

Soldiers out, civilians left behind: EU lessons from the evacuation of Kabul

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Foreword to the project

Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a rude geopolitical awakening for Europe, calling into question many long-held assumptions. It marked the end of an era in European security, starting in 1991 and lasting three decades, during which Europeans enjoyed the dividend of peace and largely neglected the threat of war.

During this period, European conventional forces partly withered into 'paper armies', NATO searched for the questions it should answer, often projecting itself 'out of territory', and the EU struggled to find its way as a capable actor in security and defence in the face of grave crises in the Balkans and further abroad.

After Europe's failings in Bosnia, Kosovo became the wake-up call that prompted the 1999 Helsinki European Council to set an EU Headline Goal of 60,000 deployable troops within 60 days. And yet, only four years later, spurred on by the first autonomous EU-led Operation Artemis in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the emphasis shifted to rapid reaction and crisis management abroad with the development of the EU's 1,500-strong Battlegroup concept.

This crisis management narrative prevailed for a long time, but with few operational credentials to show for it. It was also the dominant backdrop to the discussions on the EU's Strategic Compass, the part-strategy, part-action plan, discussed between member states as of June 2020.

Then, in the summer of 2021, came the evacuation from Kabul. The shambolic Western flight from Afghanistan highlighted grave US and European failures in anticipation and coordination. It also projected the image of Europe again as incapable of deciding and acting by itself when faced with urgency. Where were the EU Battlegroups?

The simple answer is that the Common Security and Defence Policy's (CSDP) decision-making and operational means were never conceived for an evacuation effort of such speed and scale in a non-permissive environment. Still, fuelled by both the humbling in Kabul and a sense of budding European can-do, the Strategic Compass discussions doubled down on plans for a 5,000-man strong Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) based on revised EU Battlegroups concept combining with air, land and sea force modules and critical enablers.

The shock of Russia's aggression on Ukraine upended this careful planning and emerging policy consensus. The resurgence of war in Europe and the EU's unexpected role as a 'first responder' to the crisis – not only through sanctions but also in military support to Ukraine – has raised the question of the EU's future role in aspects of collective defence. At the same time, where many had thought the EU would not face a Kabul-type scenario again, Russia's attempted encirclement of Kyiv also suggested that evacuation and crisis management capacities remain as important as ever.

Did the Strategic Compass rise to the combined challenges from Ukraine and Kabul? It was always doubtful it could. The EU commits in ambitious language both to “defend the European security order” and to develop a Rapid Deployment Capacity in reaction to crises, including operational scenarios for rescue and evacuation.¹

Yet these are only words; in practice, there is a major disconnect between the threats identified and the operational means proposed by the Compass. What in peaceful times would have been valiant efforts to take the CSDP forward inevitably comes up short against the momentous turn of history.

Revisiting the evacuation of Kabul, and the combined failures of NATO and the EU, amid the war in Ukraine – as this Project has undertaken – may seem like a historic *contre-sens*. NATO and the EU should not, however, under the pretext of a pressing new crisis, overlook past realities, which likely also entered into President Putin’s calculus.

Undeniably, in failure, there are lessons for everyone. In the US, there is a steady trickle of reports and examinations on the learnings from Afghanistan, as well as for today’s conflict in Ukraine.² Even if Europe’s security debate has moved on to this bigger and more pressing challenge, the EU must also heed the lessons from Kabul as it reviews its crisis management architecture and implements the Strategic Compass.

The exact conditions of the Afghanistan evacuation might not be seen again for many years. Still, the EU must consider a range of other scenarios: European soldiers or citizens in danger needing evacuation from failing states or war zones, military support for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, or even short-term stability support to governments and initial entry missions.

This requires a commitment to, and building of, EU rapid deployment capacities that are *effectively* ready to be used, associated with appropriate crisis management structures for EU decision-making. Post-Afghanistan, reflection is also needed on the EU’s responsibility to protect local staff involved with European delegations, projects, missions, and operations.

These are the questions that have interested this project, whose examination is structured in three parts:

- (i) a description of the central decision moments** leading up to and during the evacuation from Afghanistan;
- (ii) an assessment of the main factors contributing to failure** in anticipation, planning and execution; and
- (iii) recommendations regarding the EU’s crisis management architecture** and capacity in the context of the implementation of the Strategic Compass.

Detailed structure of the report

PART 1 – WHAT WENT WRONG? THE CRITICAL DECISION-MAKING MOMENTS

1. April – June 2021: Spring ‘*insouciance*’

Figure: The West’s retreat from Afghanistan

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2. July – August 2021: Summer ‘*sauve qui peut*’

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Figure: EU Civil Protection Mechanism repatriation flights

PART 2 – WHAT LESSONS SHOULD WE LEARN? FACTORS IN THE FAILURE TO PREPARE

1. A collective failure of anticipation

2. NATO groupthink and dependence on the US

Table: The US–NATO–EU failure matrix in Afghanistan’s endgame

3. Absence of European will and capabilities

Infobox 4: Why the EU Integrated Political Crisis Response does not work

PART 3 – WHAT TO DO NOW? RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EU AS A CRISIS MANAGER

Executive summary

The conditions of the evacuation from Kabul were nothing short of chaotic. In the heat of the action in mid-August 2021, Bundeswehr planes circled the capital, ran out of fuel and could not land, or returned home all but empty as evacuees could not be brought to Kabul Airport. With thousands massed for days at the airport gates in rough conditions, the sight and sound of human suffering and despair mixed with the sense of imminent threat.

Dutch armed forces left Afghan interpreters behind, contradicting a parliamentary commitment that everyone who worked for the Netherlands would be evacuated. In the UK, thousands of emails from at-risk Afghans were left unread. Failure in the responsibility to protect local civilians also extends to NATO and the EU. Both organisations left (former) local staff, broken promises, and shattered hopes behind as the last planes left Kabul, as was the case for most allies and countries involved in Afghanistan over the past two decades.

1. WHAT WENT WRONG? TWO CRITICAL DECISION-MAKING MOMENTS

The analysis of what went wrong in Kabul must focus on the critical junctures in the West's decision-making. Two moments stand out: the establishment of the military withdrawal schedule in mid-April and the month of August when all the countries involved scrambled to get their civilians out too.

► April – June 2021: Spring *'insouciance'*

On 14 April, US President Biden announced the decision and the calendar for the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan. Despite limited consultation upfront, the NATO Ministerial that took place on the same day promptly endorsed this decision and the withdrawal of the Resolute Support Mission forces. In public, all NATO Allies put up a brave face, and optimism was the order of the day, despite intelligence and public concern about the consequences of a rapid military withdrawal. As for the EU, an analysis of publicly available documents from the Foreign Affairs Council meetings that took place in this period shows that Afghanistan was simply not a foreign policy priority, leading to a conspicuous lack of attention to possible consequences at the EU headquarters.

► July – August 2021: Summer *'sauve qui peut'*

By the end of June, NATO and US forces were fast retreating out of the country. The Taliban made substantial territorial gains and prepared offensives in key cities. Despite acknowledging that the Taliban was at its strongest militarily since 2001, the US decided to move forward the schedule for troop withdrawal to

31 August. The Biden administration and its allies were still in denial about the possibility of an imminent Taliban takeover, and an evacuation of civilians was not envisaged. Come August, matters went from bad to worse. The Taliban advanced quickly, gaining significant ground and entered Kabul on 15 August. The race against the clock started for the US and allies to get as many 'entitled persons' out as possible. The EU institutions had prepared no better and were equally blindsided by the speed of events and decisions.

2. LESSONS LEARNED? THREE FACTORS IN FAILING TO PREPARE FOR EVACUATION

"We all misread the situation", the then German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, admitted on 16 August.⁵ This has the merit of honesty and conciseness; simply put, he was right. But the economy of words should not stand in the way of deeper scrutiny of the errors committed. Three factors of failure are evident:

► Dependence on the US and NATO groupthink

The US was always at the forefront of the transatlantic engagement in Afghanistan. The Europeans happily followed, with NATO acting as the driving belt and repository of collective decisions. Afghanistan revealed a military alliance dependent on US leadership. Most of the other Allies were largely incapable of critical examination, as illustrated by the absence of comprehensive discussions when the West's military withdrawal was decided on 14 April 2021. In the case of the EU, the implicit division of labour with NATO also played a role: Afghanistan had been the US and NATO's endeavour and responsibility and not the EU's, creating the expectation that a crisis would also be dealt with at the NATO level.

► A collective failure of anticipation

Once the decision had been taken to withdraw militarily, the Allies failed to plan for the worst-case scenario of a collapse of the Afghan security and state functions. This absence of anticipation left everyone unprepared for the events in August. On the EU side, there was not only a lack of intelligence but also a striking deficit of attention to what was happening. When the Taliban entered Kabul on 15 August, EU institutions were largely unprepared. A few uncertain days followed, informed as much by TV images as by reliable information on the ground. At the European External Action Service (EEAS) headquarters, it was a time of improvisation. The EU Delegation to Afghanistan was not staffed nor ready for an evacuation effort in the timeframe set by the US retreat and at the scale required by the EU's duty of care.

► The absence of European will and capabilities

EU Council discussions in the critical months of March to July reveal that Afghanistan was not a foreign policy priority for the EU executive. This said, even if contingency plans had been drawn up in April 2021, few would have envisaged a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) evacuation. For that, the operational capacities are too weak, the procedural hurdles too high, and the gains of joint CSDP action too low. In August, also the EU's crisis management readiness was tested and proved deficient. The Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangements, which support rapid and coordinated EU decision-making in complex crises, were never activated. The Political and Security Committee (PSC), which generally meets twice a week, was similarly dormant in August and only convened in urgency when an extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) meeting had been called.

In sum, the evacuation from Kabul showed that, while rife with discussions on 'strategic autonomy', Brussels institutions still lack basic implements, be it in terms of political will, appropriate decision-making structures or military capabilities.

3. WHAT TO DO NOW? RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EU AS A CRISIS MANAGER

The events unfolding from April to August 2021 pointed to Europe's most profound problem in security and defence. Fundamentally, it is neither its (in)capacity to plan a Noncombatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) mission nor force generation; it is the European 'state of mind'. Providing for one's own security obviously demands military capabilities and decision-making structures. But ever since the 1998 Saint-Malo declaration put European strategic autonomy and capacity to act on the agenda, a primary question has remained unanswered: do Europeans have the collective pride and self-esteem to provide for their own security?

The Strategic Compass, as adopted on 21 March 2022, was intended to be a forceful answer to this question. In his foreword, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) Josep Borrell speaks of turning "the EU's geopolitical awakening [into] robust capabilities and the willingness to use them against the full spectrum of threats".⁴ The Compass itself speaks of a Union committed to defending the European security order, invoking both its partnership with NATO and mutual assistance clause (Article 42(7) TEU). It undertakes to build a future ability to act rapidly and robustly whenever a crisis erupts, with partners if possible and alone when necessary, with the establishment of a Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) by 2025 and the preparation of new operational scenarios, including rescue and evacuation.

Never before have the EU's responsibilities in security and defence been spelt out so ambitiously. Yet, will they be followed up on? The forthcoming third part of this Project will focus on **future recommendations** relating to:

- 1. EU-NATO complementarity and the further development of the EU as a crisis manager.**
- 2. The implementation of the Strategic Compass and the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity.**
- 3. The reshaping of the EU's integrated civilian-military crisis management architecture.**

¹ Council of the European Union (2022), [A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence - For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security](#), 7371/22, Brussels.

² Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), ["SIGAR Analysis of How Lessons from Rebuilding Afghanistan May Be Applicable to the Current Situation in Ukraine"](#), 7 July 2023.

³ Towfigh Nia, Oliver, ["German foreign minister rules out resigning for misjudging Afghan situation"](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 20 August 2021.

⁴ ["European External Action Service, A Strategic Compass to make Europe a Security Provider - Foreword by HR/VP Josep Borrell"](#), 24 March 2022.