should be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and has pledged support to Ashraf Ghani's government, but has side-lined itself from the Doha peace talks between the US and the Taliban. Having invested millions of Euros in development and humanitarian aid, the EU cannot afford to let its efforts in Afghanistan go waste. Organising political dialogues between the EU, Afghanistan and its neighbours is certainly a good initiative, however if Ghani's government is overthrown by the Taliban because the US has decided to give in and withdraw its forces, then the political dialogue will be quickly forgotten and would not have had time to bear any fruit. In its efforts to aid Afghanistan in its State building and governance capacities, it would seem the EU has overlooked a crucial step: having an inclusive, effective, legitimate government to build the State in the first place.

Naturally, it is unfair and unrealistic to place this burden on the shoulders of only the EU. In 40 years, no one, neither Afghans nor the foreigners that invaded Afghanistan, have been able to find or form the government that would bring national unity, stability and prosperity to a country that withers in the chaos of ethnic division. The EU can sign all the agreements and strategies it pleases, but the reality

remains that these will not be sustainable until the Afghan people decide upon, a new, inclusive form of governance. The EU has preached the Afghan-led, Afghan-owned argument, but this does not mean the peace process cannot be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and EU-aided. As it has pledged to be a guarantor in the peace process, what is preventing it from taking on this role?

The US-Taliban peace talks

As mentioned in EFSAS article *“The future of peace in Afghanistan is rooted in lessons from the past”*, the biggest impediment to Afghanistan’s reconstruction is the Taliban’s refusal to engage with Ashraf Ghani’s government – the legitimate State representative in the eyes of the international community. Furthermore, the US, by holding direct peace talks with the Taliban, has given the Taliban a degree of political legitimacy.

The Taliban has demanded that the US withdraws its troops from Afghanistan, the US, in return, has asked the Taliban to meet with the Kabul government in order to put in place an inclusive, transitional government; the Taliban has refused to do so, as it considers Ghani’s government to be a puppet of Western powers. Furthermore, it has not ceased its militant insurgency and terrorist attacks, and it is responsible for at least 4,000 civilian casualties in 2018 alone, according to a report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. While the Taliban claims to have reformed and changed since it was ousted from Kabul in 2001, the US has no guarantee that attacks and human rights violations will cease once its troops are withdrawn.

The US’ volatile Afghan policy paired with the Taliban’s growing sense of political legitimacy makes for a dangerous concoction. If the Doha talks continue as they have, that is to say if they continue being unproductive, and the US decides to withdraw its troops before the Taliban meets with Ghani’s government and settles an agreement for its inclusion in the Afghan government, with no guarantee that the Taliban will cease its insurgency, then Afghanistan’s vicious cycle perpetuates; a war, followed by an inconclusive peace agreement, followed by internal political discord, followed by the outbreak of conflict and a repetition of history.

The EU’s interests in Afghanistan

The EU has set foot into the political mess that is Afghanistan’s peace process. It seems only fair, to the average Afghan citizen as well as to the average European taxpayer, that the Union fulfils its engagements. Indeed, the EU and its agencies have given Afghanistan at least €1.5 billion in aid, assistance and relief. At the Geneva Ministerial Conference in November 2018, an additional €474 million was pledged to Afghanistan, for public sector development and justice reforms, to address migration and internal displacement challenges and finally for the organization of this year’s presidential and provincial council elections.

Other than pledging a €474 million financial package for Afghanistan, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ European Commission Vice-President Federica Mogherini also outlined five points that confirmed the EU’s willingness to support the peace process. These are: 1) helping the government to make the peace process more inclusive; 2) supporting reforms, including security sector reform; 3) providing incentives for the reintegration of ex-combatants; 4) having the EU as a guarantor of the peace process; and 5) supporting cross-border trade and infrastructure, as well as regional connectivity.

The EU's financial aid to Afghanistan is delivered with the aim to maintain the standards achieved since the fall of the Taliban. It has led to some progress, for example, 57% of the population now has access to health care, over 120,000 police officers have received salaries from one of the EU's trust funds for Afghanistan, and more than 35% of rural and urban Community Development Council members are female, which is considerable progress as compared to the oppressive conditions women were subjected to under the Taliban rule.

Despite all this, the overall situation in Afghanistan is deadlier than ever. In a report released by the Global Peace Index on 12 June, Afghanistan was rated the least peaceful country in the world, overtaking Syria. This causes a problem for EU policy makers; Migration. Before the Syrian civil war erupted, Afghans were the largest refugee group in Europe. Since the start of the migration crisis in 2015, asylum applications have been growing, at the detriment of Afghans. As the EU has had to accommodate a massive influx of refugees, mostly from Syria, some EU member States chose to refuse asylum to Afghans as they deemed Afghanistan was "*safe enough*" to return to. In 2016, Afghanistan and the EU signed an agreement known as the "*Joint Way Forward*" where Afghanistan was offered millions in reconstruction aid, if they accepted 80,000 Afghan deportees from Europe. The EU has a history of providing aid to countries in order to contain the migration flow, however it can no longer rely on its "*Joint Way Forward*" agreement, since by continuing to implement it, would consist a violation of its own European Convention on Human Rights.

Two factors can explain the rapid deterioration of Afghanistan's (already lacking) security conditions. Firstly, the Taliban is steadily regaining pre-US invasion territory battling the Afghan government and foreign military forces in its path. The regime installed by the Taliban in the territory it controls (at least 50% of Afghanistan) is as repressive and oppressive as it was 20 years ago. For the Afghans that live in the Taliban-controlled territory, their security comes at the cost of the liberties gained when the Taliban was ousted. While the Taliban has supposedly reformed, for example by allowing men to have shorter beards (an offense that would have been punishable by flogging in 1996) and by giving girls access to school, the organisation has not renounced its violent attitude towards civilians. In April 2019, two girls' schools in Farah Province were burned to the ground, after the Taliban demanded that the Deputy Education Director of the province fire all male teachers at the school. The government official complied, but to no avail. This was not an isolated incident; over the past year, at least 400 schools (for both boys and girls) had to be shut down for security reasons in Afghanistan.

Secondly, the Islamic State (IS)'s expansion into the country has added more fuel to the fire. IS declared its stronghold in Afghanistan back in 2015 in Khorasan province, but since losing significant amounts of territory in the Middle East, reports indicate that IS fighters are moving towards South Asia, starting with Afghanistan. The introduction of yet another warring faction in the conflict is only adding more casualties and confusion; the Taliban and the US are now both fighting IS in Afghanistan, while simultaneously also fighting each other.

The EU has demonstrated its dedication to fighting terrorism, both in and out of Europe's borders and Afghanistan is now riddled with two of the world's most dangerous terrorist organisations, whose ideologies are both violently against the West. The European Union's efforts in promoting human rights in Afghanistan are more vulnerable than ever; the EU must concentrate part of its Afghan agenda to developing effective counterterrorism policies.

EU's position as a peace guarantor

Could the EU make a breakthrough in establishing a concrete peace process in Afghanistan? As mentioned above, it would be incredibly ambitious. However, amongst the myriad of actors present in Afghanistan, the EU holds the greatest amount of potential for coordinating and guaranteeing the peace process.

The EU is not a warring party in the conflict, unlike the US, the Taliban and the Afghan Army. Yet it must be noted that, in the initial stages of the US invasion of Afghanistan, some EU member States, such as France, Germany and the United Kingdom, participated in the NATO-led, United Nations (UN) mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and at the time ISAF took action in Afghanistan in 2003, 11 out of 19 NATO member States were EU member States. However, the European involvement in Afghanistan was orchestrated by the UN and NATO; there was no *European* (Union) strategy or consensus for Afghanistan.

ISAF's aim was to assist Afghan national security forces in providing effective security. The mission lasted from August 2003 to December 2014, when the Afghan national defence and security forces assumed full responsibility for the security of their country. In January 2015, the non-combat Resolute Support Mission was launched with the aim to provide training and assistance to Afghan security institutions. Moreover, in 2010, NATO and Afghanistan signed a political partnership, the Declaration on an Enduring Partnership, in Lisbon. This declaration is focused on security related issues and the status of Afghanistan's security institutions.

As of this date, 22 out of 29 NATO member States are also part of the EU, meaning there is a significant institutional overlap. The EU must coordinate its efforts with NATO in Afghanistan in order to avoid conflicts of interest between the two institutions and to provide a more contemporary and united front in a country, which is prone to internal political discord.

As NATO's framework in Afghanistan is solely focused on security, it would seem unsuitable for the organisation to orchestrate and support the peace process in any other aspect, such as public sector development and transitional justice. The UN could potentially oversee this; however, the body does not have a legislative power. Its legally binding documents are limited to Security Council resolutions, which can be vetoed by France, the United Kingdom, the US, Russia or China. The EU, in comparison, has two inclusive decision-making bodies, the Parliament and the Council of Ministers, which can vote on legislative frameworks regarding its foreign policy.

This is exactly what was done in 2017, when the EU adopted the EU-Afghanistan strategy. It revolves around four primary objectives: promoting peace, stability and regional security; reinforcing democracy, the rule of law and human rights and promoting good governance and women's empowerment; supporting economic and human development, and lastly addressing challenges related to migration.

Conclusion

The Afghan peace process has attracted a lot of onlookers. Some parties, such as China, Russia and Iran, maintain a close eye on the situation in order to better position their interests in the country. Afghanistan's regional neighbours, Pakistan and India, could potentially use Afghanistan as a new battleground for regional influence. Pakistan's role in the peace process is significant, as its military establishment maintains close ties to the Afghan Taliban.

The EU's *sui-generis* makeup places it as the best candidate to take the peace process to the next level. It does not make decisions based on the interests of a single government, unlike a regular nation-state, and it has demonstrated its will and ability to invest time, money and resources into Afghanistan. The EU should take steps towards establishing an inclusive dialogue, with perhaps, itself as a moderator, if it wants to ensure the sustainability of its investments and longevity of its agreements with Afghanistan.

If the EU is able to build a bridge between its own ongoing dialogues with Ashraf Ghani's government and the US-Taliban dialogues, then half the battle will be won. Only two questions remain. Firstly, will the EU take a first step towards a concrete peace process by organising an inclusive dialogue with all parties involved? Secondly, will the Taliban accept the EU's efforts?

The answer to the first question is with the EU; the answer to the second is with the Taliban. The political fortitude, or lack thereof, remains a stumbling block for both.