



Policy Brief

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Afghanistan: Europe's credibility test

By Shada Islam and Eva Gross

Background

Afghanistan represents a pivotal test for the future of transatlantic relations, Europe's hopes of crafting a strong new strategic partnership with the US and the EU's credibility as a global security actor.

US President Barack Obama's search for strengthened European engagement to tackle the Taliban insurgency and rebuild Afghanistan has increased the pressure on EU governments to step up their military, police and civilian efforts to stabilise the country. It also puts the onus on the Union to put Afghanistan, and the conflict's regional dimension, higher up its foreign policy agenda.

European governments, acting within both NATO and the EU, have promised to do more and better to tackle Afghanistan's myriad problems. In December, EU leaders agreed to double the personnel in the EUPOL police mission, widely regarded as the Union's most visible contribution to stabilising the country. In February, foreign ministers promised to forge a "common approach" with the US to building a stronger and safer Afghanistan.

Translating these pledges into action, however, remains a

challenge. EUPOL still suffers from staff shortages and local police training is still carried out by other actors. EU governments appear to be giving priority to upping their national profile in Afghanistan rather than on leveraging collective EU efforts. Within NATO, they remain reluctant to commit significantly more combat troops to Afghanistan or remove national restrictions on their deployment.

However, EU engagement in Afghanistan will contribute to determining the course of transatlantic ties and influence world views on Europe's ambitions of becoming an influential global security player. NATO's credibility, Afghanistan's future and, increasingly, that of an already fragile and unstable Pakistan are also at stake.

Transatlantic cooperation in Afghanistan will loom large at NATO's 60th Anniversary Summit on 3-4 April and, possibly, in President Obama's discussions with EU leaders in Prague the next day, with the US seeking agreement on a new, coordinated, comprehensive strategy to deal with the multiple challenges facing the country.

The new President lost little time in keeping his election-campaign promise to commit more troops to Afghanistan, with 17,000 extra soldiers being sent to join the 38,000 already on the ground. Former Balkans troubleshooter Richard Holbrooke has been named US envoy for 'AfPak' and Washington is carrying out a "review of reviews" of US policy options in Afghanistan, with President Obama's top military and civilian officials consulting both the EU and NATO on this.

US demands

The US wants Europe to increase its contribution to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), tasked with stabilising the country, and to strengthen EUPOL by putting "more European boots on the ground". NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has also urged Europeans to "share the heavy lifting" with the US, and Canada has threatened to reduce its engagement significantly if European allies do not do more.

EU Member States are also being asked to take on more "soft power" responsibilities, including greater efforts to improve governance and the rule of law, provide more

development assistance and strengthen counter-narcotics efforts.

Europe is struggling to respond. At first glance, the picture is not as bleak as many believe. European members of NATO have all sent forces to Afghanistan and EUPOL is actively engaged in police sector reform. The EU is also a leading aid donor to Afghanistan: combined European Commission and EU government aid to the country for 2002-2006 totaled €3.7 billion, with an extra €610 million earmarked for 2007-2010.

Crucially, however, given public reservations (if not outright opposition) to the war in Afghanistan, most EU countries are unwilling to commit extra combat troops. This is in part due to the deteriorating security situation and in part to the

remoteness of the theatre, which makes it harder to argue the case for more military engagement.

The UK, the second-largest contributor to NATO forces with 8,910 soldiers, has said it cannot do more and is demanding “fairer burden-sharing of responsibilities”, particularly in more difficult areas such as the volatile southern province of Helmand.

Germany’s 3,405 soldiers, and the extra 600 now promised, are in the relatively calm north; France has sent an additional 1,200 troops over the last year, bringing its total to about 3,000; Italy recently agreed to add 300 more soldiers to the 2,350 already there; Poland is considering increasing its presence from 1,600 to 2,000 soldiers; and the Netherlands has around 1,650 troops on the ground.

It is not just about numbers, however. NATO commanders are also asking Europeans to lift restrictions (“national caveats”) on when, where and how their troops can be deployed, amid frequent complaints that these significantly limit the multinational forces’ operational capability and ability to accomplish their missions.

Increasingly, the focus is also shifting from military solutions to a “comprehensive approach” covering wider security and development challenges such as police training and reform, reducing Afghanistan’s governance and rule of law deficit, and strengthening the counter-narcotics drive. These are areas where the EU has the expertise and experience to play a key role, but the devil lies in the detail.

State of play

The key challenge for Europe in the months ahead will be to leverage its substantial contribution to Afghanistan to boost both its visibility and its voice in the country. This will require strong coordination and cooperation among EU Member States.

Finding solutions to the multiple challenges facing Afghanistan will require sustained, simultaneous and coordinated international action on several fronts.

Having focused almost exclusively on Afghanistan in recent years, the international community is also slowly starting to recognise the need to involve its powerful neighbours in this process.

Richard Holbrooke’s appointment as the US envoy for ‘AfPak’ is a step in the right direction, given the challenge of combating the Taliban insurgency in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Several EU Member

States (including the UK, France, Germany and Sweden) have also nominated their own ‘AfPak’ envoys in addition to the EU’s current envoy in Afghanistan, Ettore Francesco Sequi.

As well as engaging with Pakistan and India, which have exported their rivalries to Afghanistan, Iran will have to be brought into the equation, as stressed recently by both US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, whose country currently holds the G8 Presidency.

Europe’s key challenges

The EU is an important, albeit still low-profile, actor in Afghanistan. It has pledged to spend €610 million until 2010 on three key priority areas: justice sector reform; rural development, including alternatives to poppy production; and health. Working with the World Bank and USAID, EU funds

have helped to build or repair over 200 health centres, paid for the delivery of equipment and medicines to more than 1,200 clinics, and brought basic health care within reach of a quarter of Afghanistan’s population.

EU efforts to reduce poppy production have had some success in the Nangarhar province, but the picture is mixed, with production fluctuating year on year. To work, eradication programmes must be part of integrated rural development schemes which include the construction of local roads for marketing alternative crops, and improved law and order. This is especially critical because narcotics’ trade revenues are believed to be funding the insurgency and war lords in Afghanistan, and increasing official corruption in the country.

European funds are being channelled into the Law and

Order Trust Fund (LOTFA), which pays the running costs of the Afghan National Police (ANP). The Commission also embarked on a justice reform programme in 2007, including efforts to eradicate corruption and strengthen governance.

EUPOL: Europe's flagship mission

With police reform now higher up the Afghan security agenda, most attention is centred on EUPOL, the Union's most high-profile initiative. Whatever else the EU does, its efforts will be judged by the police mission's success or failure.

The international focus on training the ANP is not surprising. There has been progress in training the Afghan National Army (ANA) which, together with international forces, has had some success in clearing insurgents from territory under their control.

Reforming the police force has been less successful. Insufficient training and widespread corruption mean the ANP is still incapable of carrying out the tasks required to maintain civilian control over cleared territory and normally associated with an efficient and accountable civilian police force. Peace and security (and public acceptance and trust) depend on

appropriately trained, accountable and committed police officers.

The good news is that EUPOL is now widely recognised as an important component of the international drive for improved security in Afghanistan. The bad news is that its deficiencies mean Europe continues to punch below its weight in the country.

Launched in 2007, EUPOL's tasks include working on an Afghan national police strategy, encouraging Interior Ministry reform and improving coordination among international actors. Eighteen EU Member States plus Canada, Croatia and Norway contribute to the mission.

EUPOL got off to a slow start, plagued by delays in procuring equipment, problems in getting sufficient, qualified personnel, and frequent changes in head of mission. The lack of a formalised EU-NATO deal, due to broader and well-known political hurdles, further delayed the mission's geographical expansion as it had to conclude *ad hoc* agreements with lead nations in NATO's Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) to ensure its personnel's security.

In December, EU leaders decided to double EUPOL's staff to 400, but Member States have yet to make

the extra police officers available, seriously undermining the mission's credibility and effectiveness.

One key problem is that European police experts are more attracted by the EU mission in Kosovo than the high-risk operation in Afghanistan, prompting EU foreign ministers to discuss the possibility of tripling salaries for those prepared to go to Afghanistan.

Two other problems will continue to cloud EU efforts to enhance its visibility in an increasingly crowded Afghan field.

First, even if the 400 target is met, Europe's efforts lag behind those of other countries, notably the US, which has committed substantially more resources to police reform, sometimes adopting different standards and methods. EUPOL is therefore unlikely to be able to carry out its tasks as efficiently, and on the same scale, as other Western actors in Afghanistan.

Second, the EU has little say over the political or operational aspects of reconstruction tasks undertaken by other actors, even if they impact on its work. These include military operations undertaken by ISAF under NATO command and US efforts to reform the Afghan national army and the police.

Prospects

The months leading up to, and immediately after, the planned 20 August presidential elections pose an array of serious challenges for the international community.

Voter registration, security and the independent monitoring will be priorities. Suggestions that an olive branch be extended to so-called 'moderate' Taliban (those with no links to Al Qaeda), on strict conditions, are likely to gain momentum.

The focus will also increasingly be on building the country's still-weak civilian institutions to balance ongoing efforts to construct a modern, well-equipped army.

The US – backed by Europe – is also expected to scale back its overly ambitious goals for Afghanistan, abandoning any idea of turning it into what Defence Secretary Robert Gates has called "a Central Asian Valhalla", and replacing this with a

new war plan aimed simply at halting the Taliban's momentum and preventing the country being used as a base for terrorists.

Intensified transatlantic cooperation will be required to ensure peace and stability before, during and after the poll. Crucially, EU Member States will have to work together more effectively on the ground, and greater coordination will be needed between the EU and NATO.

Experience shows that this is easier said than done. Despite repeated promises to step up cooperation and coordination, key international actors continue to work on often parallel, if not divergent, tracks. Norwegian diplomat Kai Eide's nomination last year as the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Afghanistan was designed to improve coordination among international players, but much more needs to be done.

Many Europeans, not enough EU

The EU faces its own uphill struggle to step up coordination between the Commission delegation in Kabul, EUPOL, Special Envoy Ettore Sequi's office and the new national 'AfPak' envoys. Setting up an EU 'contact group' on Afghanistan would further confuse the situation, making it even less clear who speaks for Europe.

Instead of pursuing narrow national goals and bilateral interests with the US, Member States should bolster the EU's profile in Afghanistan, streamlining its presence by consolidating the various offices under one management; giving Mr Sequi additional responsibility for Pakistan; and ensuring he has the power to coordinate the national 'AfPak' envoys' activities.

Recognising that these elections are essential to Afghanistan's political development and the government's legitimacy, the EU has promised to fund the poll and send election observers to monitor it. Some EU countries are also expected to follow the Dutch and Italian lead by contributing extra troops to ISAF, but only for the election period.

While NATO still hopes that some European countries will use its April

Summit to declare their willingness to do more, President Obama appears to understand that instead of berating them for not providing extra soldiers, they should be asked to step up their contributions on the 'stability side' to meet the country's 'softer', but equally crucial, security and development needs. Both Mr Gates and NATO have called for a "civilian surge" to match the military efforts.

This makes it even more crucial that EU governments honour their pledge to increase EUPOL's staff. Given their unwillingness to increase wages and short-staffed police forces' reluctance to send personnel to Afghanistan, the EU could consider signing up retired police officers as contract agents.

Another, more ambitious, option could be to broaden the mission to encompass wider 'rule of law' objectives, thus imposing better coordination of police training, legal and administrative help, and the fight against corruption. The EU should also push for a shift in US anti-narcotics policy away from the current purely repressive and military-led approach towards a 'smarter' strategy to win the civilian population's hearts and minds.

This should be a key concern in international assistance but often gets short-changed given the focus on providing stability, which tends to privilege military aspects of reconstruction. Without it, however, Western interventions will struggle to achieve lasting success.

The regional dimension

US insistence that spreading insurgency in Pakistan poses even more of a challenge to Western security interests than Afghanistan has put pressure on the EU to

develop a credible strategy for improving relations with Islamabad. This has slowly climbed up the agenda: a first-ever EU-Pakistan summit is planned this year, and new trade concessions and increased aid are being considered.

To be effective, EU assistance will have to focus on both sides of the 'AfPak' border to include the Pashtun areas of both countries. Given Indian resistance, EU governments will also have to proceed with caution on suggestions that India-Pakistan tensions over Kashmir should be addressed in regional discussions on Afghanistan. Finally, bringing Iran, Russia and China into the discussions may certainly bring advantages, but will also pose additional diplomatic challenges.

Achieving stability in Afghanistan will require strong transatlantic cooperation and agreement on a new, flexible and multi-pronged strategy with both military and civilian components. President Obama has signalled that he is ready and willing to hammer out such a shared vision with Europe.

However, European governments, must act to enhance their credibility in the country. This means putting Afghanistan and Pakistan higher up their political agenda, and coordinating and consolidating their programmes, policies and representations. Above all, the EU must take immediate action to ensure the success of its hitherto less-than-impressive EUPOL mission.

Shada Islam is a Senior Programme Executive at the European Policy Centre. Eva Gross is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for European Studies, Free University Brussels.

European Policy Centre ■ Résidence Palace, 155 rue de la Loi, 1040 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 (0)2 231 03 40 ■ Fax: +32 (0)2 231 07 04 ■ Email: info@epc.eu ■ Website: www.epc.eu