



Afghanistan: enter 2014

by Eva Gross

2014 will bring a presidential election and change in government to Afghanistan – but also a fundamental shift in the nature of international assistance. As the twelfth year of US-led military engagement in Afghanistan draws to a close, some uncertainties over the size and speed of US withdrawal (and ISAF contributing nations following suit) remain. The general trend, however, is clear: US and NATO troop numbers will be significantly reduced and reoriented to training Afghan forces rather than carrying out executive security functions. Yet the transition to Afghan ownership is taking place in a volatile security environment and is led by a government that faces both internal and external challenges to its own capacity and legitimacy. As international actors (including the EU) recalibrate their approach to Afghanistan in the run-up to 2014, they must consider their long-term strategic interests, the extent of their possible contributions but also the means of coordinating efforts in pursuit of stability in Afghanistan and its wider region.

Security and governance

NATO's handover of the remaining 95 districts in the South and East of the country to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) on 18 June leaves the provision of security in the hands of Afghans. The recent evaluation meeting of the 2011 Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF) on 3 July further underscores the state of play when it comes to the two cornerstones of international engagement in Afghanistan: security and governance, the preconditions for long-term stability in the country.

The 18 June handover concluded a transition process that commenced in 2010 and saw a gradual shift of security functions to the ANSF. Yet recent attacks, including on a civilian NATO installation on 2 July, show that the insurgency is still resilient and that the security situation is not improving. The high number of casualties calls into question the viability of the ANSF and threatens the cohesion and sustainability of Afghan and international efforts.

When it comes to governance, the TMAF serves as a reference point for international efforts as they shift towards an Afghan-owned sustainable approach. Well-documented cases of corruption – but also the difficulty of applying conditionality in a context where state expenditure is largely financed by the international community – highlight the fact that the Afghan government has not always been a reliable partner. Discussions preceding the 3 July meeting in Kabul illustrated the Afghan government's lack of progress in tackling corruption, thus endangering the delivery of additional aid. While donors did confirm pledges of \$16 billion through 2015, these discussions laid bare a number of problems with official Afghan commitments.

Two concrete issues have highlighted the difficulties in ensuring the protection of human rights as well as in the preparation of the upcoming presidential elections in 2014 and also the parliamentary elections in 2015. President Karzai's recent appointment of commissioners to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (a body almost entirely funded by international donors) has been widely criticised by human



rights activists who doubt the appointees' ability to be impartial. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) also requires the appointment of a new chairperson and indicates delays in the preparation for the presidential elections.

Overlapping conflicts

Underneath the challenges in the areas of security and governance lie three interlinked conflicts that touch on European strategic interests and call for different (yet connected) policy responses.

First, the US-led war against al-Qaeda and its Taliban supporters and the reason why the international community intervened in Afghanistan in the first place. After the removal of the Taliban in 2001, state-building was to provide a bulwark against safe havens for terrorists. The US counter-insurgency strategy adopted in 2009 was a part of the effort to dry out support for the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Following a strategic shift in Washington, this war has moved from stabilisation and state-building missions to selective drone strikes and special operations, predominantly in the porous border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan, thus further underscoring the interconnectedness of insecurity.

The second underlying conflict is one of contestation of government. The insurgency is the most visible and violent element of this conflict, but endemic corruption and shortfalls in the rule of law also undermine the legitimacy and capacity of the Afghan government. The EU, while dependent on NATO and US engagement on security, makes contributions to improving governance and the rule of law through the CSDP mission EUPOL Afghanistan and its support for the reform of the justice sector as well as financial support to the Afghan government. A successful outcome to the current peace process in Afghanistan is a precondition for the solution of the first and second conflicts – although recent tensions over possible direct talks between the US administration and the Taliban in Doha have highlighted political sensitivities on the part of the Afghan President. They also reflect uncertainties over whether the Taliban view themselves as an alternative to, or are willing to negotiate a deal with, the Afghan government – or just prefer to keep their options open.

The third conflict is regional. Tensions with Pakistan (including in particular support for the Taliban as a hedge against Indian influence in Afghanistan) negatively affect Afghan security and development. These conflicts also generate cross-cutting developmental and humanitarian emergencies as well as human rights violations, including against (but not limited to) women – all of which will be exacerbated by the escalation of one (or a combination) of the three conflicts.

In addition to security, then, Afghanistan also remains a normative concern for the international community at large.

Current EU capabilities can facilitate putting in place a comprehensive approach that combines security and development. With a view to the regional conflict dimension, the EU can also draw on its long-term instruments and make Afghanistan a cross-cutting issue in its relations with Afghanistan's neighbours, and thus foster cooperation through bilateral programmes. Both options highlight the role of the Delegation and the EUSR/Head of Delegation in engaging regional actors and Afghan stakeholders, including civil society.

Strategic aims – and opportunities

The EU and its member states are currently preparing to recalibrate (and perhaps also shift the focus of) their engagement in Afghanistan. At stake are immediate security concerns such as terrorism, organised crime and systemic instability. Together with normative humanitarian interests, these call for a long-term engagement in the country. Strategic aims involve strengthening security and governance at both local and regional level – and Afghan capacities to undertake these functions directly.

Apart from being a conflict driver, the regional setting also harbours opportunities, as it is key to Afghanistan's economic development through the potential (and related interest) for trade with India, Pakistan, Central Asia, China and Iran. The outcome of recent elections in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran could give cause for cautious optimism.

The year 2014 will determine the post-2014 engagement and scope of action of the international community, including the EU. The conduct and outcome of the 2014 presidential elections, in turn, will determine the strength of the Afghan government and the degree to which it can play a constructive role in the resolution of the three conflict areas. Due to constitutional term limits President Karzai will not be able to run for office, and this makes the election – and its conduct – significant for Afghanistan but also for the international community.

While continuing to focus on its long-term interests – through liaising and coordinating with other international stakeholders and making the best possible combined use of its own political, economic and civilian tools – the Union must concentrate on this key chapter in the political process and engage with Afghan and international actors in the preparation and potentially also monitoring of the presidential elections due to take place on 5 April 2014.

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