

STUDY

Requested by the AFET Committee



Afghanistan: Lessons learnt from 20 years of supporting democracy, development and security



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Lessons learnt from 20 years of supporting democracy, development and security

ABSTRACT

The Taliban's rapid seizure of power in August 2021 took the European Union (EU) by surprise. In response, the EU developed a 'Basic Needs' approach and now supports the United Nations' initiatives to alleviate human suffering and support non-governmental organisations' activity on the ground. This study asks how, with over 20 years of international action, the EU finds itself in this situation. Significantly, the EU was but one international actor supporting actions initiated by the United States of America (USA) after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. Yet the EU's external action has now been recognised as having been inadequate and deeply flawed. Afghanistan may have been the largest recipient of EU development and humanitarian aid over the last two decades, but EU state-building exercises failed to account for the growing insecurity within Afghanistan and changes in the US strategy. The country should not have been treated as a 'blank slate' upon which a new modern state could be erected; nor should peacebuilding have been rejected because it involved negotiating with the Taliban. The EU did have successes during this time, including the establishment of a peace deal that held for some time. Yet, regrettably, the EU was too slow to recognise the impact of corruption, and it worked at cross-purposes with the USA's shorter-term commitments.

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Executive Summary

On 15 August 2021, Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, fell to the Taliban, state institutions were seized, and the government fled. The withdrawal of the United States's (US's) troops led to the immediate collapse of the government, as images of a chaotic evacuation from Kabul were broadcast. However, given 20 years of high-level international engagement and support in Afghanistan, questions remain over why the government collapsed so quickly, and why the state failed to demonstrate resilience in the face of a known threat. This study, underpinned by high-level interviews and qualitative data, addresses these questions. There is now broad agreement that Afghanistan was far too dependent on US military support. However, it is also true that the European Union (EU) made numerous errors over its 20 years of involvement.

First and foremost, mistakes were made by the United States of America (USA) in its response to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. The decision to cast its response within the framework of a 'war on terror' – a framework about which many US policy-makers have expressed regret – limited the US commitment to a 'light footprint' and short military horizons that were unsuitable for a state-building exercise. For 20 years, the USA failed to develop an effective strategy and demonstrated an inability to coordinate with partners. The USA was eager to call for transatlantic solidarity and legitimise its policy with international cooperation, but for the most part, policy-makers saw themselves acting alone in their best interests. This was true from the initial decision to limit cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, through to the decision to invade Iraq, and finally to negotiate the Doha agreement with the Taliban unilaterally. Nevertheless, it is the decision to exclude the Taliban from the Bonn Process in 2001 that is considered by many to be the 'original sin' that metastasised into an insecure, unstable, corrupt state led by what was widely regarded as an illegitimate central government unable to reach beyond Kabul meaningfully.

As this study makes clear, the EU should not escape criticism for its role and the mistakes made in Afghanistan. Although this study highlights multiple lessons within each section, the recurrent themes can be broken down into three analytically distinct categories. Firstly, there were failures of autonomy, whereby the EU could not derive an impartial strategic alternative to nesting within US foreign policy objectives and placing reliance on American power. As a result, the EU strategy was neither independent nor impartial. EU policy was entirely dependent on the US military presence in Afghanistan continuing to align with US national interests and a US willingness to maintain a military deployment well beyond Afghanistan's transformational decade. Significant opportunities to review the EU strategy were missed, particularly around 2016, when the EU demonstrated success in negotiating peace between Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin and the Government of Afghanistan, refocused international attention through the Brussels conference and launched the *Global Strategy*.

Secondly, there were intelligence failures. In 2001, Afghanistan presented a complex international crisis. This crisis had been building since the 1979 Soviet invasion, and was exacerbated by the complex turns of the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, EU policy in 2001 proceeded upon the deliberate decision to treat Afghanistan as if it were a 'blank slate'. This approach translated into a significant policy of assisting with Afghanistan's development but ignoring lessons learnt from the 1980s and 1990s, failing to engage with issues of corruption meaningfully, and deciding not to pursue a peace strategy for fear of unsettling Europe's strategic alliances. With aid allocation

becoming a proxy indicator for EU commitment and success, there was a failure to recognise the impact of US development aid exceeding Afghanistan's absorption capacity and a failure to recognise that growing insecurity in 2004-2021 was likely to undermine EU development objectives in the long run. After 2002-2003, the EU strategy failed to adapt to changing circumstances within Afghanistan and was unrealistic given the growing insecurity and incommensurable timelines that the USA and EU were operating within. After ratifying the Lisbon Treaty and establishing the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2011, there were numerous opportunities to rectify and adapt these policies that were not taken. Bureaucratic inertia and internal conflict between the European Union Special Representative Office and the EEAS in Brussels led to a diplomatic downgrading of Afghanistan.

Thirdly, there were failures to identify alternatives to US policy and imagine the likely outcomes of the failure of transatlantic policy. Throughout the study, issues of identity and imagination can be seen as having become entangled, which has consequently undermined EU foreign and security policies. In response to the 2001 terrorist attacks, alternatives to a military response were voiced within the EU. Nevertheless, once the US decision was made, EU policy-makers failed to imagine alternatives beyond state-building. European identity as a 'civilian power' led to policies being pursued because policy-makers defaulted to assertions such as 'that is who we are' and 'that is what we do', rather than identifying the strategic terrain presented and asking 'will this work' and 'how will we adapt' to ensure success. Failures of imagination continued. In August 2021, policy-makers were surprised by the Taliban's seizure of power. Strategic exercises were conducted, but suggestions that the USA would go through with its troop withdrawal were met with disbelief. Similarly, suggestions that the Taliban could come back to power were rejected. Afghanistan was considered 'too big to fail', which often prevented EU policy-makers from accepting the strategic reality and imagining the outcome that came to pass in the summer of 2021.

Throughout this study, 32 evidence-based recommendations are put forward. These are tied to the multiple lessons that can be learnt from the EU's experience in Afghanistan. They highlight the need for the EU to build a knowledge base that will enhance an understanding of the EU's international engagement and prepare for a more multi-polar international system. They also set out what EU institutions must be prepared for as they negotiate the shape of their relationships with the Taliban and the fallout of broader regional instability. There are no ideal options for the EU to adopt, but history suggests that the 'Basic Needs' programme that the EU has in place may be able to mitigate the worst of the humanitarian crises Afghanistan is likely to face in the coming decade. The viability of state building during an ongoing conflict is now contentious among EU officials, who have less faith in their ability to deliver the EU's strategic objectives. The EU should not allow '*Afghanistan Syndrome*' to set in, but rather use this opportunity to learn lessons and expand upon its ability to embed lessons learnt into policy-making practices.

Résumé

Le 15 août 2021, Kaboul, la capitale de l'Afghanistan, est tombée aux mains des talibans ; les institutions étatiques ont été saisies et le gouvernement a fui. Le retrait des troupes américaines a entraîné un effondrement immédiat du pays, montrant les images d'une évacuation chaotique de Kaboul. Cependant, compte tenu de vingt ans d'engagement et de soutien international important en Afghanistan, des questions demeurent quant aux raisons pour lesquelles le gouvernement s'est effondré si rapidement et pourquoi l'État n'a pas su faire preuve de résilience face à une menace connue. Pour répondre à ces questions, cette étude s'appuie sur des entretiens de haut niveau et des données qualitatives. Il est aujourd'hui largement admis que l'Afghanistan était bien trop dépendant du soutien militaire des États-Unis, mais il est également vrai que l'Union européenne (UE) a commis de nombreuses erreurs au cours de ses 20 années d'engagement.

Tout d'abord, en réponse aux attaques terroristes du 11 septembre 2001, les États-Unis ont multiplié les faux pas. L'inscription de leur réaction dans le cadre d'une 'guerre contre le terrorisme', depuis regrettée par de nombreux responsables politiques américains, a limité l'engagement américain à une 'empreinte légère' et à des horizons militaires étriqués qui ne convenaient pas à un exercice de construction de l'État. Pendant 20 ans, les États-Unis n'ont pas réussi à développer une stratégie efficace et ont fait preuve d'une incapacité à se coordonner avec leurs partenaires. Ils étaient désireux d'appeler à la solidarité atlantique et de légitimer leur politique par la coopération internationale, mais la plupart des décideurs politiques se voyaient agir seuls dans leur propre intérêt. Cela s'est vérifié dès la décision initiale de limiter la coopération de l'Organisation du traité de l'Atlantique Nord et celle d'envahir l'Irak, ou encore celle de négocier unilatéralement l'accord de Doha avec les talibans. Néanmoins, c'est la décision d'exclure les talibans du processus de Bonn en 2001 qui est considérée par beaucoup comme le 'péché originel'. En effet, cette décision a engendré un État peu sûr, instable et corrompu, dirigé par ce qui était largement considéré comme un gouvernement central illégitime, incapable de significativement s'étendre au-delà de Kaboul.

Comme le montre clairement cette étude, l'UE ne devrait pas échapper aux critiques concernant son rôle et les erreurs commises en Afghanistan. Ces échecs peuvent être répartis en trois catégories analytiquement distinctes. Premièrement, l'autonomie a été un revers, l'UE n'ayant pas été en mesure de trouver une alternative stratégique impartiale à son intégration dans les objectifs de la politique étrangère américaine et à la confiance dans la puissance américaine. En conséquence, la stratégie de l'UE n'était ni indépendante ni impartiale. La politique de l'UE était entièrement sous la coupe de la présence militaire américaine en Afghanistan, cette dernière continuant à s'aligner sur les intérêts nationaux américains et la volonté des États-Unis de maintenir un déploiement militaire bien au-delà de la décennie de transformation de l'Afghanistan. Des occasions importantes de revoir la stratégie de l'UE ont été manquées, en particulier autour de 2016, lors de la négociation de la paix réussie entre Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin et le gouvernement de l'Afghanistan, qui a recentré l'attention internationale grâce à la conférence de Bruxelles et a lancé la *Global Strategy*.

Deuxièmement, des échecs ont été essuyés en matière de connaissances. En 2001, l'Afghanistan se trouvait dans une crise internationale complexe. Cette crise s'était développée depuis l'invasion soviétique de 1979 et avait été exacerbée par les évolutions complexes des années 1980 et 1990.

Néanmoins, la politique de l'UE en 2001 s'est appuyée sur la décision délibérée de traiter l'Afghanistan comme s'il s'agissait d'une 'feuille blanche'. Cette approche s'est traduite par une politique importante d'aide au développement de l'Afghanistan, mais qui a ignoré les leçons tirées des années 1980 et 1990 en ne s'engageant pas de manière significative sur les questions de corruption et en décidant de ne pas poursuivre une stratégie de paix par crainte de déstabiliser les alliances stratégiques de l'Europe. L'allocation de l'aide étant devenue un indicateur indirect de l'engagement et de la réussite de l'UE, l'impact de l'aide au développement américaine - qui a dépassé la capacité d'absorption de l'Afghanistan - n'a pas été reconnu, pas plus que l'insécurité croissante entre 2003 et 2021 n'a été identifiée comme susceptible de compromettre les objectifs de développement de l'UE à long terme. Après 2002-2003, la stratégie de l'UE n'a non seulement pas réussi à s'adapter à l'évolution de la situation en Afghanistan, mais elle était également irréaliste compte tenu de l'insécurité croissante et des calendriers inconcevables dans lesquels les États-Unis et l'UE opéraient. Après la ratification du traité de Lisbonne et la création du Service Européen pour l'Action Extérieure (SEAE) en 2011, de nombreuses occasions de rectifier et d'adapter ces politiques n'ont pas été saisies. L'inertie bureaucratique et les conflits internes entre le Bureau du représentant spécial de l'Union européenne et le SEAE à Bruxelles ont conduit à un déclasserement diplomatique de l'Afghanistan.

Troisièmement, on peut regretter des échecs d'imagination. Tout au long de l'étude, on constate que les questions d'identité et d'imagination se sont entremêlées, ce qui a par conséquent miné les politiques étrangères et de sécurité de l'UE. En réponse aux attaques terroristes du 11 Septembre 2001, des alternatives à une réponse militaire ont été exprimées au sein de l'UE. Néanmoins, une fois la décision américaine prise, les responsables politiques de l'UE n'ont pas réussi à imaginer de solutions autres que la construction de l'État. L'identité européenne en tant que 'puissance civile' a conduit à la mise en œuvre de politiques car les décideurs politiques ont simplement affirmé 'c'est ce que nous sommes' et 'c'est ce que nous faisons', au lieu de stratégiquement identifier le terrain et de se demander 'est-ce que cela va marcher' et 'comment allons-nous nous adapter' pour garantir le succès de leur intervention. Ce manque s'est poursuivi. En août 2021, les décideurs politiques ont été surpris par la prise de pouvoir des talibans. Des exercices stratégiques ont été menés, mais les suggestions selon lesquelles les États-Unis iraient jusqu'au bout du retrait de leurs troupes ont été accueillies avec incrédulité. De même, les suggestions selon lesquelles les talibans pourraient revenir au pouvoir ont été rejetées. L'Afghanistan était considéré comme '*too big to fail*', ce qui a souvent conduit les responsables politiques de l'UE à ne pas être en mesure d'accepter la réalité stratégique et d'imaginer le résultat qui s'est produit à l'été 2021.

À la suite de cette étude, 32 recommandations fondées sur des données empiriques sont proposées. Celles-ci sont liées aux multiples enseignements que l'on peut tirer de l'expérience de l'UE en Afghanistan. Elles soulignent la nécessité pour l'UE de constituer une base de connaissances qui permettra de mieux comprendre l'engagement international de l'UE et de se préparer à un système international plus multipolaire. Elles montrent également ce à quoi les institutions européennes doivent se préparer lorsqu'elles négocient leurs relations avec les talibans et les retombées d'une instabilité régionale. Il n'existe pas d'options idéales à adopter par l'UE, mais l'histoire suggère que le '*Basic Needs*' programme mis en place pourrait permettre d'atténuer les pires crises humanitaires auxquelles l'Afghanistan sera probablement confronté au cours de la prochaine décennie. La viabilité de l'édification de l'État pendant un conflit en cours

est désormais contestée par les responsables européens, qui croient moins en leur capacité à atteindre les objectifs stratégiques de l'UE. L'UE ne devrait pas laisser s'installer le 'Syndrome de l'Afghanistan', mais plutôt profiter de cette occasion pour tirer des leçons et développer sa capacité à intégrer les enseignements de ces événements dans les pratiques d'élaboration des politiques.

List of abbreviations

AF/PAK	Afghanistan-Pakistan
ANDS	Afghanistan National Development Strategy
ANP	Afghan National Police
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPE	Civilian Power Europe
ECHO	European Community Humanitarian Office
EEAS	European External Action Service
EOM	Election Observation Mission
EU	European Union
EUPOL	European Council's Common Security and Defence Policy mission
EUSR	European Union Special Representatives
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOA	Government of Afghanistan
HIG	Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin
HR/VP	High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
IEC	Independent Electoral Commission
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
LOTFA	Law and Order Trust Fund of Afghanistan
NA	Northern Alliance
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODA	Official Development Aid
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OOF	Other Official Flows
PRC	Peace and Reconciliation Corps
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
RSM	Resolute Support Mission
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USA	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WHO	World Health Organization

1 Introduction

1.1 Context and scope

On 15 August 2021, Afghanistan's capital Kabul was seized by the Taliban in a largely unopposed *coup d'état*. This marked a critical tipping point within a month-long offensive, whereby the Taliban had steadily been gaining rural territory. With minimal resistance and protection from the Afghan National Security Forces, President Ashraf Ghani's government retreated, and Afghan state institutions were seized. The rapid and sudden failure of the Afghan state took many inside and outside Afghanistan by surprise, leaving chaotic evacuation scenes at Kabul airport (Hassan, 2021). Twenty years of international support and military intervention had produced neither a democratically legitimate government nor a prosperous and secure society. With terrorist attacks unfolding whilst the United States of America's (USA) troops withdrew, it was unclear whether the originally-stated counter-terrorism objectives had been met. Instead, the Taliban has re-established an Islamic Emirate ruled by a fundamentalist interpretation of sharia law. Once again, Afghanistan provides a haven for terrorist groups that threaten international security and ultraconservative social structures are being enforced as human rights violations are being inflicted upon the wider population (Hassan, 2022). The already hazardous environment for Afghan women and girls has deteriorated rapidly and the economic and humanitarian crises that disproportionately impact them are growing.

The catalyst for the Afghan state's collapse was Washington's unilateral decision to withdraw US troops. Announced by President Trump in February 2020, following the Doha Agreement and reaffirmed by President Biden in April 2021, the decision compelled wider withdrawals from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) Troop-Contributing Nations. NATO had long held a holistic approach to troop deployment in Afghanistan, following the mantra 'In together, out together' (Biden, 2021; Jonegård, 2019). Yet, this does little to explain why two decades of international support failed to establish the necessary resilience for defending the state and preventing key institutions from collapsing so readily. Nor does it explain why the unintentional facilitation of the Taliban's rise to power was allowed, given repeated assurances that 'only when the conditions are right' would NATO withdraw (NATO, 2020).

The rise of a new Taliban regime undoubtedly complicates the relationship of the European Union (EU) with Afghanistan, as witnessed by a new phase emerging in the European Community's bilateral and multilateral relationships with the country. By 2018, the European Council concluded that the EU would support 'an inclusive Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, with the Government and the Taliban at its core' (European Council, 2018). Yet, this approach has collapsed with the Afghan government's departure. In its place, the EU has established five benchmarks of engagement whilst fashioning a 'Basic Needs' approach from its humanitarian and development instruments. For its part, the de facto Taliban government has not met EU calls for forming an inclusive and representative government. Increasingly, the EU finds itself buttressing the United Nations (UN) and coordinating calls for international unity as a source of leverage. Yet, the current crisis raises serious questions concerning what lessons the EU can start to learn from over 20 years of supporting democracy, development and security in partnership with Afghanistan. More broadly, as the European Parliament has proposed, lessons must be learnt from EU involvement in Afghanistan if Europe is to move forward on a sure footing. It is within this Study's scope to undertake an initial 'lessons learnt' exercise, exploring how and why EU policy towards Afghanistan has developed through today's crisis. By undertaking this exercise, this Study can draw out the significant issues at play and the lessons that need to be learnt.

1.2 Objectives

This study evaluates why international efforts in Afghanistan have failed to produce a secure, prosperous and democratic state capable of maintaining a stable development pathway. In identifying the value of European efforts in Afghanistan, a series of important lessons for the EU, particularly the European Parliament, are set out as European external action moves forward. This is especially urgent given that the Taliban's rise to power raises serious questions about EU capabilities, expectations and overall effectiveness. The study is part of a more extensive process of 'important self-criticism' taking place within the EU and contributes to the ongoing debate about how lessons learnt can be applied to further EU state-building efforts worldwide. As the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) Josep Borrell outlined:

'what has happened in Afghanistan should teach us a lot about this exercise of state-building, which is much more difficult than what [former] President [of the United States, George W.] Bush could have imagined before the invasion of Iraq. What does it mean for our relations with the United States? What does it mean for the development of a European Union strategic autonomy, for our security and for our defence policy?' (European External Action Service, 2021b)

Conspicuously, there is remarkably little academic literature to draw upon by way of research sources, given the importance of the Union's engagement with Afghanistan and the level of engagement that the EU has afforded the country over the last 20 years. There is no complete historical overview of European-level action in Afghanistan from which we can contextualise this 'lessons learnt' exercise. What little literature does exist has identified specific stages: the initial 'trade and aid' in the 1950s through to the 1970s; 'humanitarianism' from the 1980s through to 2001; and finally, 'state-building' from late 2001 to 2021 (Hassan, 2022). However, this Study goes beyond the broad chronicling of specific phases. A necessary objective in attempts to draw out lessons for the EU has been to try and establish in considerable detail 'what happened and when'. As such, this study has found it necessary to construct something of an initial history, picking out critical issues from the various stages of European-level engagement to highlight important lessons that emerged over time.

1.3 Methodology

The author deploys a historical approach using a process that traces European policy evolution in Afghanistan. The Study has been reliant on open-source material, drawing upon a large amount of qualitative data in the form of evaluation reports by a large number of international actors, as well as material produced in the form of European Parliament resolutions; European Commission Statements; Council and HR/VPs, Member State positions, declarations and statements. Where possible open-source lessons learnt material has been utilised. To undertake this analysis, all material was first entered into the Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software NVivo, which was used to explore, code and query all research material. Information was 'viewed' and 'coded'. In addition, publicly available US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) documents were entered into the database, following which 'queries' relating to the discussion of European policy were raised. Of particular interest to this Study are the 14 *Lessons Learnt Reports* published since 2016 and all 56 *Quarterly Reports* published since 30 October 2008. In addition, evaluation reports from multiple Member States have been identified and entered into the database. With regard to EU documents, this Study has benefitted from a pre-existing database of information collected by the author over the last 20 years, including archive material.

Furthermore, within the timeframe afforded for the study, over 20 interviews were conducted with EU and US officials, civil society actors, as well as domestic and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Throughout interviews with current and former EU and US officials, it was made clear to the author that their preference would be to speak frankly and honestly under conditions of anonymity, sometimes because of diplomatic sensitivity in their current roles. Some interviewees actively agreed to be cited and

their identities are disclosed and referenced. The decision not to disclose the identity of civil society actors as well as domestic and international NGOs workers was made because of the ongoing threats to such actors within Afghanistan, now and in the future. Interviews were carried out online given the timeframe, the geographical spread and the dangers of international travel into Afghanistan. These interviews were semi-structured, with a list of questions sent to participants in advance, along with information about the project. The benefit of this methodology is that it allowed the many strands identified at early stages to be drawn together comprehensively.

1.4 Structure

This study lays out an analysis of the EU Relations with Afghanistan. Section 2 provides a historical contextualisation covering collective European action from the 1980s to September 11, 2001. This builds a picture of Europe's humanitarian leadership throughout that time and how the EU navigated the Taliban's rise during their first encounter. Section 3 focuses on the trilateral relationship between the EU, the USA and Afghanistan in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, terrorist attacks. This draws out issues of transatlantic solidarity being in tension with European integration and the EU's strategic autonomy. Section 4 broadens the focus to regional engagement and regional efforts for peacebuilding, counter-terrorism and proliferation, counter-narcotics and irregular migration. Section 5 focuses on the EU's bilateral relationship with Afghanistan with a focus on the EU's Aid efforts, democracy assistance and election monitoring together with attempts to further Afghanistan's stability and security through EU's Common Security and Defence Policy mission. Section 6 outlines the EUSR' and Special envoys' roles, explaining the internal tensions that emerged post-Lisbon Treaty and the formation of the European External Action Service (EEAS). Section 7 outlines the EU's approach to peacebuilding and the internal tensions that emerged over state-building and peacebuilding. Section 8 outlines the EU's approach to the Taliban following the collapse of the Government of Afghanistan (GOA) in 2021. Section 9 draws together the findings of each section and summarises the important lessons learnt from the EU's engagement. In total, 32 recommendations are outlined within the Study. These are evidence-based and correspond to specific sections. The recommendations are provided at the end of each section but a consolidated list is available as an Appendix.

2 Historical contextualisation and analysis (1980s-2001)

This Section contextualises the historical relationship between Europe and Afghanistan in the late 20th century. It provides a broader context through which to understand today's crisis. The utility of this relies in demonstrating that many 'top-level' themes and issues from the last twenty years of engagement in Afghanistan can be dated back much further. This is an essential corrective. A consistent theme throughout interviews with senior officials at the EEAS and other EU institutions was how, with regret, **post-2001 Afghanistan was treated as a 'tabula rasa'**. According to a former EU official in Afghanistan between 2001-2005, who was later EU Ambassador to Pakistan, 'We didn't take into consideration we were not starting from a blank sheet ... I was part of that ... we thought that we could build from nothing' (Cautain, 2022).

Whilst coding the dataset and interview transcripts for this study, significant themes emerged from qualitative data. The four major themes that cut across Europe's relationship with Afghanistan before and after 2001 are:

1. **Tensions between European integration and the maintenance of Atlantic solidarity.**
2. The **role of US global leadership** and its effects on developing European strategy and issues of strategic autonomy.
3. The **tensions between long-term development and more immediate security concerns.**
4. The **limitations of European capabilities** concerning crisis management and strategic planning.

Europe's navigation of these top-level themes continues to shape the European Union's relations with Afghanistan. However, they did not suddenly emerge in September 2001. They are a product of structural forces within the international system combined with regional and domestic forces in Afghanistan and Europe over at least the last fifty years. This is a substantially longer time horizon than most policy-makers have identified and conceptually operated within; and a far larger international context than was appreciated from offices in Brussels and the EU's compound in Kabul. By way of an example, the Soviet invasion in 1979 is a crucial point in a wider systemic pattern whereby states invade Afghanistan only to withdraw, leaving behind a security vacuum filled by violent domestic actors (often supported by external actors). Within this systemic pattern, European leadership and humanitarian assistance have been forced to adapt to the push and pull of international actors positioning themselves within the international system. This is as true of the Soviet Union in the 1980s as it is with the USA from the 1980s to the 2020s. Afghanistan in 2001 contained the 'etchings of history', some made within living memory, that have shaped its cultural norms, societal values and political divisions. An ahistorical approach to Afghanistan is profoundly problematic and destined for failure.

Recommendation 1: Future conflicts and crises will require analysis considering longer time horizons than most policy-makers have identified and conceptually operated with. The EU should seek to build a pre-emptive knowledge base that combines area studies with an understanding of EU engagement in the world.

2.1 Context of the European Union engagement with Afghanistan (1950s-1979)

The EU's engagement with Afghanistan is often portrayed as having been hastily derived following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. This portrayal is incorrect, even if ahistorical simplicity has shaped EU policy-makers' mental models and imaginations. This relationship has, in reality, been shaped by the preceding decades of European-level engagement set in motion by the European Community. Understanding the relationship within a longer historical context allows us to frame the complexities embedded within this relationship and better understand its current trajectory. Briefly, it is worth recognising that the relationship started early in the 1950s with small levels of trade. This was expanded throughout the 1960s-70s with the introduction of the Common Agricultural Policy and the rise of European food aid (Bergmann, 1977; Hassan, 2010; Hassan, 2022). Whilst in general terms, this relationship was not high on the European agenda, European Community-Afghanistan level discussion about modernisation and development framed relations. Indeed, **the 1930s to 1970s were considered Afghanistan's 'golden years' and Kabul 'the Paris of Central Asia'**. Afghanistan was a tourist destination and women not only attended university but also had equal rights that were comparable to those of European nations (Bumiller, 2009). For example, women initially gained the right to vote in Afghanistan in 1919, one year after the United Kingdom (UK) and one year before white women in the USA¹.

Nevertheless, given low social-economic indicators, humanitarian aid and development in and through economic modernisation have been central to the relationship from the outset. It was only in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 that the European Community suspended food aid. Unable to guarantee that Soviet forces would not intercept aid within Afghanistan, the European Community instead directed aid to Afghan refugees that had fled to neighbouring Pakistan (Jenkins, 1980).

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan reframed the European Community-Afghanistan relationship. As geopolitical security concerns rose to the political agenda, the nine Community Member States reshaped their relationship with Afghanistan. Displaced by Cold War concerns, modernisation and development gave way to expressions of transatlantic 'solidarity' (Jenkins, 1980). Consequently, significant problems with the Community's crisis management capacity were exposed in the early 1980s. As Ham (2016) discusses, 'Neither the European Community nor the EPC [European Political Cooperation] were authorised more than in an informal way to deal with th[is] security issue'. The European Community could not act collectively as national governments refused to provide the Community with the necessary authority nor the coherence needed for firm leadership of this crisis. **For the 'solidarity of the West', Member States forfeited the development of the European Community's crisis management instruments and failed to assert a unified European approach to Afghanistan.** Member States' security interests pushed them more towards solidifying their relationship with the USA, thereby marginalising European Community-level cooperation and integration. This mistake was replicated in 2001, even with the advent of the EU and the passing of over two decades. **This has hindered Europe's strategic autonomy.**

2.2 The rise of European humanitarianism in Afghanistan (1980-1996)

In the 1980s, as much out of necessity as fitting with the zeitgeist of Civilian Power Europe (CPE), **the European Community developed a humanitarian approach towards Afghanistan**, whilst traditional state-based geopolitics concerns remained the purview of Member States. European identity replaced power politics with 'civilian power' to make the world a better place and help 'the poor abroad' (Duchêne, 1973). In the name of Western solidarity, transatlantic relationships helped shape what was

¹ Women's right to vote in Afghanistan was lost in 1929 but regained in 1964 after the adoption of a new Constitution.

politically possible and, as a result helped foster a normative Europe without traditional security instruments.

The strategic direction of the international order, and the maintenance of international security, were implicitly yielded to the USA. Europe's external role in the world was to have a positive impact through its civilian capabilities and normative commitments. This has become central to European identity and the emergence of European exceptionalism in European aid policies (Lorenzini, 2019). In 1985, the institutionalisation of this humanitarian approach took shape as the *Aid to Uprooted People* programme and the redelivery of aid to Afghanistan from a representative office in Peshawar, Pakistan (Crisis Group, 2005). This programme aimed to assist in the expected return of refugees but by having geographical access predominantly from Pakistan, the programme was limited to Afghanistan's Eastern provinces (Sondorp, 2004).

When Soviet troops withdrew in 1989, Afghanistan had undergone a decade of occupation and conflict. The UN-brokered Geneva Accords left a weak communist government trying to face down mujahedin fighters who benefited from a USD 3 billion influx of US weapons and assistance (Katzman 2005; Rashid 2000). With Washington and Moscow agreeing to a joint removal of military aid to Afghan fighters on 13 September 1991, Afghanistan's Najibullah government was dealt a severe blow and mujahedin factions began to see a greater opportunity to take power. On 18 March 1992, President Najibullah agreed to step down, furthering a power vacuum and undermining peacebuilding efforts. This initiated a wave of rebellions, which resulted in a new mujahedin regime being installed in Kabul on 18 April 1992, comprising Tajik and Uzbek forces, a landmark moment that has direct consequences today.

Since establishing the Afghan state in 1747, with only a brief exception in 1929, the Pashtuns have never lost control of the capital (Byrd, 2012). Estimations of Afghanistan's heterogeneous population, conducted at the time, suggested that the country was constituted of Pashtuns (50 %), Tajiks (26 %), Uzbeks (8 %), Hazaras (7 %) and Aimaqs (6 %) (Ahady, 1995)². **The Pashtuns' declining power precipitated the outbreak of a bloody civil war** (Rashid, 2000). Gulbuddin Hekmatyar rallied Pashtun forces and laid siege to Kabul. His indiscriminate violence and the murder of thousands earned him the title 'Butcher of Kabul'. To paraphrase, even if to oversimplify, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 'It was the rise of Tajik and Uzbek forces, and the fear that this instilled in Pashtuns' that made [civil] war inevitable'. This was a crucial moment in the rise and fall of political power in Afghanistan, where a **threat to displace the major ruling power ended in civil war**. Conversely, **the Taliban's rise in the 1990s would generate optimism, promising to reverse this decline and restore Pashtun supremacy**. This dynamic should have provided an important lesson for **the Bonn Process**, which **renewed perceptions of Pashtun's decline**.

The **civil war precipitated conflict between warlords and their respective fiefdoms**, who exercised little restraint in committing widespread atrocities and human rights violations³. The complex security environment was made worse by drought and famine. As a result of these combined factors, Afghanistan entered into a renewed phase of humanitarian crises, whereby substantial human suffering was

² The size of the Afghan population and the different ethnic groupings are highly contested. As such, these figures should be considered illustrative rather than definitive. In 2021-22 both the UN and the World Bank estimated the total Afghan population at approximately 40 million. The exact proportions of each ethnic population continue to remain contested but are approximately Pashtuns (42 %), Tajiks (27 %), Uzbeks (9 %), Hazaras (9 %), Aimaqs (4 %), Turkmen (3 %), Baloch (2 %) and other (4 %) (Puri-Mirza, 2022).

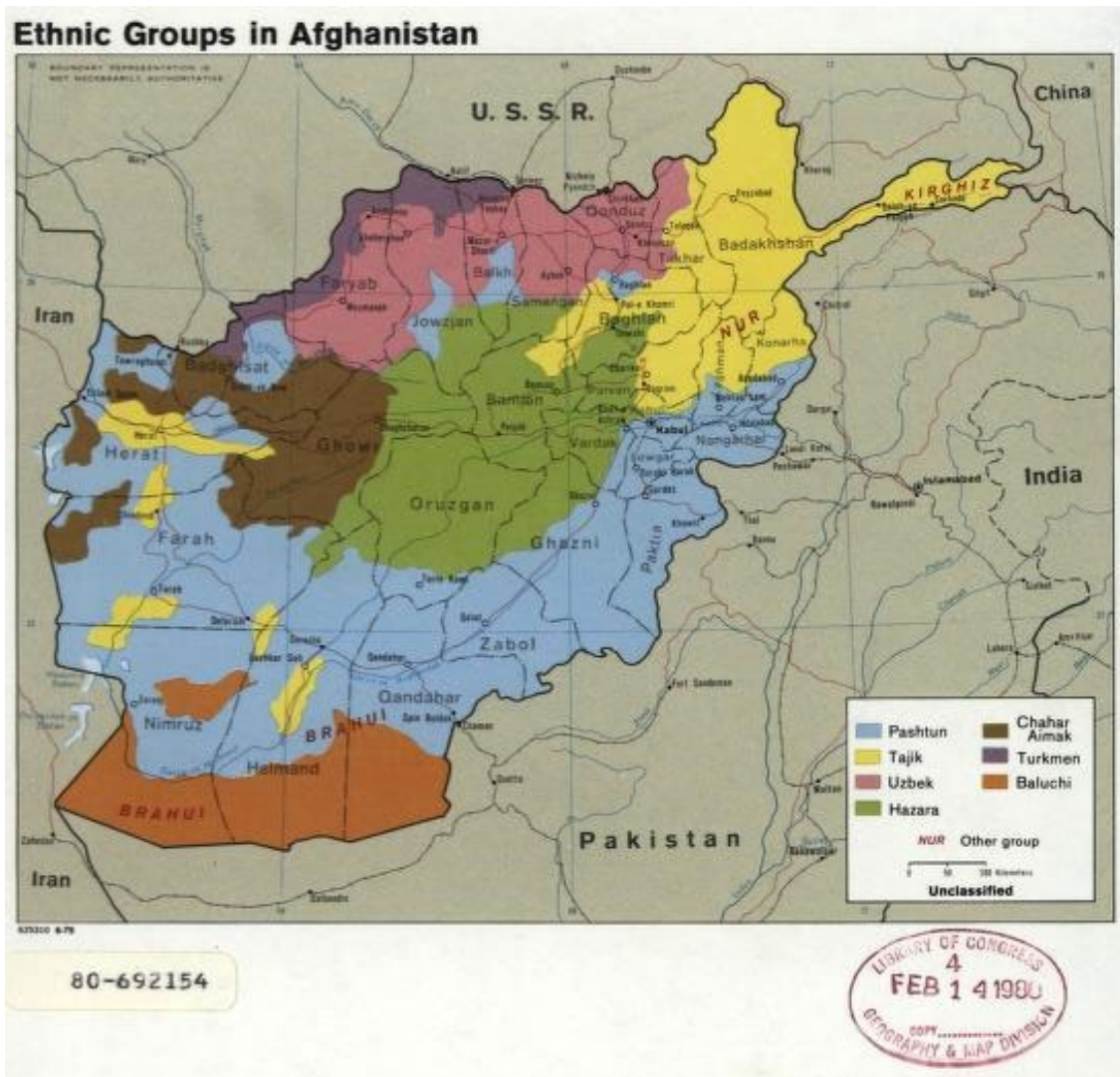
³ Afghanistan can be divided into five such fiefdoms, whereby warlords maintained military and political control. In the north, Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostam controlled the Faryab, Jozjan, Balkh, Samangan, Baghlan, and (partially) Kunduz provinces. In the northeast, Tajik Commander Ahmad Shah Masud controlled the Takhar, Badakhshan, Parwan, Kapisa and parts of Kunduz provinces. In central Afghanistan, the Hazara organizations, especially the Hizibi Wahdat, had control over the Bamyan, parts of Ghor, Uruzgan and Ghazni provinces. In the west, Tajik Commander Ismail Khan controlled the Badghis, Herat and a large part of the Ghor and Farah provinces. By 1994, the Taliban emerged in the south (Ahady, 1995).

compounded by over five million Afghans lacking access to food and water and less than 12 % of the population having access to sanitation. A refugee crisis followed. By the start of the new millennium, approximately one million Afghans were internally displaced and several million refugees fled predominantly to Pakistan and Iran (Ruiz and Emery, 2001; Rashid, 2000; Agrawala et al., 2001).

Nevertheless, just as Afghanistan would need humanitarian assistance due to the civil war, so did it need concerted peacebuilding efforts that never arrived. As one lesson-learnt exercise concluded, the Geneva Accords in 1988 had failed to include a mechanism to settle an internal conflict, global powers disengaged and 'Russia, Pakistan, Iran and [...] Saudi Arabia supported their favoured Afghan groups in the civil war' (Suhrke et al., 2002). This situation was far from Afghanistan's functioning national institutions of the 1960s and 1970s. This points to the need for peacebuilding exercises to promote indigenous pluralism and build institutional mechanisms and local peacebuilding capacities. **Nevertheless, the consequences of this war-driven dysfunctional legacy and their evident fallout in the 1990s, continues to play out today. The cost of disengagement, and any resulting security vacuum, is likely to fuel further crises as neighbouring powers and regional actors pursue their national interests within Afghanistan.**

EU activity in Afghanistan was not insulated from the deteriorating insecurity inside the country throughout the 1990s. Afghanistan was an extremely complex environment in which to deliver aid. Throughout the early 1990s, the EU ostensibly buttressed the UN, supporting UN-initiated activities and coordinating humanitarian assistance. The European Community and then EU institutions maintained an emphasis on multilateral crisis management. The EU supported the notion that the UN Security Council (UNSC) maintained primary responsibility for international peace and security under the UN Charter.

Figure 1: Ethnic groups in Afghanistan



Source: United States Central Intelligence Agency, *Ethnic groups in Afghanistan*, 1979, The Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division [website](#).

In 1993, the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) began operating in Afghanistan and financing projects that demonstrated ‘independence’, ‘neutrality’ and ‘relief’, following the ‘values and principles for the intervention of European humanitarian aid’ (European Commission, 2010). From its inception, ECHO was intended to build its operational capacity for direct action on the ground during humanitarian crises (Mowjee, 1998). However, this capacity was not developed. Instead, **ECHO relied on implementing partners, facilitating the channelling of funds through predominately European NGOs.** Doing so allowed the EU to bypass the UN in instances where European NGOs directly appealed for EU funds, adopting a more political dimension if needed (Donini, 1996; also see Crisis Group, 2005). The EU’s office in Peshawar began to take on a discreet role in ‘coordinating the work of NGOs, particularly in the health sector, which was supported by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the governmental authorities. By the mid-1990s, **the EU had quietly become the ‘de facto coordinating body’ in a range of sectors and particularly in the realm of humanitarian assistance** (Donini, 1996; Burns, 1995). This is significant for three reasons:

- Firstly, it is notable that as the Soviet Union collapsed and the USA turned its attention away from Afghanistan, warlords filled the security vacuum. Europe was a key strategic actor in mitigating the worst effects of the humanitarian crisis.

- Secondly, the EU's presence on the ground facilitated leadership that is often overlooked within contemporary analyses and the little available literature on EU-Afghanistan relations. In and of itself, there are lessons to be learnt here, one of which concerns correcting the narrative and asserting the positive role Europe has historically played well before the attacks of 11 September 2001.
- Thirdly, the EU was able to build, operationalise and resource a network of NGOs on the ground and because of their autonomy, they could navigate the complex system and landscapes Afghanistan presents. These were not exclusively humanitarian, adopting a quiet political agenda where there was demand. A number of these NGOs continue to operate in Afghanistan today and their Senior officials have contributed interviews to this Study.

Recommendation 2: Lessons learnt in the 1980s and 1990s illustrate the need for ongoing peacebuilding exercises that promote indigenous pluralism, build institutional mechanisms for peace and enhance local peacebuilding capacities.

Recommendation 3: There is a need for EU institutions to correct the narrative and assert the positive role Europe has historically played in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

2.3 The rise of the Taliban (1994-1996)

The international community's inability to negotiate a peace settlement throughout the 1990s proved catastrophic for the Afghan population. Multilateral efforts were inconsistent, and whilst they could mitigate some of the worst consequences of the humanitarian crisis, they could not prevent events in Afghanistan from tipping over into the world's largest refugee crisis (Amnesty International, 1995a; 1995b). With **widespread human insecurity** and **systemic levels of human rights violations, the Taliban emerged in 1994** and began to challenge the warlords in and around Kandahar province. Led by Mullah Omar, **the Taliban capitalised on widespread divisions** within the warlord's fiefdoms and the once-idealised Mujahidin leadership. Whilst the USA had funded the Mujahidin by way of Operation Cyclone through Pakistan in the 1980s, from early 1990s, the USA primarily regarded Afghanistan as 'an old Cold War story' (Coll, 2004). **The Taliban would initially rely on Pakistan**, who at times struggled to deal with them, but the partnership was cemented in alignment with Pakistan's Islamisation agenda and the desire for strategic depth against India. However, domestically **the Taliban gained legitimacy partly by providing local security underpinned by their interpretation of sharia law and punitive justice.**

By lowering the levels of arbitrary violence in domestic life, the Taliban quickly seized power in Afghanistan. By fighting warlords and solving local disputes, Mullah Omar rapidly emerged as a 'Robin Hood figure' within sections of the Afghan population. As such, **the Taliban could be viewed politically as a viable alternative to the instability of civil war** (Bergen, 2006). A few months after the movement surfaced, they seized a large arms dump outside Spin Baldak and captured Afghanistan's second-largest city Kandahar. **By early 1995, the Taliban were using commandeered Soviet weapons in their advance towards Kabul and on 27 September 1996 finally took the capital** (Katzman, 2005). Although many of the Taliban were born in Pakistani refugee camps and received education in Pakistani *madrassas*, they demonstrated remarkable speed in mobilising and seizing a country they barely knew. **A combination of fighting skills learnt from Mujaheddin parties based in Pakistan, and their Pashtun nationalism and appeals to Islam facilitated their rapid rise to power.** This allowed a supra-tribal and supra-ethnic set of norms to emerge with the group portraying itself as a Sunni religious movement for all the peoples of Afghanistan but ethnically Pashtun when advantageous (Borthakur and Kotokey, 2020).

Once Kabul had been seized, **the Taliban's first act was to capture former President Najibullah from the UN diplomatic compound he had been residing in since 1992.** Najibullah was transported to the

Presidential Palace, castrated, dragged behind a jeep, shot dead and finally hung on a control post outside the Palace (Katzman, 2005; Rashid, 2000). **Punitive ceremonial displays of justice set the tone for the Taliban's engagement with Afghans and the international community.** This was met with condemnation from the European Parliament, which expressed 'shock'. In addition, the Parliament expressed its concerns over the Taliban's 'absolute discriminatory regime against women', committing 'atrocities', an 'extreme interpretation of Sharia ... implying inhumane forms of punishment', attacking 'humanitarian workers such as the Delegate of the International Red Cross Committee' and burning 'foreign films and books' (European Parliament, 1996). These became recurring themes brought up throughout EU institutions and the wider international community during the late 1990s and with the Taliban's self-perceived victory in 2021, they are likely to re-emerge throughout the 2020s.

Recommendation 4: EU institutions should be prepared for the regaining of power by the Taliban to be accompanied by widespread human rights violations, worsening conditions for women and girls and the renewal of punitive justice, including public executions and the death penalty.

2.4 European Union relations with the Taliban (1996-2001)

In the second half of the 1990s, EU institutions became Afghanistan's largest single aid donor, providing 18 % of all official donor receipts, compared to the United States' 3 %⁴. Within this period, EU institutions alone accounted for 27 % of all humanitarian aid disbursements compared with 2 % from the USA⁵. This contribution was by no means insignificant. Far from its often-caricatured tertiary role, the EU was the single largest humanitarian donor to Afghanistan throughout the 1990s (European Commission, 2003). Independent reports have outlined the success of Europe's intervention. For example, an extensive evaluation of AUP demonstrated that 'Aid to uprooted people' had a significant impact on the livelihoods of those people and host communities in Afghanistan. Its versatility allowed it to work with different actors (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, local government, International and Afghan NGOs), in a variety of sectors (health, agriculture, education and mine action) and through different mechanisms (direct delivery, capacity building and delegation of responsibility to local NGOs) (COTA, 2000: 17).

The importance of the EU's role should not be underestimated. Its humanitarian capacity was institutionalised through NGO networks and formal humanitarian assistance programmes long before 11 September 2001. **It was not only operating successfully but also having a direct impact.** Moreover, unlike the situation in 1980, when Member States were divided on collective European-level action, a consensus had emerged around Europe's humanitarian role and the institutions that could be used to build humanitarian capacity on the ground. **European unity was central to its success.** Nevertheless, **this role set Europe on course for direct tensions with the Taliban as they suddenly rose to power.** Understanding these tensions provides a vital backdrop to European engagement with the **Taliban today, who have not moderated their ideological aspirations,** even if different tactics and strategies have evolved.

Undoubtedly, EU relations with the Taliban became particularly strained. Along with the international community generally, excluding Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan, the EU refused to recognise the Taliban regime as the sole legitimate GOA. The epitome of tensions between the Taliban and the EU emerged on 29 September 1997, when EU Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs Emma Bonino was threatened with a Kalashnikov rifle and arrested in Kabul. This episode highlighted many of the most vital themes likely to resurface; namely: contestations over **women's rights; interpretations of Sharia law; arbitrary violence; and human rights abuses.** The Commissioner and her party had been touring a women's hospital when they were arrested and some members were beaten for taking photos in violation

⁴ Figures generated by the 'OECD.Stat' [website](#).

⁵ Figures generated by the 'OECD.Stat' [website](#).

of the Taliban's strict interpretation of the Islamic code (Shawcross, 1997: 8). Upon release, the Commissioner asserted that 'This is an example of how people live here every day – in a situation of random terror' (Johnston, 1997). Bonino later added:

'Afghanistan must get back on the top of the agenda of the international community. Peace will not come by itself and no military solution will bring lasting peace. The roots of Afghanistan's problems are political, and they need a political solution, involving all interested regional and outer powers.' (Agence Europe, 1997)

This escalated tensions with the Taliban (Reuters, 1997; Smith, 1997). Nevertheless, Commission spokesman Klaus van der Pas reassured the international community that the EU would continue sending humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, as 'this money is given regardless of the government ... it goes to the people, not the government' (Peters, 1997). For the European Parliament, long before 11 September 2001, there was grave disquiet about the Taliban regime. As the President of the European Parliament Nicole Fontaine, argued, the Taliban represented a 'fanaticism that hides behind and betrays the Islamic religion' whilst victimising 'Afghan women ... who are forbidden to work outside the home, and are subjected to physical and moral violence belonging to a past age' and Afghan girls, who were 'particularly hard hit, since they are excluded from the education system'. Fontaine made the Parliament's position clear, asserting that,

'There must be a return to standards of behaviour which are in keeping with universal human rights, and are worthy of the long centuries of Afghan civilisation. This can only be brought about by relentless international pressure on this shameful and criminal regime, and its main allies, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia' (Fontaine, 2001a).

Indeed, shortly before his assassination Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, leader of the National Resistance Front against the Taliban, was invited to speak at the European Parliament. In April 2001, Massoud warned the Parliament about the political, military and economic support the Taliban was receiving from Pakistan and the threat al-Qaeda posed to the USA (Morillon, 2004). The European Parliament can elevate the national opposition to the Taliban, which remains a valuable foreign policy tool.

Despite the evident tensions between the EU and the Taliban regime, **a policy of operating humanitarian aid and circumventing the Taliban is said to have had 'a tangible impact'** supporting 'over 400 schools and over 200 basic health clinics, many offering services to women and girls' (European Commission 2003a). Given the crisis in 2021, this provides an essential lesson that the EU can learn from the 1990s: **humanitarian aid and other elements with a political component can be successful and have a tangible impact.** However, caution on the development side needs to be acknowledged. The European Commission's *2003-2006 Afghanistan Country Strategy Paper* outlined that during the first Taliban period,

'the biggest impact has been more on reducing extremes of vulnerability rather than actual development, which has been largely impossible given the war and then Taliban policies, especially in relation to girls' education and women's mobility and employment' (European Commission, 2003a).

This timeframe includes June to December 1998, when **the Taliban demanded that all NGOs leave Kabul.** ECHO was therefore forced to suspend the provision of aid. This situation was compounded by two major earthquakes and the Clinton administration's decision to launch cruise missiles at al-Qaeda training camps in retaliation for the bombing of two American embassies on the African continent (European Community Humanitarian Office, 1998: 15; Clinton, 2005). ECHO resumed work in Afghanistan at the end of 1998 but limited its activities to 'regions in the greatest need', such as Hazarajat, which faced a Taliban blockade' (European Community Humanitarian Office, 1998: 15).

Hence, **throughout the 1990s, EU success was more than anecdotal.** It helped mitigate the excesses of the humanitarian crisis. **However, the EU could not encourage development capable of generating**

meaningful structural change. Local and immediate personal impacts could not generate sustained structural development in the short, medium or long term. This provides an essential set of lessons for today.

Recommendation 5: As the EU steps forward to fill the humanitarian vacuum and demonstrate international leadership, it should expect tensions with the Taliban to be increasingly exacerbated.

Recommendation 6: Although undesirable, in the medium term, if tensions with the Taliban become irreconcilable, the European Parliament should be willing to use its platform to elevate the profile of partners it sees as a workable opposition to the Taliban. Such action should be approached cautiously.

Recommendation 7: The EU should expect its 'Basic Needs' programmes to have a tangible impact based on lessons learnt in the 1990s. However, it should maintain cautious expectations about this policy beyond mitigating the worst of the humanitarian crisis or destabilising the new Taliban government.

3 The European Union and the transatlantic context of state-building in Afghanistan (2001-2021)

3.1 Transatlantic solidarity and 11 September 2001

The 11 September 2001 attack remains the world's most deadly terrorist atrocity. Whilst almost 3 000 people lost their lives directly, an additional 5 000 survivors and responders died due to Ground Zero exposure (Halle, 2021). Furthermore, the World Trade Center Health Program supports the ongoing care of 120 000 survivors and responders who are suffering from ongoing issues as a result of this action⁶. These attacks took place one week after the European Commission released *Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships* in which the Commission astutely warned of the dangers emanating from Afghanistan due to 'terrorism, religious fundamentalism and ethnic conflict'. Yet, the Commission stopped short of outing a concrete response, arguing that the EU merely needed to 'reflect more deeply on the major political challenges facing the region, and be ready to adopt a more assertive and forward-looking approach to its policy dialogue' (European Commission 2001). This was somewhat vague and reflected broader international inaction towards the growing threat emanating from the connection between Afghanistan and Pakistan. During the 1990s, what was nebulously understood as an international terrorist 'network' would later be known as al-Qaeda, led by the Saudi national Osama bin Laden. As early as May 1996, with evidence of his terrorist financing beginning to mount, **Pakistani intelligence officers introduced bin Laden to Taliban leaders in Kandahar** (9/11 Commission, 2004). Over time, the Taliban and al-Qaeda built a significant relationship. Bin Laden had established himself as more than a guest, with al-Qaeda offering *bay'ah* (a pledge of allegiance grounded in Sharia law) and financial support to the Taliban. **It was from Afghanistan that the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks were planned.**

With Afghanistan hosting al-Qaeda, the G.W. Bush administration made two fundamental decisions from which early objectives flowed. Firstly, *National Security Presidential Directive 9* saw no distinction between terrorist organisations and the states harbouring them (The White House, 2001). From this premise, a second decision followed to cast **the US response within the framework of a 'war on terror'**. These decisions led to the USA engaging with Afghanistan through traditional security instruments. The importance of these decisions should not be underestimated. They created a path-dependency from which the long-term momentum of US policy flowed. With the USA being the only superpower in the international system embedded within complex alliance networks, this **path dependency impacted the EU** and the international system more widely. The long-term consequences of these decisions are still unfolding today.

The USA concluded that it was at 'war' with international terrorism and by 14 September 2001 the White House developed a paper titled *Game Plan for a Political-Military Strategy for Pakistan and Afghanistan*. This paper detailed specific demands for the Taliban, including the surrender of bin Laden and his chief lieutenants such as Ayman al Zawahiri. **The link between Afghanistan and Pakistan was cemented from the start of the conflict.** By 16 September 2001, the US Departments of State and Defense had consulted NATO, requested intelligence sharing, and designed a plan to approach allies based on their capabilities and resources. The following day, military plans had been established, including ground troops for counter-terrorism operations (9/11 Commission, 2004: 332-3). **The USA remained confident that the Taliban would not hand over bin Laden.** This would have entailed breaking *bay'ah*, a severe offence under Sharia Law, and upsetting marriages and kinship networks which cement social, economic and political relationships between the Taliban, al-Qaeda and Pakistan. Indeed, **these networks continue to exist and make it very unlikely that the Taliban will disengage from al-Qaeda today** (Hassan, 2022).

⁶ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 'Program Statistics' [webpage](#), *World Trade Center Health Program*, 2022.

On 21 September 2001, President G.W. Bush approved military plans for the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

Europe's response to the terrorist attacks emphasised transatlantic solidarity. For the first and only time, NATO invoked Article 5, pertaining to collective defence set out in the Washington Treaty, as an act of solidarity. NATO had outlined the serious threat terrorism posed to the alliance's 1999 Strategic Concept but it was not until its response to 11 September that NATO launched its first counter-terrorism operations and its first operation outside of the Euro-Atlantic area (NATO, 2018). This was a transformational moment for the NATO alliance and as **NATO's lessons learnt report concludes, the campaign in Afghanistan has enhanced NATO's combined military capabilities** (NATO, 2021). For many European powers, coming to the assistance of the USA was significant given the history of US intervention in Europe throughout the 20th century. This was compounded by a sense of shock and sympathy regarding the events themselves. However, as one EU official detailed,

'it's not a secret that transatlantic solidarity played very strongly at the moment of engagement [...] if we were requested to go to the moon, by the USA, we would go to the moon [...] if we were asked by the USA to go to Madagascar, we will have been now discussing 20 years of EU involvement in Madagascar [...] transatlantic unity and solidarity was much more important. And actually, it was the only reason why people [states] entered Afghanistan. It was not about democracy. It was not about state building. It was just to get rid of Osama bin Laden at that point [...] initially, it was just EU Member States, following the request of the USA to get engaged.'

As many interviewees agreed, **Member States' decisions to assist the USA in Afghanistan were deemed essential to European security.** As one EU official interviewee stated, the decision to uphold transatlantic solidarity was because:

'we wanted them [the USA] to react as they are reacting now on the Eastern Flank of NATO. We wanted to be sure that the USA will help us out whenever we have yet another problem with Russia.'

Within this international context, therefore, **there was considerable importance in maintaining and demonstrating Transatlantic security.** This is a significant lesson that goes beyond the past and present crises in Afghanistan. **European engagement and invocation of transatlantic solidarity are essential for maintaining European security.** The outcome of events in Afghanistan may be deeply problematic and EU state-building objectives not met but this larger international objective should neither be forgotten nor trivialised in the face of growing international instability. Moreover, given the synergy between transatlantic values, nor should it be considered 'bandwagoning', despite touching on issues of Europe's strategic autonomy⁷.

Recommendation 8: When weighing the success and failure of European policy in Afghanistan, the broader international context should be considered. Future decisions concerning Europe's strategic direction will need to continue to consider the importance of collective defence and the maintenance of transatlantic solidarity.

3.2 European strategic autonomy, 11 September 2001 and Afghanistan

If European intervention in Afghanistan is understood exclusively through the initial lens of supporting US counter-terrorism objectives, ensuring that transatlantic solidarity is translated into European security, then **issues to do with European strategic autonomy are defunct** (Franke, 2021). Indeed, a consensus emerged whilst undertaking this Study that, as Ambassador Cautain (2022) argued, 'The major actor was the USA. We [the EU] never tried strategic autonomy on Afghanistan'. Moreover, as Shapiro (2021) has

⁷ Bandwagoning is a concept used to describe the actions of relatively weaker international actors. When a weaker actor joins with a stronger actor, it is considered bandwagoning if it is primarily conceded that the stronger actor disproportionality gains from the alliance.

argued, from the start of Europe's involvement in Afghanistan, 'European contributors willingly, even eagerly, subordinated themselves to US strategy, regardless of whether it made sense'. This is important for understanding debates around strategic autonomy. **European policy-makers often define strategic autonomy in terms of the EU's capacity to act, thereby neglecting the underlying need for strategic judgements to be made.** As Youngs' (2021) thoughtful analysis details, in most instances, **it is not the EU's lack of capabilities that restrains it from acting autonomously but political choices. In the case of Afghanistan, this was the political choice to follow US leadership for two decades.** In such circumstances, **adding a modest layer of capabilities is unlikely to be game changing for EU actions around the world.** As Kaldor (2021) argues, even in 2021, as NATO followed the US withdrawal, European strategic autonomy in Afghanistan was left wanting due to a lack of political will, disagreement between Germany and France and a desire not to become involved in 'live fire' once Kabul fell.

A further distinction should be made concerning the EU's strategic autonomy. As one EU official interview disclosed, the EU relied on US military and strategic capabilities throughout its twenty years of engagement in Afghanistan. However, on the 'civilian side', EU action was autonomous and derived from 'a genuine EU commitment to values'. In part, eliding the concept of strategic autonomy with the EU's civilian agenda reflects how EU policy-makers have constructed a concept by using the term without adequately defining what it means (Youngs 2021). Afghanistan was a test of Europe's strategic autonomy to the extent that the EU could carry out its autonomous civilian agenda. However, this civilian autonomy was nested within the continuation of US military power and the political choice to remain engaged in Afghanistan.

Simply put, **US military power underwrote the transatlantic campaign in Afghanistan because European powers lacked the political will to imagine an alternative to this scenario.** Accordingly, Afghanistan has demonstrated two crucial issues, firstly, the extent to which Europe has willingly relied on American capabilities (Shapiro, Puglierin et al., 2021) and secondly, the extent to which **the USA has shifted its grand strategy over the last two decades and become less willing to be the 'world's policeman'**. America has preferred to focus on more immediate national interests and strategic competition in a multipolar system. These two factors can no longer be reconciled. To overcome this new international dynamic, **the EU will need to develop further security capabilities and underwrite its strategic autonomy in both the security and civilian spaces.** However, these will need to be accompanied by **developing a deep and urgent political resolve** if these capabilities are more than trivial. This is especially true if the EU continues integrating a civilian agenda into crisis management capabilities.

Enhancing EU strategic autonomy would provide significant advantages to Europe's collective security. It would also **reflect an international order where US power and therefore transatlantic power, is relatively diminished in the face of multipolarity** (Zakaria, 2008). This provides a crucial lesson to be learned moving forward. **The EU and Member States continue to lack the necessary threshold of security capabilities, which undermines Europe's global influence and ability to act autonomously.** As a Senior EU official assessed, just as in 2001 European powers are unable to go it alone and act autonomously. If the USA was to ask for European assistance twenty years later,

'Would we [European Powers] be in a position to decline? That's the strategic autonomy question. If suddenly, the US started a war in Latin America. And requests NATO's help, are we in a position not to go? [...] the answer is most probably negative at this point. It's nothing to do with Afghanistan.'

This echoes more comprehensive criticism by a Senior European diplomat, who explained that 'the European Union is stuck in declaratory tool foreign policy ... the EU likes to say a lot of stuff. They are very good at saying stuff.' However, it was felt that the EU needs to embrace 'strategic reality' if it is to have a foreign policy that 'gets its hand dirty' and 'creates influence in the world' not just 'state sentences about

how it would like the world to be'. This would be a radical departure from the identity underpinning CPE since the 1970s.

Recommendation 9: Growing US reluctance to be a global security guarantor and the relative decline of transatlantic power calls for the need to develop further EU security capabilities that underwrite EU strategic autonomy in both the security and civilian spaces. These will need to be accompanied by the development of a deep and urgent political resolve if these capabilities are to be more than trivial. This is especially true if the EU continues integrating a civilian agenda into crisis management capabilities. Currently, the EU and Member States continue to lack the necessary threshold of security capabilities, which undermines Europe's global influence and ability to act autonomously.

3.3 Transatlantic tensions: marginalisation, 'mini-lateralism' and divergence

The USA and the EU should not necessarily oppose greater strategic autonomy to transatlantic solidarity. European efforts, starting with the *European Security Strategy* (2003) and the *EU Global Strategy* (2016), have maintained the primacy of NATO in European defence. As such, there is considerably more space for convergence than divergence across multiple international issues as the EU moves from vague concepts to concrete practices (Smith, 2018). An important lesson from the EU's experience in Afghanistan is that greater strategic autonomy, necessarily underpinned by greater security capabilities and political will, would allow the Union to become a more desirable partner in crisis management. It would provide more significant international influence within the transatlantic alliance. This would be a considerable improvement on the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001, where European-level assistance was deemed undesirable by the USA.

Once the 'war on terror' was framed within traditional security instruments and counter-terrorism *vis-à-vis* state-to-state conflict, the USA declared that military action would not be carried out within the full NATO framework. Instead, as US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asserted, 'the mission needs to define the coalition, and we ought not to think that a coalition should define the mission' (Gordon and Shapiro, 2004). This had a significant impact that provides an important lesson moving forward. **Transatlantic solidarity had been rejected, the EU was marginalised and the USA deprived itself of a greater European contribution to which many governments would have been willing to contribute** (Vendrell, 2008).

The decision to proceed on an *ad hoc* basis reflected the Bush administration's desire to form 'coalitions of the willing'. This was a clear reflection of the administration's unilateral persuasion and lessons learnt throughout the 1990s in Bosnia and Kosovo (Perle, 2003; Haass, 1999). This decision was highly significant for the EU. Not only was NATO rejected, hence the traditional institution for organising European cooperation and coordination in defence, but the manner in which *ad hoc* members joined the coalition was also a direct challenge to the European security and defence policy. The US decision undermined the EU's emerging Common Foreign and Security Policy/European Security and Defence Policy because it invited EU Member States to align themselves with the US-led war on terror and OEF. Within this context, Britain, France and Germany sought to reassure their solidarity with the USA at the cost of EU unity. Thus, as Eva Gross has noted about these Member States' decisions,

'This [...] provoked resentment not only for compromising EU unity but also for engaging in what may be termed mini-lateralism: discussing contributions in closed meetings, often ahead of EU summits – thereby sidelining smaller EU Member States, including Belgium, which held the EU presidency during the second half of 2001' (Gross, 2009: 39).

Echoing the 1979 international crisis in Afghanistan, traditional tensions between transatlantic solidarity and European integration emerged. **European powers were marginalised because the USA saw them**

as lacking capabilities and having low expectations of what they could achieve. Accordingly, UN Security Council Resolution 1386 laid out a mandate for a 5 000-strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to be deployed in Kabul in December 2001. This was to be a 'light footprint' mission, which was controversial even as diplomats remained quiet for the sake of transatlantic solidarity. Francesc Vendrell (2008), the second European Union Special Representative (EUSR) to Afghanistan, recalls forcefully advocating for a much greater international presence on the ground⁸. This was rejected in favour of counter-terrorism objectives and resulted in a quiet divergence within the transatlantic relationship. This brewing divergence was masked until the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Recommendation 10: EU institutions should not regard greater strategic autonomy to be in opposition to transatlantic solidarity, as there is considerably more space for convergence than divergence across multiple international issues. Furthering EU capabilities will enhance the attraction of working with the EU in managing international crises, which will multiply the EU's influence and the ability to prioritise civilian objectives rather than diminish them.

⁸ Vendrell argues that 'Some of us forcefully argued for a 'heavy footprint' on the model of Cambodia, East Timor, Bosnia, or Kosovo, since we were convinced that its people were ready for some kind of international tutelage that would do away both with warlord and Taliban rule, reconstruct their country, and assist in building up rule of law institutions. In the end, the day was won by those favouring a 'light footprint' and an 'Afghan-led' process - a politically correct slogan that in practice meant that the international community would be led not by genuine representatives of the Afghan people but a group of rapacious individuals.' (BBC News Channel 2008).

3.3.1 The European alternative to the 'war on terror'

The G.W. Bush administration came to see its declared 'war on terror' as overly simplistic⁹. As many active and retired US military leaders would argue, publicly and privately, the idea of a 'war on terror' was too one-dimensional in its prescriptions and conveyed the impression that military power alone could address the threat (Chollet and Goldgeier, 2008; Hassan, 2013b). This initially echoed private objections from EU officials and was a point of contention between the USA and European institutions (Gordon and Shapiro, 2004). For the Bush administration, this was another instance of Europeans being unwilling to recognise the 'importance of force in international relations' and relying on US leadership in NATO to 'largely absolve the Europeans from having to think much about international security beyond Europe's shores' (Gordon and Shapiro, 2004).

Publicly, European powers expressed considerable solidarity with the USA. The European Parliament was in accord with the Council, declaring: 'EU solidarity with the USA'; the need for 'as broad a coalition as possible to fight terrorism, within the framework of the UN'; and ultimately, in regard to terrorism, endorsed a 'commitment to its eradication' (Fontaine, 2001b). Yet, even here **tensions with the USA were subtle**, with the Parliament emphasising the importance of King Zaher Shah and the criminal conviction of bin Laden and Mullah Omar (Fontaine 2001c; 2001d). These issues created a significant source of underlying tensions within the transatlantic response to the 11 September 2001 attacks. In the Maastricht era, **Europe had broadly adopted a criminal justice approach to terrorism**. Europe's historical experience with terrorism was more sensitive to exacerbating cycles of violence with the use of force. Traditionally this has meant **focusing on the root causes of terrorism alongside police and judicial authorities** (Baker-Beall, 2017; Hassan, 2010). This represented a significant alternative approach to that pursued under the US-initiated 'war on terror'. This was not explored by the G.W. Bush administration at the time, even as voices domestically and internationally were calling for a reframing of terrorism away from state-to-state conflict and towards criminal justice along with international legal frameworks. **CASTING 11 September 2001 within the framework of criminal and judicial institutions provides a compelling alternative to the war on terror framework adopted**. However, when interviewed for this Study, and with the benefit of hindsight, both US and EU officials recollected that alternatives were not 'possible' or 'imagined' at the time.

3.3.2 Divergence and the war in Iraq

Although European criticisms of the US war on terror were heard relatively quietly at the start of the military campaign in Afghanistan, this was not the case for the war in Iraq. In little more than a year after 11 September 2001 amongst calls for transatlantic solidarity, **the Iraq war caused the most significant transatlantic divide since World War Two** and considerable division between EU Member States. These tensions spilt out publicly, with the USA castigating Germany and France as 'old Europe' (Gordon, 2003). **Increasingly the EU's commitment towards Afghanistan was questioned** in Washington DC and NATO headquarters in Brussels. **Europe's contribution was seen as lacking** (Burke, 2014; Hassan and Hammond, 2011). As Burke highlighted, 'If the war [in Afghanistan] was going badly, it was because Europe was not paying enough attention to Afghanistan. The perception in Washington was that this was the war Europe was supposed to manage while the USA focused on Iraq' (Burke, 2014).

⁹ President G.W. Bush has argued, 'We actually misnamed the war on terror. It ought to be the struggle against ideological extremists who do not believe in free societies who happen to use terror as a weapon to try to shake the conscience of the free world' (Bush, 2004). Similarly, Secretary of Defence Donal Rumsfeld conceded, 'I don't think I would have called it the war on terror ... I don't mean to be critical of those who have or did or - and certainly I've used the phrase frequently ... it's not a war on terror. Terror is a weapon of choice for extremists who are trying to destabilise regimes and impose their ... dark vision on all the people that they can control. So 'war on terror' has a problem for me' (Rumsfeld, 2006).

As the USA turned its attention to the conflict in Iraq, there was growing pressure from the former for greater European-level involvement. From the US perspective, attention and resources turned to Iraq, which directly impacted resources in Afghanistan. As illustrated by the US SIGAR report:

‘Simply maintaining security levels—a goal that did not seem ambitious early in the war—proved very ambitious and poorly aligned with the ways and means the US government planned to use ... this kind of misalignment represents ‘the most common cause for failure of nation building efforts’ [...] This gap became particularly acute starting in 2003 when the USA diverted troops and reconstruction funds to the invasion and reconstruction of Iraq. As [US Ambassador James] Dobbins told SIGAR, Bush administration officials soon ‘recognized that they had to resource [Iraq or Afghanistan] more substantially, [and] they chose Iraq because the situation there had degenerated more quickly ... You had several years of calculated neglect [in Afghanistan] [...] It was intentional’ [...] Thus, as the Taliban resurged, the ambition of the US mission surged with them, but the means kept falling further behind.’ (SIGAR, 2021)

The Iraq war's impact was not only a phenomenon faced by the USA. For example, a 2009 UK Department for International Development evaluation report highlighted the depletion of resources for Afghanistan due to the Iraq war (Bennet, Alexander et al., 2009). The same report outlines a further effect of the war in Iraq, outlining how the ‘US-led intervention in Iraq provided the Taliban with a political foundation on which to draw both resources and recruits from the wider Islamic world on the grounds that Afghanistan was subjugated by a ‘US-led invasion’ [...] Afghanistan thus became a cause célèbre within the global Islamic community, alongside Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon and Chechnya’ (Bennet, Alexander et al., 2009).

Significantly, **there is no evidence of the EU recognising or adapting its approach to Afghanistan in light of the growing risk the US strategy was accumulating due to the war in Iraq.** This was partly explained throughout the interviews conducted for this Study. The prevailing narrative has been that the USA expected Europe to lead in Afghanistan. However, this should be framed within more nuanced terms. For example, the relationship was described by one US official interviewed as more ‘chicken-and-egg. We wanted to control everything. The European governments and European efforts were therefore often sideshows’. Consistently, among US officials interviewed for this Study, it was argued that ‘European actors were designated as side shows’ whereby they would ‘essentially take the leftovers ... [for example] the UK you take care of this area, splitting up both geography and thematic portfolios’. This was perceived as a way to try and ‘share the burden’. Nevertheless, it was argued that,

‘From the US perspective, it was frustrating. European actors, European governments, both bilateral and multilateral, from the US perspective, often didn't show up to the fight [...] the Germans were not allowed to go on night missions, they were not allowed to go on offensive operations, things like that had significant restrictions, so what was attempted across the country was very uneven. From the [US] perspective, what was attempted, was a full-throated counter insurgency effort. With all of its obvious limitations, this was not matched by Europe, in most American eyes, both diplomatic and military.’

As another US official explained, ‘there was a sense of, okay, we got to give the Europeans something to do, we've got to share a burden, if possible, but really, we don't expect a lot to come of this ... when they were put in charge or when they were leading on certain efforts ... it didn't go very well. Not that we did a lot better, ultimately. But the perspective was, it didn't go very well.’ As a result, it was pointed out that **European powers were marginalised throughout the war.** For example, ‘in Helmand, the Brits were kicked out and the Americans brought in, even if it was all for nought. But that was the perspective’.

3.3.3 Divergent and incompatible timelines as the mission expanded

That the USA had to choose between resourcing the war in Afghanistan and Iraq was not an intentional policy objective. It was a consequence of the George W. Bush administration considering **the war mission in Afghanistan completed in 2001-2005**, only later to find that **growing insurgencies were mounting in Afghanistan and Iraq**. It was reluctantly that the US military began engaging in nation-building, having revised US grand strategy towards the Freedom Agenda in 2003 (Hassan, 2013b). Initially, with the prioritisation of counter-terrorism, **the USA expected troops would depart Afghanistan by 2004**. This would have provided a considerably smaller overlap between the two wars. Initially counter-terrorism objectives led the USA to conclude that the US military would have more autonomy if ISAF's mandate were limited to Kabul. This led to a security vacuum in provinces and allowed some former warlords, who had been previously pushed back by the Taliban, to return with neutral and even active US support. It was not until **11 August 2003 that NATO took the lead on ISAF**, thereby ending six-monthly national rotations and not until **October 2003 that ISAF's mandate was expanded to cover the whole of Afghanistan** (NATO, 2022). This was reflective of the expanding mission in Afghanistan, which NATO's (2021) Lessons Learnt Process warns against, asserting that,

'the wider ambition of building a stable Afghanistan, while not without important gains, proved extremely challenging. When planning and conducting future operations, Allies should continuously assess strategic interests, remain acutely aware of the dangers of mission expansion, and seek to avoid taking on commitments that go well beyond assigned tasks.'

With European responsibilities in Afghanistan increasing, whilst the USA turned its attention to Iraq, it was progressively apparent that **the USA and EU were operating with different conceptions of how long it would take to nation-build in Afghanistan**. EU institutions and Member States came to view Afghanistan as a **long-term commitment**, providing a consistent source of **development cooperation and humanitarian aid**. The USA was operating on **shorter-term military horizons**, with the intention of using the **military to provide development projects on a 'feast and famine' basis**. This is not to suggest that the partners were not collaborating at all. Repeatedly throughout the interviews, EU officials referred to close partnerships, consistent (and near constant collaboration) and meaningful strategic alignment. For example, as a Senior EU diplomat explained,

'we aligned everything we were doing. So, we aligned what we were doing on the security side with what we were doing on the development side with what we were doing on the [hand gesture for so forth] and what we would do regionally. So, everything started working in the same direction.'

Indeed, this alignment was considered so extensive that one interviewee said that at the EU level, perhaps there should have been more 'unity or coordination in pushing back on the USA'.

This is not the view presented by US officials, who highlighted that 'it just became easier to go it alone [...] from the US perspective, Europe didn't matter as much. It's just the hard, painful truth'. This provides something of a paradox. Many EU officials, from the Delegation through to those in the Commission and later the EEAS, believed they had been coordinating and strategically aligning with the USA. However, as one US official highlighted, pointing to US lessons learnt reports in Afghanistan, US strategy was a moving target:

'The conceptual requirement of developing an effective strategy is a bar even lower than coordination. We couldn't even hit the basics of understanding how to build a long-term strategy. And by long term, even five years [...] identifying the way forward, the kinds of programmes that would be necessary, the theories of change all of that, we couldn't even do that. And so, coordinating [...] seems like a much higher bar than what we were able to hit [...] it's in some ways, much worse than you think. That is really the source of this problem, we couldn't even conceptually understand what would be required of an effective strategy. And, so, we never even got to the point of asking 'Well, who do we need to build this strategy with?''

Two incompatible outlooks and approaches to Afghanistan emerge from the interviews conducted for this Study. The USA struggled to develop something that amounted to a strategy and often looked at short-term commitments and a swift exit. On the other hand, the EU was operating on a long-term commitment to Afghanistan whilst nesting its technocratic expertise within an indeterminate US approach. The EU was undoubtedly attempting to align and coordinate policy but the USA primarily saw Europe as an unreliable partner and moved forward independently. As one US official explained, the 'USA was the 800-pound gorilla in the room'; it was able to 'bulldoze' its counterparts and that is why there was 'this divergence in what we [USA and Europe] were trying to accomplish'. Problematically for the EU, the risk of diverging timelines was not identified nor assessed from 2001 through to 2021.

Recommendation 11: The dangers of aligning EU strategy with the USA must be better identified and considered throughout any future crisis response and ongoing campaign. Reflecting on lessons learnt by NATO, the EU should continuously monitor and assess its strategic options and avoid mission expansion and commitments that are in danger of failing. In particular, the effectiveness and commitment of international partners should be monitored for risks, such as over-commitment in other strategic spheres and the misalignment of ways, means and strategy. The EU should become particularly resistant to nesting its longer-term civilian policy objectives within the short-term military horizons of the USA. Within the EU-USA strategic dialogue, EU institutions should be cautious around coordination issues and sensitive to US failure to build long-term strategies.

4 The European Union and the regional strategy and issues in Afghanistan

4.1 The EU's regional strategy for Afghanistan

Whilst the EU and Member States followed US strategic leadership in Afghanistan, it has long been recognised that **any lasting solution in the country lies outside of the transatlantic alliance**. Throughout the second half of the 1990s, EU institutions, particularly the European Parliament, made declaratory statements linking ongoing violence in Afghanistan with regional instability, drug trafficking and international terrorism (European Commission, 1996). In accord with this, the European Commission clarified that the roots of Afghanistan's problems were political and required a regional solution (see Section 2.4).

Afghanistan is a mountainous land-locked country, and its six neighbours have powerful interests and influence. This should not suggest that Afghanistan is geographically ill-defined. Within central Asia, Iran is to the west and Pakistan to the south and east. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are to the north and in the Pamir Mountains of the northeast, there is a largely impassable 75km border with China. Afghanistan is a much older country than its neighbours, except for Iran. Those in the north emerged from the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. Pakistan is also a relatively new addition to the region. Established in 1947, Pakistan was the result of British decolonisation and India's partitioning (Jalal, 2017). Accordingly, Afghanistan's boundaries reflect Russian and European colonial history and its role as a frontier of empires. Whilst the Durand Line, demarcating Afghanistan and Pakistan, is seen as problematic because of its artificial delineation in 1893, some analysts illustrate that much of the Afghan border was forged by conflict and resistance, in much the same way that small European states emerged (Byrd, 2012; Omrani, 2009). Moreover, Afghanistan was once the region's hub, acting as a Eurasian bridge for commerce and culture and central in connecting west and east Asia (Hassan, 2022). In the 21st century, this role is diminished and its neighbours largely marginalise Afghanistan because it is frequently regarded as a source of regional instability, Islamic terrorism and social issues due to the export of narcotics (Price and Hakimi, 2019).

In terms of nation-building, the EU has been more engaged in Afghanistan over the last twenty years than its regional neighbours. **Regional cooperation** within that time frame **has been disappointing and limited** (Zhou, 2022). For many neighbours, the transatlantic approach to Afghanistan marginalised their interests and the country became seen as too 'American-ised'. This did not just include Iran, China, Russia and Pakistan but also India, which was the most active regional power supporting the GOA and provided Afghanistan with approximately EUR 2.8 billion of development aid in the form of student scholarships, infrastructure and transport projects (Asey, 2021; Singh, 2020). There was particular disquiet from Afghanistan's neighbours regarding the unilateral withdrawal of US forces and the Taliban's return, which many policy-makers in the region believed was symptomatic of being marginalised by the USA within their neighbourhood over the last two decades (Asey, 2021).

Given that the EU has followed US leadership over this time, any future regional strategy and cooperation on Afghanistan will require making up lost ground. This is particularly the case if the EU is to go beyond dialogue and smaller regional projects, to meaningful work with regional stakeholders and shift the political reality on the ground. **This will require the EU to be more engaged in central and south Asia and transform its strategic doctrine towards the region.**

In 1994, the European Commission published *Towards a New Asia Strategy*, arguing that the EU needs to 'accord Asia a higher priority than is at present the case' and that there was an 'urgency to strengthen [the EU's] economic presence in Asia' (European Commission, 1994). Within that new strategy, arms control and

non-proliferation, human rights and drugs (notably with India and China, not Afghanistan) were raised as areas that needed 'discussion' (European Commission, 1994). Unfortunately, within this period, **the EU was inactive on the regional threat of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism** (Hassan, 2010; 2013). Conversely, the USA was said to have 'no policy' towards Afghanistan and attention was mainly on the India-Pakistan nuclear rivalry drawing attention away from the mounting threats across the Pakistan/Afghanistan border (9/11 Commission, 2004). Published in 2001, the European Commission's *Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships* argued that 'much remains to be done' because there had been only 'modest growth' in the relationship throughout the 1990s (European Commission, 2001). Undoubtedly, the main focus of EU policy towards Asia was on the importance of trade and aid which lacked strategic depth bilaterally and regionally. Indeed, in 2014 an independent *Evaluation of the European Union's regional cooperation with Asia* carried out for the European Commission concluded that 'While the vast majority of individual programmes and projects under the Regional Strategy Paper have been highly relevant to the needs of Asian partner countries, **the strategy as a whole failed to develop a coherent regional approach**' (European Commission, 2014). A decade later, many analysts regard the EU's approach to south Asia to be dominated by the same lens of trade and aid; with the notable exceptions of Afghanistan and India (Hassan, 2022; Christiansen et al., 2013). Some analysts have referred to this as the "same old same old" approach to South Asia' (Carlo and Islam, 2021).

Concerning Afghanistan in particular, there was an attempt to link the **EU's policy with Pakistan** during the appointment of EUSR Ettore Francesco Sequi in September 2008. Expanding the EUSR role, the position's mandate was to cover Afghanistan and Pakistan. Conceptually, Afghanistan-Pakistan (AF/PAK), rose to the top of the political agenda, as it was considered that the two countries needed to fit within a coherent, unified policy framework. Tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan had been simmering. In the previous year, Karzai had threatened to pursue Taliban militants with Afghan troops crossing into Pakistan if needed. Change in the EUSR's position, therefore, reflected the broader international debate. It mirrored the creation of the office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan within the US Department of State, headed by Senior diplomat Richard Holbrooke.

Similarly, the UK, France, Germany, Sweden and Denmark appointed their own AF/PAK Representatives. However, this more regional approach was short-lived. With the appointment of Vygaudas Ušackas as EUSR in 2010, **the EUSR position jettisoned the oversight of Pakistan** (Council, 2010). This was a **downgrading of the AF/PAK strategy** and out of step with the US strategy, which continued to maintain the position of the Special Representative for AF/PAK. In this sense, the mandate alteration signalled a more autonomous and independent European strategy. This decision partly resulted from complexities around the integration of more voices in the policy making process. As the Horizon 2020 funded *Whole-of-Society Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding* project reports, 'coordinating EU and wider international efforts became even more difficult. For some time, the European Special envoys even held coordination meetings among themselves' (Dirkx, 2017). It also reflected the strategic decision to focus the coordination of EU efforts as a result of *The Plan for Strengthening EU Action in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, approved by EU Foreign Ministers at the External Relations Council meeting on 27 October 2009. In sum, the Commission chose to focus on better coordination of EU efforts rather than an expansion to a more regional approach.

4.1.1 Regional peacebuilding between Kabul, Delhi and Islamabad

The EU should actively reinforce measures that build trust between India and Pakistan, which has been central to regional power competition. This competition has undermined Afghanistan's political development, as Pakistan has used Afghanistan and the Taliban as a proxy to balance and challenge India's power. As one Senior EU diplomat outlined for this Study, it was Pakistan's insecurity and links with the Taliban that ultimately undermined the Transatlantic approach to Afghanistan. Indeed, Pakistan's support

for the Taliban was said to have created a balance of power. On one side, the USA, allies and the GOA. On the other side, the Taliban with Pakistani support. It is essential to acknowledge that because the USA considered the Taliban defeated in the early stages of the conflict, counter-terrorism operations focused on al-Qaeda and not the Taliban leadership that had fled to Pakistan (Hussain, 2021). This allowed the Taliban to regroup and begin its renewed insurgency, so many analysts regard the Taliban's return as a success for Pakistan's regional policy (Thomas, 2022). Whilst this may have been the initial response, relations between the Taliban and Pakistan are increasingly changing. For example, a Senior EU diplomat disclosed from conversations with Pakistani officials that Pakistan no longer believes that the Taliban is listening to their advice. Moreover, with the Taliban's return being greeted positively within Pakistan, there is a real danger that Pakistani militants could find common causes and inspiration from the Taliban, creating further instability inside Pakistan itself. Hence, this presents a strategic opportunity for the EU to build a more regional approach; the road to peace in Kabul may well start in Delhi and Islamabad. This will inevitably require greater attention to resolving tensions over Kashmir. However, Senior EU diplomats interviewed for this Study, suggest that the EU position has been to steer away from engaging with this issue and 'not to touch Kashmir'.

4.1.2 Regional cooperation on counter-terrorism and arms proliferation

The **area of counter-terrorism has been the most prominent international and regional area of cooperation over the last twenty years.** It will remain the largest area of policy agreement for the foreseeable future, even if there is contention over the ways and means of pursuing a counter-terrorist policy. The USA has withdrawn from Afghanistan but is maintaining an 'over the horizon' approach to monitoring how the terrorist threat in Afghanistan evolves (Thomas, 2022b). Nevertheless, **the EU should maintain serious concerns about the rise of the Taliban and continued links to international terrorism.** It is not immediately apparent that counter-terrorism objectives in Afghanistan have been met beyond temporarily reducing terrorist capabilities. In April 2022, the US Department of State calculated that some improvement had been made in the Taliban's commitments to counter-terrorism, as specified in the Doha accords. It is not easy to reconcile this assessment with the apparition of al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri in Kabul in August 2022.

Furthermore, US defence officials in March 2022 determined that **al-Qaeda still intends to carry out external terrorist attacks but currently lacks the capability.** Assessments suggest that 'al-Qaeda could reconstitute that capability in one to two years in the absence of sustained counter-terrorism pressure' (Thomas 2022). The Taliban and al-Qaeda may be considered two distinct groupings, but they are linked through 'intermarriage and other personal bonds between members ... official assessments concur that [al-Qaeda] AQ-Taliban ties remain close' (Thomas, 2022b). These reports suggest that al-Qaeda is observing a 'strategic silence' and that 'the Taliban, in turn, are likely to allow AQ figures to remain in Afghanistan so long as they do not threaten the United States or its allies' (Thomas, 2022). Accordingly, there is scope for discreet cooperation on counter-terrorism, as it pertains to limiting al-Qaeda activity, even if ties between the Taliban and al-Qaeda remain.

Similarly, the **Islamic State-Khorasan Province**, concentrated in the east of Afghanistan, was able to attack and kill dozens of US military personnel and hundreds of Afghan civilians at Kabul airport in August 2021. They continue to conduct attacks within Afghanistan. In addition to opposing the Taliban and seeking to 'purify' Afghanistan, they advocate the toppling of the Pakistani government, oppose the Shia leadership of Iran and have targeted Chinese diplomats (Mir, 2021; Thurston, 2023). There is scope for cooperation with the Taliban and other regional actors on counter-terrorism. Furthermore, other groups such as the **Haqqani Network, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan** and **Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement** have all been highlighted as operating within or having strong ties to Afghanistan. As a July 2022 UN Council Report made transparent, terrorist

organisations, including al-Qaeda, operate more freely within Afghanistan. This problem has been exacerbated by coalition partners who left considerable stockpiles of weapons behind, including 'AK-47s, medium-range rocket launchers, M-14s and M-16s, among others... [in addition to] night-vision equipment, thermal imagers and steel-penetrating bullets'. This has raised genuine fears that weapons in 'Afghanistan could fall into the hands of ISIL, Al-Qaida or other groups and that such transfers could add to the offensive capability of the groups in question' (UNSC, 2022). This is not hypothetical as the Taliban has paraded US weaponry on the streets of Kabul and the Taliban's elite units have utilised this technology whilst securing key sites (Fahrenkopf, 2021). Moreover, this military technology has reportedly been used to target national forces in neighbouring states. Pakistan has recorded instances of militants in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province directly targeting the police force with US weaponry and killing six officers (Economic Times, 2022).

There is an argument that without specialist knowledge and maintenance some military technology will become superfluous over time, this may be so but it is also likely to create regional and international markets for more sophisticated actors with the necessary expertise (Mehra, Demuyndck and Wentworth, 2022). This situation could have been avoided with a more carefully planned withdrawal. This is a clear and present danger to the EU and the UNSC (2022b) has confirmed that it **believes small arms have already moved outside of Afghanistan and may have found their way to foreign terrorist groups**. With the EU lacking its own intelligence agency, finding, monitoring, tracking and ultimately disposing of this technology will be particularly challenging as it circulates amongst nefarious actors on the Eurasian continent. Given the dangers this poses, **the EU should take the lead in working with regional partners to mitigate these risks**. This should include sharing best practices and scoping the need for regional training programmes. In addition, the *EU action plan on firearms trafficking 2020-2025* (European Commission, 2020b) should be expanded to include this new threat. This is particularly urgent given that the Action Plan does not mention Afghanistan and focuses on Southern and Eastern Europe. Whilst there is likely to be some overlap, **European instruments will likely require further resources if this threat grows**. This should be done in addition to the 2021 *Afghanistan: Counter-Terrorism Action Plan* set out by the Council (Council of the European Union, 2021). Notably, the Action Plan suggests that Member States share strategic intelligence through the voluntary mechanism of the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre but questions should **be raised over whether there is sufficient intelligence capability within the EU or should these be institutionally enhanced**. The EU's experience in Afghanistan suggests that there is too significant a deficiency between expectations and the EU's independent intelligence capabilities. This will hamper the EU's ability to engage in strategic information exchange and interaction with countries in the region and beyond.

4.1.3 Regional cooperation on counter-narcotics

Countering Afghanistan's production of heroin has long been a top priority for the EU. For example, EUSR Klaus-Peter Klaiber, in December 2001, was mandated with the tasks of supporting the new interim government, ensuring the rights of women and minorities were upheld and fighting the trafficking and production of drugs. His role as EUSR was to represent European-level interests and reassure Afghanistan that European cooperation would be sustained over the long term. However, in this early period, there was often **tension between supporting counter-narcotics goals and convincing Afghanistan's neighbours that 'their interference in this process was unwelcome'** (United Nations News, 2002). In what one EU official interviewed for this study referred to as 'the wasted years', EU involvement was limited and somewhat intangible. With the EU marginalised (see Section 3.3.), it was more common to cite Member States' involvement in Afghanistan, which included German responsibility for training the Afghan Police force, French leadership in establishing a constitutional committee and British counter-narcotics efforts.

The UK placed counter-narcotic second only to counter-terrorism in the early stages of the war. These efforts fell considerably short and the UK ultimately withdrew leadership of international counter-narcotics in 2011 (Berry, 2021). By 2008, EUSR Vendrell, serving for the EU in Afghanistan from June 2002 to August 2008, summarised the situation as ‘We [the EU and the international community] have all failed’ allowing Afghanistan to turn into a ‘criminal narco-state’ (BBC News Channel, 2008). Over the two decades, this situation did not improve. In 2018, General Nicholson, Commander of US Forces–Afghanistan, explained, ‘We believe that the Taliban, in some ways, have evolved into a criminal or narco-insurgency’. Today this is a position shared by the Council of the European Union, which has drawn a strong linkage between Afghan Narcotics, the Taliban and the threat of terrorism in Europe. The *2021 Afghanistan: Counter-Terrorism Action Plan* considers narcotics one of the Taliban’s leading sources of income. This includes opium production, poppy cultivation and the production as well as the trafficking of synthetic drugs. Travelling primarily through the Balkans, an increase in opium production in Afghanistan is seen as correlated with the availability of heroin on EU markets. The Commission’s *EU Agenda and Action Plan on Drugs 2021-2025* expands on this to detail the linkages between organised crime within the EU and the need to view drug markets as global and regional (European Commission, 2020a).

There is scope for EU institutions to build a more regional counter-narcotics approach than they have over the last two decades. Although the EU had disbursed EUR 96 million earmarked for narcotics control in Afghanistan as of January 2022, the estimated income from opium sales has grown to USD 1.4 billion, and Afghanistan’s illicit narcotics economy has not been impeded (UN News, 2022). Afghanistan continues to account for 86 % of global illicit opium production and is increasingly involved in the manufacture of methamphetamine flowing into south-west Asia. The use of methamphetamine and ‘captagon’ tablets is on the rise both in the immediate region and an emerging narcotics market in Iraq and the wider Gulf region (UNODC, 2022). Accordingly, there is scope for issue-based cooperation with neighbouring Iran and the wider Gulf as well as Pakistan, who share growing concerns about the instability of illicit narcotics in the region. This will be difficult in the short term, given the instability inside Iran and their support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There is also scope for dialogue and cautious cooperation with the Taliban in this area, given their announced prohibition of the cultivation, production and trade of illegal drugs on 3 April 2022¹⁰. In 2000 and 2001, the Taliban did attempt to ban the cultivation of opium and it is seen as the only successful nationwide attempt to implement a ban. UN officials at the time called it ‘one of the most remarkable successes ever’, seeing the production in 2000 drop from 82,000 hectares to 8 000 hectares (Mansfield, 2016). One member of a joint UN-USA-UK-EU mission, invited by the Taliban in early 2001 recalled, for this Study, that of the 8 000 hectares that remained, these were mainly in non-Taliban controlled areas. In 2001, opium cultivation was primarily in areas controlled by the Northern Alliance. However, the EU would need to be cautious, given the Taliban’s human rights record but previous reports suggest that the Taliban were able to accomplish this without engaging in repression (Mansfield, 2016). There is potential, therefore, to begin negotiating the **opening of the licit economy with the closure of the illicit economy in the short term**. Discreet EU cooperation on counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics is possible with the Taliban.

4.1.4 Regional cooperation on irregular migration

The EU has attempted to tackle the root causes of displacement and irregular migration in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries as part of its overall approach to the region. This was formalised in 2016 with *The Joint Way Forward* signed by the EU and the GOA, one of the first migration partnership agreements instigated by the EU (European External Action Service, 2016). As part of a new approach to ‘managing migration’ the agreement tied the continuance of development assistance to the return of Afghans who have been refused protection or settlement in the EU (Quie and Hakimi, 2020). This hardened approach

¹⁰ See the Twitter [post](#) shared by Afghanistan’s new agency, *Bakhtar News Agency* on 3 April 2022 (in Arabic).

reflected the EU's transforming politics around the 2015 migration crisis and the rise of populist politics within Member States. For one EU official interviewed for this Study, controlling migration was the only genuine and independent exertion of EU autonomy since 2001 and primarily resulted from sharing a land mass and proximity to Afghanistan that the USA does not. Indeed, with Afghanistan being aid dependent, the Commission exerted considerable pressure on Afghanistan to comply. As Amnesty International (2019) reported, before signing *The Joint Way Forward*, Ekil Hakimi, Afghanistan's Finance Minister, told the Afghan parliament, 'If Afghanistan does not cooperate with EU countries on the refugee crisis, this will negatively impact the amount of aid allocated to Afghanistan.'

Regional partnerships have been central to the European agenda on migration. **Since 2016, the Commission has placed concrete regional collaboration at the centre of its strategy.** For example, in 2017, the Commission met its target of reaching agreements with three partner countries on arrangements for return and readmission and highlighted meetings that had taken place with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This resulted in an electronic platform for processing readmission applications with Pakistan (European Commission, 2018b). Whilst most Afghans flee to neighbouring countries, Frontex has identified Afghans amongst the top three nationalities undertaking illegal border-crossings into the EU. 16 711 Afghans made such a journey between January and December 2021, predominantly arriving through the West Balkans. Since the Taliban have returned to power, **Frontex has identified the likelihood of this number growing and new irregular migration routes emerging** (Frontex 2022).

Recommendation 12: The EU should seek to transform its regional approach to Central and South Asia. This should include a move away from prioritising trade and aid towards a more integrated regional emphasis on achieving strategic depth. This could be achieved by having regional delegations communicate and coordinate with one another and focusing on building greater regional awareness.

Recommendation 13: EU institutions should actively reinforce measures that build trust between India and Pakistan, which has been central to regional power competition. There is space for significant involvement from the European Parliament in helping to facilitate trust-building exercises over the next decade.

Recommendation 14: EU institutions should maintain serious concerns about the rise of the Taliban and continued links to international terrorism. Where possible, the EU should carry out discreet and limited cooperation with the Taliban on the issues of counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics. The EU should also take the lead in working with regional partners to mitigate the risks of small arms and specialist military equipment reaching the EU. This could include sharing best practices and scoping the need for regional training programmes. The EU action plan on firearms trafficking 2020-2025 should be expanded upon to include this new threat.

Recommendation 15: Questions should be raised over whether there is sufficient intelligence capability within the structure of the EU. Considerations should be made concerning how existing capabilities can be enhanced and structured to harness information within and across EU institutions.

Recommendation 16: The EU has the potential to build greater regional cooperation in the area of counter-narcotics with regional powers in the Gulf. There is also space to cooperate with the Taliban in this area, starting with negotiations about opening the licit economy and closing the illicit economy in the short term.

5 The European Union's bilateral assistance to Afghanistan

5.1 The European Union's post-2001 aid to Afghanistan

The EU and Member States are collectively the **world's largest donors of international aid**, providing approximately EUR 50 billion per year in efforts to 'advance global development' and 'overcome poverty' (European Commission, 2022). The EU aims to increase its contribution and dedicate at least 0.7 % of its gross national income to development aid each year. This aid is split between **development cooperation** and **humanitarian assistance**. Development cooperation supports countries within a medium to long-term horizon, intending to build sustainable economic growth and eliminate poverty. Development cooperation is often given directly to governments, wherein the EU will cooperate on priorities and monitor its expenditure. Humanitarian aid is designed for rapid deployment in more immediate crises, addressing the basic needs of civilians in conflicts or natural disasters. It is never channelled through the government or armed groups and is allocated to humanitarian partners. It is within this context that aid to Afghanistan should be understood. **Afghanistan is a crucial case study as it is the world's largest recipient of EU aid.**

From 1980-2001 Afghanistan received a combined global total of approximately EUR 1.6 billion in Official Development Aid (ODA) and Other Official Flows (OOF). Within the shorter period between 2002-2020, this global figure grew exponentially to a total receipt of approximately EUR 65 billion. **Between 2002 and 2020, Afghanistan received approximately EUR 6 billion in official development assistance and official bilateral transactions from European institutions.** Within the same timeframe, Afghanistan received a further **EUR 20 billion bilaterally from Member States**¹¹. The highest of these were: Germany (EUR 6.6 billion), the United Kingdom (EUR 5.9 billion), Sweden (EUR 1.7 billion), the Netherlands (EUR 1.6 billion) and Denmark (EUR 1.1 billion) (see Table 1). This **combined total of EUR 26 billion from the EU and Member States compared to the USA's EUR 32 billion in ODA and OOF**. Thus, from 2002-2020 the EU and Member States provided approximately 40 % of all ODA and OOF to Afghanistan compared to 49 % from the USA. In 2020, the *Afghanistan Conference* was held in Geneva, at which the EU promised an additional contribution of EUR 1.2 billion in aid from 2021-2025. This aid was intended to complete Afghanistan's **Transformational Decade between 2015-2024**. However, since the Taliban took control of Kabul and established a 'caretaker' government on 7 September 2021, EU development cooperation operating through the GOA has ceased. The EU has renewed its focus on humanitarian aid and meeting '**Basic Needs**', increasing its allocated funds three-fold to EUR 200 million for 2021, in addition to the contributions from EU Member States.

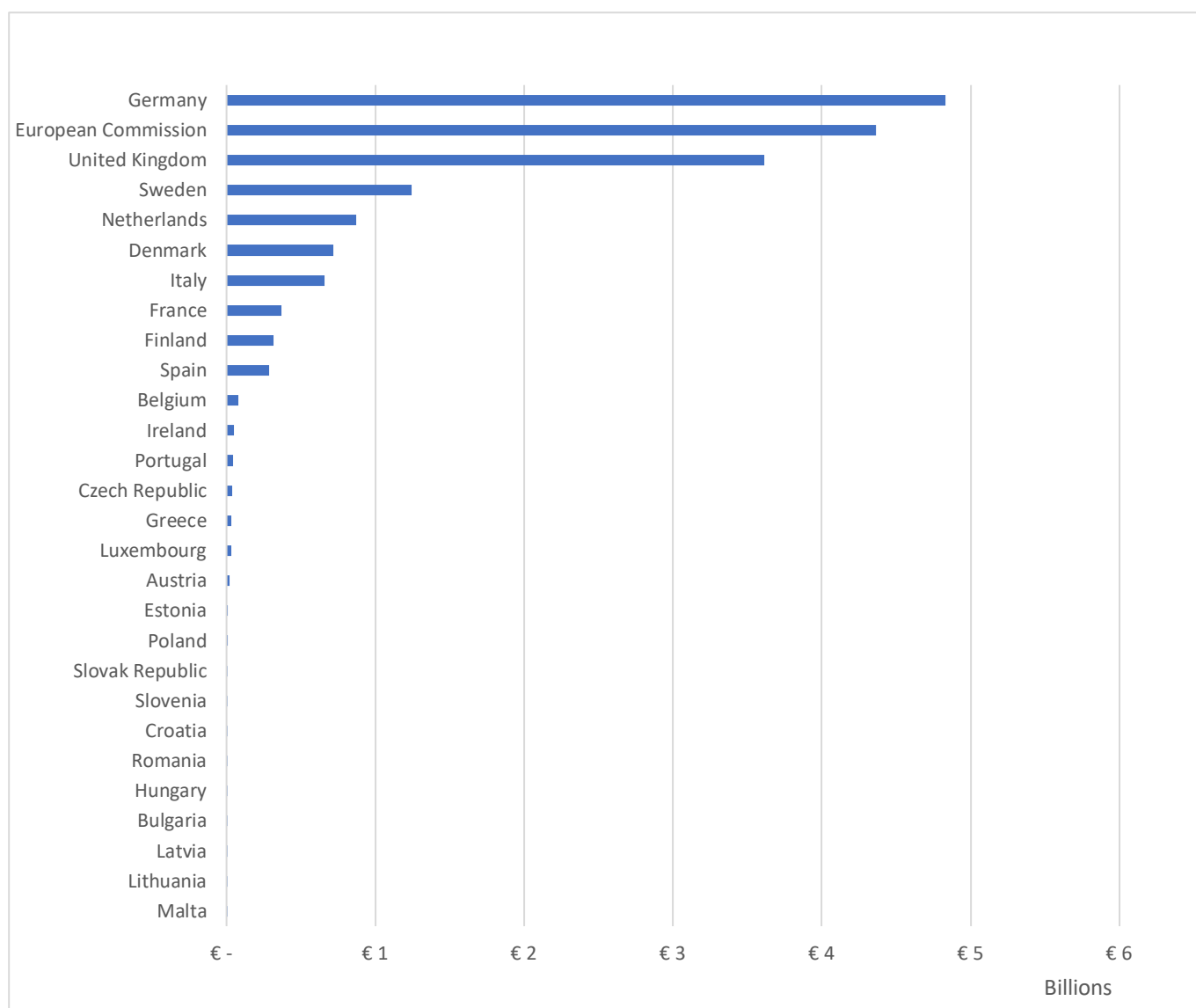
Since August 2021, the EU aid explorer has not provided detailed information regarding projects undertaken in Afghanistan for security reasons. Similarly, this Study has obscured specific details of aid recipients that have been collected. However, EU Aid explorer provided recipient data between 2007 and 2022 and is used here for the granular and agreed-on nature of the data provided. Between 2007 and 2022, Afghanistan received EUR 17.6 billion in disbursements from the EU and Member States.

This EUR 17.6 billion in disbursements can be divided into 161 sectors, of which '**Public sector policy and administrative management**' (EUR 1.9 billion), '**Material relief assistance and services**' (EUR 1.29 billion), '**Civilian peace-building, conflict prevention and resolution**' (EUR 1.17 billion), '**Security system management and reform**', (EUR 1.17 billion) and '**Legal and judicial development**' (EUR 1.3 billion) were the five largest areas of spending (see Figure 2). These sectors are the only categories to each

¹¹ For clarity, SIGAR calculates that the US appropriated USD 145 billion for the reconstruction of Afghanistan as of June 2021 but this is not reflected in official ODA figures (SIGAR, 2022c).

cross the EUR 1 billion benchmark and totalled EUR 6.66 billion, totalling 38 % of all EU and Member State aid disbursements between 2007 and 2022.

Table 1: Total disbursements of official assistance to Afghanistan between 2007 to 2022

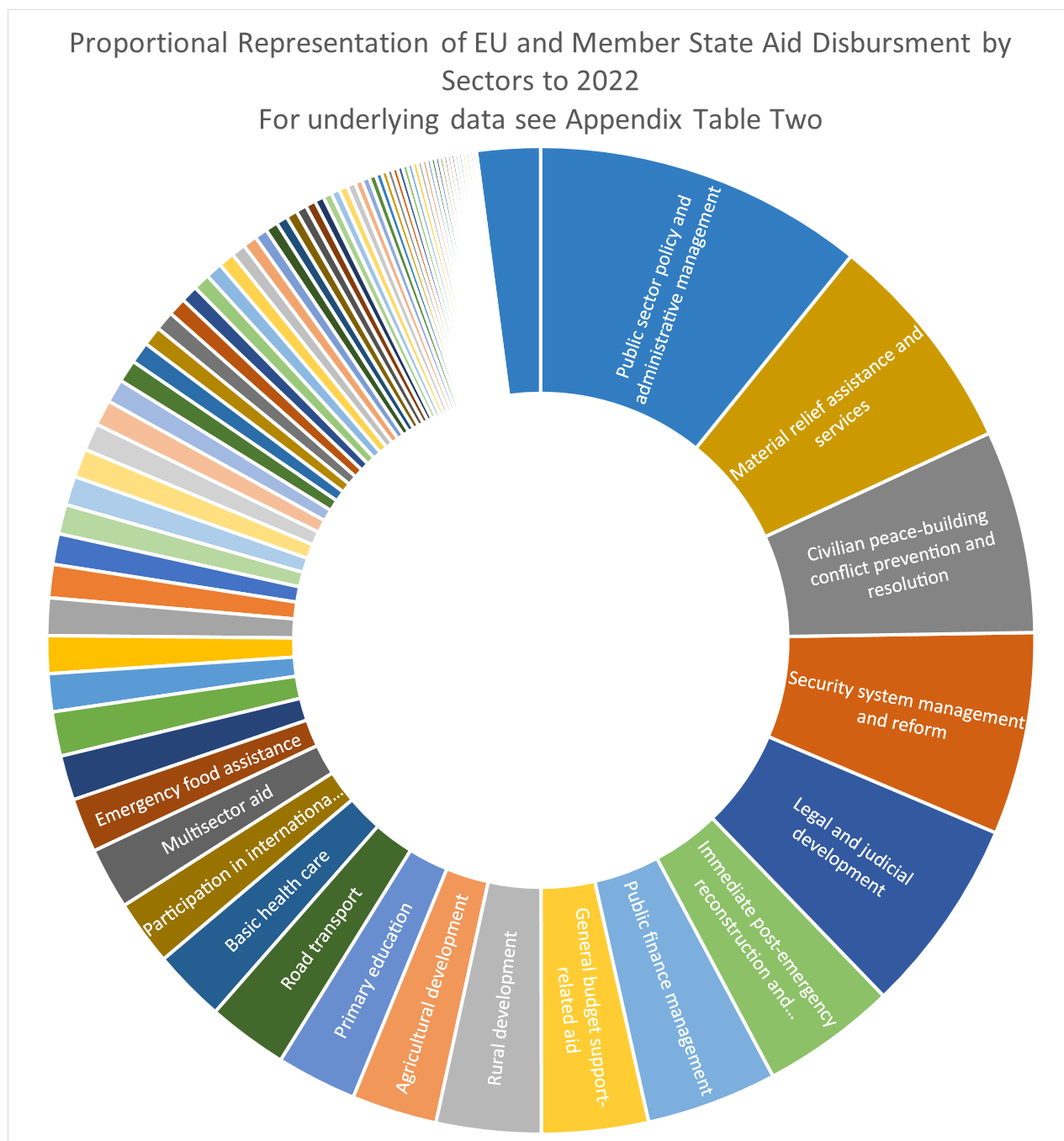


Source: EU Aid Explorer, 'Recipients' [website](#), n.d.

This study addresses EU development cooperation in general terms and does not name specific projects, organisations or individuals¹². Specific figures for each sustainable development goal are provided by the EU Aid explorer, of which *Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions* constitute the largest development aid disbursement (see Figure 3).

¹² This includes information known to the author from legacy data and that disclosed by EU officials whilst completing this Study.

Figure 2: Proportional representation of EU and Member State aid disbursement by sectors from 2007 to 2022



Source: EU Aid Explorer, 'Recipients' [website](#), n.d.

This study addresses EU development cooperation in general terms and does not name specific projects, organisations or individuals¹³. Specific figures for each sustainable development goal are provided by the EU Aid explorer, of which *Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions* constitutes the largest development aid disbursement heading.

¹³ This includes information known to the author from legacy data that was disclosed by EU officials whilst completing this study.

Figure 3: EU disbursements to Afghanistan for Sustainable Development Goals¹⁴



Source: Screenshot from EU Aid Explorer, 'Recipients' [website](#), n.d¹⁵.

Through the allocation of development cooperation, the EU has often portrayed itself as a 'key partner' in the reconstruction and stabilisation efforts. Following the 18 September 2005 elections and formation of the Afghan National Assembly, thereby completing the Bonn Process, the EU sought closer ties with the Afghan government. Two months after the election, both parties signed the *EU-Afghanistan Joint Declaration*. Under this new partnership, it was jointly declared that both parties were 'committed to a secure, stable, free, prosperous and democratic Afghanistan' (Council, 2005).

Hence, the 2005 *EU-Afghanistan Joint Declaration* provides a foundational document for the relationship between the EU and the former GOA. Not only did this facilitate a new partnership, but it also set out the terms of reference moving forward. It did this by establishing key areas of reform and shared priorities. Accordingly, it reaffirmed the GOA's commitments to 1) Consolidating a democratic political system; 2) Establishing responsible and accountable government institutions; 3) Strengthening the rule of law; 4) Safeguarding human rights (including the rights of women); 5) Continuing with the development of civil society; 6) Promoting economic growth and combatting poverty across the country; 7) Accelerating progress towards sustainable state finances; 8) Fighting corruption and 9) Ending the production and trafficking of drugs.

In return, the EU reaffirmed its 'commitment to helping the GOA achieve these objectives and [would] use its influence with partners in the international community to encourage continued substantial cooperation with Afghanistan'. What emerged from this new partnership was a commitment to cooperate under the headings of 1) Political and Economic Governance; 2) Security Sector Reform and Justice Sector Reform; 3)

¹⁴ The amounts visualised for each Sustainable Development Goal cannot be summed together. See the graphic 'Sustainable development goals' from the European Commission, 'EU Aid Explorer' [website](#), n.d.

¹⁵ The amounts visualised for each Sustainable Development Goal cannot be summed together. See the graphic 'Sustainable development goals' from the European Commission, 'EU Aid Explorer' [website](#), n.d.

Counter Narcotics; 4) Development; 5) Human Rights, Civil Society and Refugee Return; 6) Education and Culture and 7) Regular Political Dialogue.

The 2005 *EU-Afghanistan Joint Declaration*, as is standard with this type of document, is thin in detail. However, the headings are approximately derived from the **Afghanistan National Development Strategy** (ANDS), which originated from the **Afghan Development Forum**. These provided the contextual background for developmental cooperation, with the ANDS establishing three National Development Headings: (1) Security, (2) Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights, and (3) Economic and Social development. The ANDS also identified five 'crosscutting themes', namely: (1) Gender Equity, (2) Counter-Narcotics Strategy, (3) Regional Cooperation, (4) Anti-Corruption and (5) Environment.

For the part of the GOA, the ANDS process started in 2004 through consultation with Afghan policy-makers. Subsequently, an ANDS Working Group was established, holding informal consultations with '400 Community Development Council leaders representing over 10,000 villages' (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2005). Throughout this process, consultations were held with members of the international community and later donor countries, as well as civil society representatives, providing written comments on drafts of the ANDS. Nevertheless, the GOA were eager to emphasise that the ANDS was **Afghan-owned, indigenously fashioned and representative of Afghanistan's development needs**. Indeed, by 2003 the international community had moved away from the donor-driven meetings and initiatives of 2001-2002. Increasingly, **the GOA was taking 'full leadership' of 'the reconstruction process and aid coordination'**, even if organisations, such as the World Bank, wanted more funding to go 'through government budget channels and in support of national priorities' all while engaging in a 'tremendous amount of 'capacity building by doing'' and 'mind-set changing' over the National Development Budget (World Bank, 2003).

The GOA would set out three further development documents: the *2008-2013 Afghanistan National Development strategy*; the *2017-2021 Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework*; and the *2021-2025 Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework*¹⁶. These documents expanded on the 2005 ANDS, setting out timelines and goals. First and foremost, it was stated that by 2020, Afghanistan would be:

- A stable Islamic constitutional democracy at peace with itself and its neighbours, standing with full dignity in the international family.
- A tolerant, united, pluralistic nation that honours its Islamic heritage and deep-seated aspirations toward participation, justice, and equal rights for all.
- A society of hope and prosperity based on a strong, private sector-led market economy, social equity and environmental sustainability (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2008).

In sum, this amounted to an agenda **heavily dependent on the GOA building a wide range of national capacities whilst improving the security situation and promoting reconciliation and justice**. This would be undertaken through a transition period (2012-2014) followed by the transformation decade (2015-2024). From the GOA's official perspective, 'lessons learnt,' exercises highlighted particular constraints holding back development and effective implementation, namely: (1) Doubts over Fiscal Sustainability, (2) Lack of Capacity, (3) Low aid volume and low disbursement, (4) Weak aid coordination and effectiveness, (5) Unequal provincial development, (6) Inadequate attention to private sector growth, (7) Fragmentation of donor efforts, coordination and alignment, (8) Lack of conflict sensitivity, (9) Inability

¹⁶ The gap in a publication from 2014-2016 is explained in Section 2.2 by the 2017 Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework, arguing 'The transition in 2014 had a substantial impact on Afghanistan's security, political, and economic dynamics. The new National Unity Government faced not one, but three crises as terrorists and armed opposition groups intensified their attacks just as international troop levels declined, the economy went into recession, and a contested election occupied the national leadership's attention'.

to manage complexity when faced with complex policy and delivery challenges (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2008).

From an EU perspective, the 2005 *EU-Afghanistan Joint Declaration* established a framework through which cooperation on the ANDS could move forward. It allowed the EU, along with other international donors, to emphasise '**Afghan ownership**' and the need for the GOA's 'leadership' in 'promoting economic and social development, including the development of poverty reduction strategies and in state-building'. Nevertheless, whilst recognising the need for the GOA to make significant progress on these issues, the EU depended on it to make progressive reforms. Moreover, the declaration was heavily criticised for adding 'little substance to the bilateral relationship' (Crisis Group, 2005).

In linear terms, development cooperation can be seen as establishing a symbiotic relationship whereby both partners benefit from a close relationship. In theory, the EU delivered development aid so Afghanistan would develop into a more secure, prosperous and democratic state, with the peoples of Afghanistan and Europe benefitting in kind for a more stable region. This is not what happened in practice. **With development assistance struggling to adequately reach Afghanistan's widespread regions, power was centralised with the GOA.** As the EEAS detailed,

'A significant part of this funding has been channelled through the national programmes of the Afghan government or through the multi-donor trust funds that contribute to the government's central budget.'

These Trust Funds include the **Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund** and the **Law and Order Trust Fund of Afghanistan** (LOTFA), to which the EU and Member States contributed 40 % and 34 % of their total budgets, respectively (Hassan, 2021). Within this framework, the success of EU development assistance was contingent on cooperation with the Afghan government and its long-term success. In EU parlance, this is known as '**Country Ownership**', whereby EU development programmes are undertaken in partnership with host governments, who often take responsibility for managing the programmes and projects. EU development cooperation followed the Afghan government's own development priorities.

In theory, **conditionality** is applied to development cooperation, along with auditing requirements, as a means of providing EU leverage and persuasion over the host government. Within this framework, two forms of political power are at play. The EU and Afghanistan's government operated agenda-setting power through cooperation. This potentially gave the EU power to persuade and make the GOA do something that it would otherwise not do, leveraging the financial flows of development aid. This was effective post-2014, for example, in negotiations over migration (see Section 4.1.4). However, development cooperation mechanisms do not occur in a closed system, whereby variables can be controlled and closed off from other systemic influences. **Development cooperation occurs in an open system**, whereby other factors constantly interact and power relationships are not always linear. This is an important factor when considering problems development assistance faced in Afghanistan. The largest of these issues was introduced by EU and US officials and termed 'dwarfing'.

Recommendation 17: The EU's experience in Afghanistan demonstrates the need for greater conflict sensitivity and aid scrutiny in future crisis management scenarios. This need was partly reflected in adopting the new 2021-2027 Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe, which should be monitored. In particular, the soft obligation to provide a conflict analysis when providing aid to war-torn countries should remain under review.

Recommendation 18: The EU should not shy away from creating strong parallel development structures to governments that cannot reach beyond their immediate urban setting. This is mainly the case when the government is considered corrupt and lacking in legitimacy and would allow the EU to build resilience into its development assistance.

5.2 International development assistance fuelled widespread corruption and elite capture of aid

The concept of **'dwarfing'** refers to the fact that throughout the twenty years in Afghanistan, **EU developmental expenditure was 'dwarfed' by USA's military and reconstruction spending.** Afghanistan's ODA and OOF amount to over EUR 65 billion from all international contributions, including the USA, over the last twenty years. However, US SIGAR calculations attribute approximately EUR 145 billion (USD 145 billion) in US expenditure, on rebuilding 'Afghanistan, its security forces, civilian government institutions, economy, and civil society'. In addition, the US Department of Defense spent approximately **EUR 837 billion** (USD 837 billion) **on warfighting.** SIGAR's lessons learnt for the USA detail the pitfalls of US over-expenditure and broke this down into specific stages:

- 2001–2005: Harmful Spending Patterns Established;
- 2006–2008: Spending Ramps Up;
- 2009–2011: An 18-month Surge and a Flood of Cash;
- 2012–2014: Rapid Transition Timeline Reveals the Limits of US Efforts;
- 2015–2020: Coming to Terms with Reduced Troops, Assistance and Influence.

The importance of this timeline is that it corresponds with many of the issues faced by EU actors as they attempted to navigate a multifaceted set of relationships in a complex environment. Indeed, before 2014 it points to a severe **problem with aid absorption.** Numerous lessons learnt reports have highlighted various problems with Afghanistan's absorptive capacity. For example, in 2009, the UK Department for International Development identified that Afghanistan had a 'low absorptive capacity' and had 'only spent 23 % of what it had been granted for the development budget' and within that 'for every USD 100 spent only USD 20 actually reaches Afghan recipients' (Bennet, Alexander et al., 2009). Similarly, the UK's House of Commons International Development Committee noted in 2012 that 'the Afghan Government has a limited absorptive capacity. The Afghan Government is currently able to spend only an estimated 18 to 20 % of the aid allocated to it by the US Government [...] where aid had gone through the Afghan Government it was not sufficiently reaching the provinces [...] which meant that funds coming through the line ministries were directed on ill-informed priorities or to corrupt individual and institutions' (House of Commons, 2012).

Similar observations were made by Global Affairs Canada's International Assistance Evaluation Division, concluding that 'there was a pressure to spend, and it was too much and too fast in the context of Afghanistan [...] it was sometimes difficult to find good initiatives in Afghanistan to disburse the amount of money available. Many other donors also perceived their development assistance spending in Afghanistan as ambitious and exceeding the absorption capacity of Afghan institutions' (Global Affairs Canada, 2020). Moreover, building on reports from the US, a report released by the *Danish Institute for International Studies* highlighted that,

'the 'US' initial support of warlords, reliance on logistics contracting, and the deluge of military and aid spending [...] overwhelmed the absorptive capacity of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan [and] created an environment that fostered corruption and impeded later [counter- and anti-corruption] efforts.' (Anderson, 2016)

As the USA's lesson learnt exercises highlight, 'An economy can only absorb a certain amount of inputs until it becomes saturated. Additional input goes somewhere else, usually capital flight, usually illicit. In Afghanistan, absorptive capacity [was] reached in the first year of operations. That led to the corruption eruption' (SIGAR, 2014). By 2011, US Agency for Internal Development (USAID) estimated that potentially up to 30 % of its contracted project costs were attributable to corruption. As one Congressional Research

Report concluded, 'substantial sums of aid money flowing into Afghanistan are being pocketed by corrupt officials and criminal networks and are being diverted out of the country into bank accounts in Dubai and other overseas destinations' (Schwartz, 2011).

Further US lessons learnt reports have highlighted that not only was the money spent so large that Afghanistan could not absorb it but it 'grew to levels far beyond what US agencies themselves could effectively absorb, disperse, and oversee' (SIGAR, 2021). Whilst there is debate about the theoretical range in which the absorptive aid threshold is reached, ranging between 15 % and 45 % of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), between 2004 and 2013, USA appropriations for Afghanistan's reconstruction alone exceeded this upper threshold. In 2006 and 2010, for example, US-appropriated funds alone exceeded 100 % of Afghanistan's GDP (SIGAR, 2021). Other international actors, including the EU and Member States, added to the absorptive capacity problem, whilst **multilateral institutions such as the UN failed to coordinate adequately and help address this problem**. The issue of corruption was not addressed because it was assumed, and for some policy-makers remains so, to be part of Afghan 'culture' and attributable to individual Afghan behaviour. The US solution to corruption was often further donor interventions. As SIGAR (2021) reports, the USA remained unaware for years that it had initiated a structural problem fuelling corruption, namely excessive spending and lack of oversight. Whilst conducting this Study, some **senior EU officials at the Commission remained unaware of this structural issue**. Strategic concerns over corruption fuelling grievances and funding the insurgency have nonetheless been a common theme since 2009, and US understandings of this problem have been available in open-source lessons learnt material since 2016 (SIGAR, 2016).

Absorptive capacity matters because **exceeding this threshold is counterproductive, leading to 'waste, fraud, and increased corruption'** (SIGAR, 2021). Ambassador Cautain (2022) explained that when outlining the biggest mistakes made over the last twenty years, the international community 'incentivised corruption, spending more than [Afghanistan's] GDP'. This led to 'elite capture of aid', which meant that there was no 'peace dividend' whereby aid 'trickled down beyond the cities ... How else can you explain a 48 % poverty rate in 2021?' Moreover, as another EU official outlined,

'We thought it is a *tabula rasa*, and we can implement our ready-made development solutions to build a modern state. And then it wasn't a question of lack of money ... there was an absorption problem since day one. Afghanistan was washed with money from all donors, not only EU donors, and this money hasn't been spent wisely, because there were too many donors with too much cash, [and] no structures to implement that assistance. It's catered to the ever-present corruption culture in Afghanistan. So, money that was supposed to install modern institutions modelled on the western idea of independent civil service, free of corruption, actually, were used, not with our consent, but it's just that this is what happens ... [we made the] problem even bigger ... money was stolen ... we knew that the government will not be able to deliver ... we just wanted to spend the money ... Take SIGAR's reports and you'll see that they were super critical about the way money has been allocated and spent, you take our report[s], you'll see that we're not that happy with the outcome that we bought with European taxpayers' money ... we contributed to this culture of clientelism and corruption by not addressing it properly. Not reacting when we would see that it is happening on our account, or on the account of another donor.'

With EU officials acknowledging that EU aid was misused or 'stolen', **further questions should be raised concerning the accountability of a strategy that privileged the levels of aid disbursement over emphasising the efficiency, value, sustainability and overall impact of aid**. It should be noted that the findings of this Study are not easily reconciled with the independent evaluation carried out on behalf of the European Commission (2018) *Evaluation of the European Union's Cooperation with Afghanistan (2007-2016)*. This evaluation correctly identified high levels of corruption linked to overall high levels of international development assistance and weak accountability mechanisms. However, the evaluation argues that 'the EU [was] recognised as a leader on anti-corruption' with 'significant clout'. The discrepancy

is mainly due to the weight placed on what was perceived as an ‘increasingly conducive climate for change’ to tackle corruption.

Nevertheless, empirical evidence does not concur with this assessment. For example, since Afghanistan entered Transparency International’s *Corruption Perceptions Index* in 2007, it has consistently been placed in the ten most corrupt states in the world. In 2018 and 2021, Afghanistan placed 172 and 174 out of 180, respectively, demonstrating **no improvement in its levels of corruption** (Transparency International, 2022). Similarly, the 2018 evaluation highlights LOTFA’s funding of the Afghan National Police (ANP) as an area of EU-added value, arguing that EU funds to this multilateral mechanism were well deployed because this ‘internationally-backed structure to pay police salaries has mitigated massive risks associated with corruption’ (European Commission, 2018a). This is a problematic assessment. Whilst the EU was funding **LOTFA**, there was gross mismanagement of funds by Senior United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) staff, which allowed payroll fraud to ‘**ghost employees**’ and procurement fraud (Johnsøn, 2016). With millions of euros unaccounted for, the UNDP acknowledged that its internal reviews had turned up several irregularities, an admission generated by SIGAR effectively monitoring US spending (Reuters, 2014). Whilst such sums are small compared to the overall LOTFA budget, the EU withheld funding of millions of Euros in aid but as Johnsøn’s (2016) research illustrates, ‘having no alternatives, the EU resumed funding to LOTFA’ and demonstrated the failed logic of ‘state-building first, anti-corruption second’.

The EU’s ability to draw lessons from the problems of absorption capacity and corruption is somewhat straightforward but challenging to operationalise because policy outcomes in this area are dependent on the actions of the USA in particular and other states more generally. Accessible open-source information regarding Afghanistan’s reconstruction was published from 2002 to 2021, and **EU institutions could better monitor absorption capacity and overall international aid concerning future crises**. An agreed absorption capacity threshold could be combined with a better focus on efficiency, value, sustainability and the overall impact of aid as markers of success. Further, this could be matched with awareness regarding the dangers of corruption illustrated by Afghanistan, combined with greater prioritisation and political will to appreciate issues around aid absorption through all EU institutions. This should include the Commission first and foremost in policy design and execution, the Parliament in terms of maintaining accountability and the European Court of Auditors. However, much of this problem rests on better US-EU cooperation, coordination and dialogue. This is because the USA was the lead international actor but was working within the horizon of months and years, whilst the EU’s approach to Afghanistan was operating within a timeframe of decades. **US policy’s short-term commitment undermined EU development thinking**, which was geared towards a long-term commitment. In large part, this is because the volume of **spending became an indicator of successful policy in and of itself**, but also because of how the initial stages of the war in Afghanistan unfolded.

During this early period, few resources were spent developing Afghanistan’s security forces. Where forces were being developed by, for example, the German-led police capacity building programme, the USA considered these to be moving forward ‘glacially’ (SIGAR, 2021). This empowered militias and strongmen outside of Kabul, on which the USA came to rely. The US House of Representatives Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs report highlighted how this worked in practice, titled *Warlord, Inc*. The report estimated that by 2010 the US military funding had ‘injected a good portion of a USD 2.16 billion contract’s resources into a corruptive environment’ just in Host Nation Trucking contracts (Tierney, 2010). This helped to build a **parallel economy that essentially undermined the GOA**. Alternative **military spending fuelled the formation of financial structures, which were not subject to the same oversights as traditional development institutions**. This parallel system went unchallenged by the US military because of ‘a perpetual sense of imminent departure’, which in turn ‘reduced the ability of US officials to plan for the long term’ (SIGAR, 2021).

In the early periods of this phase, EU institutions were marginalised in favour of transatlantic solidarity and US counter-terrorism operations. As a RAND lesson learnt report details, initially, 'Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cells and US Army Civil Affairs Teams–Afghanistan supported humanitarian assistance, relief, and reconstruction efforts throughout Afghanistan' (Bensahel et al., 2004). Whilst President G.W. Bush was referring to a **'Marshall Plan for Afghanistan'**, USAID and US Central Command were developing plans for Joint Regional Teams. The Afghan Transitional Authority and interim president Hamid Karzai supported these. As a result, in January 2003, a new structure termed **Provincial Reconstruction Teams** (PRTs) was established. PRTs combined military and intelligence personnel with civilian reconstruction specialists, bringing expertise in diplomacy and economic development with representatives of the Afghan Ministry of Interior. The deployment of PRTs grew to twenty-five units, which were attached to military engagements and spread throughout Afghanistan. For those PRTs operating under the U.S.-led coalition for OEF, the United Kingdom was the only European Member State to make a major contribution. PRTs led by NATO, under the control of ISAF, had greater European involvement, with Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom taking responsibility for operations. The experiences and effectiveness of PRTs varied considerably depending on the security context, and the operational mission was often deployed to insecure environments where limited development or humanitarian operations were underway from IOs and NGOs.

An early lesson from the development of PRTs was that **national governments had 'considerable influence over their day-to-day operations'**, which complicates coordination and [was] not conducive to the unity of effort throughout Afghanistan' (Dziedzic and Seidl, 2005). Moving forward, this meant that there were **problems with management and synchronisation** between PRTs, even though their objectives were broadly to: extend the authority of the GOA, promote and enhance security, and facilitate humanitarian relief as well as reconstruction operations. Moreover, **the blurring of military and civilian lines was strongly opposed by aid organisations**, who argued that any confusion about roles would lead to increased targeting of aid workers throughout the country. The systemic merging of military and civilian personnel fitted with the imperatives of a 'light footprint' and the US strategic doctrine, but it could not eradicate the divergent tensions that emerged as a result of military forces and humanitarian assistance often having short- to medium-term imperatives. Interviewees for this Study gave clear examples of where these tensions emerged and impacted the EU's aid strategy. For example, one aid worker leading a long-term ECHO-funded European NGO in the Health Sector explained,

'We, we've never left the country ... We have always had, let's say, relationships with all the different parties involved in the country since 1999, in a very transparent way. So, the [GOA] government knew that we were also talking to the Taliban before and vice versa. And this has never been a problem ... I would say most of the time that the most serious problems occurred were related to the Western military component that was not respecting our neutrality.'

Interviews with EU officials highlighted that US operations undermined **EU development cooperation with the GOA and aid effectiveness**. As one Senior EU official conveyed from time in Afghanistan:

'I worked with the Americans on this, so you know, it's not like I didn't talk to our American friends about it. The vast amount of money is coming from the USA. Now, who in the US is using the vast amount of development mode? The US military [...] their generals, colonels and lieutenants, were given very big bags of money, and on the rotation scheme, they had six months to spend all the money. And they did [...] You have four and a half million dollars in your pocket, and you want to spend it in six months – that created corruption because that money was spent very, very poorly. It fuelled corruption to an extreme point; to an unthinkable extent. Basically, these were unguided money missiles raining down over Afghanistan left, right and centre.'

Unlike traditional aid agencies, US military spending was not audited in traditional ways. On the contrary, volumes of expenditure were equated with success. As one EU official explained:

‘If we look at the traditional development agencies – Danish DANIDA, GTZ and even USAID, this was better controlled, and they understood they had to look after that money. But we’re talking about 10 % or whatever 15 % of the total sum. It was nothing. It was all the other money that the military was spending there; that was just crazy money. Millions to spend in six months. Development projects in six months? It’s completely insane. I mean, anybody who knows about development knows that it’s completely insane.’

Whilst the EU was funding development work in Afghanistan, **the US military had built a parallel development economy that was fuelling corruption on a grand scale and impacting EU aid projects.** This was in addition to corruption within the real economy, with a joint GOA-ISAF estimate that for every USD 2 billion in customs revenue generated annually, only half flowed to the government and the other USD 1 billion was diverted by local officials at the border. It is estimated that by 2010 more money was flowing outside of Afghanistan than the GOA’s core budget total of USD 3.4 billion (Schwartz, 2011). It is within this context that **greater questions should have been asked of the EU’s own aid strategy and whether or not the EU was capable of being effective in a saturated and corrupt environment.** Ambassador Cautain (2022) evaluates that **the EU’s goals may have been realistic in the first years, but after that, ‘they were not realistic anymore’ because of the scale of corruption and growing insecurity throughout Afghanistan. EU institutions should have considered the absorptive capacity of Afghanistan as a whole in addition to the activities of other international actors.** This was not the case, and to the contrary, EUSR offices at various points were asked not to push too hard on corruption. Similarly, when interviewed, **EU officials in Brussels were sometimes unaware of the shape and scale of US activity and what the US’s own lessons learnt activities had revealed since they were routinely published from October 2008.**

Recommendation 19: With EU aid being misused and stolen, further questions should be raised concerning the accountability of a strategy that privileged the levels of aid disbursement over emphasising the efficiency, value, sustainability and overall impact of aid.

Recommendation 20: EU institutions should institutionalise structures that can monitor and respond to issues surrounding absorption capacity and overall international aid levels in future crises. Such structures should prioritise identifying and tackling corruption with a view to counterbalancing the prioritisation of aid spending and ensuring greater accountability for European taxpayers.

5.3 The European Union’s democracy assistance and election monitoring

Supporting democratic elections in Afghanistan was not an inevitable outcome of the Bonn Process. Ambassador James F. Dobbins, the first US Special Envoy to Afghanistan, recalls that it was not a US, or indeed European, suggestion to introduce the idea of democratic elections within the draft stages of the agreement. Ambassador Dobbins’s mandate was to ensure that a broad-based government was formed. Instead, Iranian representative Javad Zarif raised its absence with the Afghans, who later incorporated it into the Bonn Agreement (Dobbins, 2008). For European powers and some in Washington DC, top of the list of people to lead Afghanistan were members of the diaspora, most prominently King Zahir Shah (See Section 2.1.2). The USA was reluctant to engage with such a proposition, given the commitment and sacrifices the Northern Alliance (NA) had made to oppose the Taliban (Dobbins, 2008). Moreover, with the NA taking over two-thirds of the country, they could ‘present participants in Bonn with a *fait accompli*’. The NA took over the ‘lion’s share of ministries in the Interim Administration’, which,

‘enabled the NA’s warlords and commanders to retain or be appointed to many provincial and district governorships and to key positions in the Afghan National Army and ANP. The return to power of persons widely despised and dreaded by most Afghans for the atrocities and sleaze that had characterized their rule during the mid-1990s ensured that from the very beginning bad governance and corruption became the norm.’ (Vendrell, 2012)

Repeatedly throughout the interviews conducted for this Study, interviewees have referred to the failings of the **Bonn Process as the 'original sin'**. This is echoed in academic literature, think tanks and the policy community more widely. Rather than seeing democratisation and development as incompatible with Afghan norms and values, the state's collapse in 2021 has been attributed to the events of 2001-2002. Namely, **the institutionalisation of highly centralised Kabul-centric government that empowered the warlords that were so despised in the 1990s**. The post-2001 system empowered the very individuals that the Afghan people rejected in the 1990s by allowing the Taliban to come to power.

Of course, with the EU, amongst other actors treating Afghanistan as a 'blank slate', these individuals had impunity and space for further corruption (see Section 2.1.3). This was **not in line with EU values and norms** but EU actors tacitly accepted it. This is important because it speaks to a central debate in international relations theory. There has long been a debate about how to negotiate the tensions between maintaining international order and justice (Foot et al., 2003). Within the EU, this is particularly pronounced given the potential tensions between Member States, for example, in the European Council and between other supranational institutions of the Commission, the Parliament and the European Court of Justice. As such, the EU has long sought to balance the focus of nation-states on *order* in the international system and the EU's emergent agenda for *justice within* and *justice beyond* its border (Nicolaidis and Lacroix, 2003). **By accepting the US approach, the EU tacitly accepted order over justice, which ran counter to the much-needed national reconciliation process in dealing with various national traumas of the 1980s and 1990s**. This ignored 'lessons learnt' from other international experiences with peacebuilding and national reconciliation (Maass, 2006). This was a missed opportunity to build trust with the Afghan people, and even if international prosecution of the warlords such as Hekmatyar and Dostum was improbable, it is feasible that justice could have been obtained through domestic institutions in the longer term.

Moreover, as one particularly informative study grounded in trauma-informed research outlines, 'decades of international peacebuilding have failed to account for—let alone address—the persistence of deep-rooted sources of internal conflict' (Franke and Wolterstorff, 2022). **Community-level conflict was not sufficiently addressed within international frameworks and points to a capability gap that the EU could potentially fill**. A rapidly deployed **Peace and Reconciliation Corps (PRC)** with specialist mediation training focused on local dialogue and peacebuilding may have been particularly useful from 2002-2004. This could potentially have helped in solving local problems upon which the Taliban were later able to capitalise. This could also have aided the international community in refocusing efforts on local governance and institutions where international instruments were lacking. A PRC would have been particularly useful in 2011 when there were greater calls for the demilitarisation of the Afghan conflict and a refocus on peacebuilding (Peral and Tellis, 2011). This would be in line with EU values.

Throughout the decades of conflict in Afghanistan, the centralised government was often resented and deemed illegitimate beyond immediate urban areas such as Kabul. Nevertheless, within this timeframe and following the Bonn Agreement, Afghanistan undertook national elections. Theoretically, these **elections were supposed to provide the Afghan government with legitimacy**. Yet, an important lesson from Afghanistan is that this was not the case, and more need to be done to address citizens' concerns beyond urban areas. **Elections alone were insufficient for providing government legitimacy** (Lierl, 2021).

5.3.1 2004 Presidential election

Afghanistan elected its first president in 2004. With 55.4 % of the vote, **Hamid Karzai** won an election marred by the threat of violence and resurgence by the Taliban. On this occasion, the EU did not send an Election Observation Mission (EOM) because of the security situation, instead sending a more compact Democracy and Election Support Mission. Nevertheless, as Hedi Annabi, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations told the UN Security Council,

‘Taking place against the backdrop of extremists’ threat, difficult terrain and sometimes adverse weather conditions, Afghanistan’s first-ever presidential election ... while not perfect, had placed under the best auspices the Afghans’ journey towards a vigorous democracy.’ (UNSC, 2004)

Similarly, Afghanistan returned to elections in 2005, holding parliamentary and provincial council elections, leading to the inauguration of the National Assembly in December. Emma Bonino, who headed the EU EOM, concluded that this was,

‘an important step in a transition process designed to put in place a representative government and thereby help bring peace to Afghanistan after a quarter-century of conflict. The elections were held in extremely difficult conditions, and to a timetable that was very tight ... Overall, given their complexity and the operational challenges, the elections are an accomplishment, although there were notable shortcomings which will need to be addressed in the future.’ (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2005)

Just four years later, Afghanistan held the 2009 Presidential election, whereby the two leading contenders were **President Karzai** and his main rival **Abdullah Abdullah**. The election was widely regarded as flawed (Tellis, 2009). Reports of widespread ‘irregularities’ together with missteps by the Afghan Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and the Electoral Complaints Commission, compounded the problems. **Indeed, the 2009 election significantly undermined the legitimacy of the Karzai government** (Dorronsoro, 2019).

For the EU Council, the presidential and provincial council elections represented ‘an important milestone for democracy in Afghanistan’ as they were the first conducted by the Afghan authorities (Council, 2009). Nevertheless, the EU EOM faced considerable constraints in its mission and a deteriorated security situation. The EOM highlighted the,

‘recurring lack of willingness by important interlocutors such as the IEC and the UNDP Enhancing Legal and Electoral Capacity for Tomorrow (ELECT) to facilitate access to information required for effective observation.’ (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2009)

The EOM report was deeply critical of the overall situation, stressing that **many lessons from previous elections had not been learnt** (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2009). The 2009 election demonstrated the need for political party formation rather than individual candidates. However, it highlighted many pitfalls with the overall electoral process and arrangements, such as ‘several million’ duplicated voter cards and a lack of political will in vetting candidates for criminal activities or links to illegal armed groups. The EU EOM’s analysis identified **1.6 million votes as ‘suspect or fraudulent, the vast majority of which were for Mr Karzai’**. The IEC initially declared that Mr Karzai had won with 54.6 % of the vote, only to renege on this and announce the need for a runoff election. Before the runoff, Dr Abdullah declared his withdrawal, citing a lack of transparency and independent checks and balances to allow an election to be held. **Hamid Karzai was declared President, albeit under a cloud of irregularities, corruption and a lack of adherence to Afghanistan’s election laws**. Mr Karzai’s presidency moved forward under a cloud of illegitimacy, which only helped damage Afghanistan’s democratic progress and bolster the Taliban insurgency. **For the EU EOM, it was clear that the international community had failed to learn and implement early lessons**. This is a lesson the EU should learn moving forward.

5.3.2 2014 Presidential elections

Central to any democracy is the peaceful transition of power. With Hamid Karzai moving from transitional government to President in 2004 and the cloud of the 2009 election hanging over his government, the peaceful transition of power had not been tested. **The transition of power can be particularly challenging within a highly centralised fragile state where the winner takes all** (Blanc, 2020). With the 2014 Presidential elections imminent, the Taliban increased the level and ferocity of its attacks. This was

not only to undermine the elections and the legitimacy of the GOA. The Taliban wanted to position themselves in potential peace talks with the GOA in Qatar.

Nevertheless, the EU sent an Election Assessment Team led by Mr Thijs Berman, a member of the European Parliament. Although some of the previous EU EOMs recommendations had been adopted, there was still evidence of widespread corruption and the results proved inconclusive, leading to a **second round between Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani**. Importantly, the EU Election Assessment Team and the EUSR worked together to set out the EU position and offer technical and financial help for the runoff (Tolo, 2014). This was a moment of **high visibility for the EU**. Nevertheless, second-round voting was again inconclusive, resulting in election officials ordering a recount and then an audit which eventually led to a stalemate. On 21 September 2014, the stalemate was broken when the two candidates agreed to form a **national unity government**. Ashraf Ghani would become President and Abdullah Abdullah the Chief Executive Officer. Although this was a drawn-out process, it marked the **first peaceful transfer of power in Afghanistan's history**, even as it was heavily mediated by the USA and the shuttle diplomacy of Secretary of State John Kerry (Blanc, 2020).

Given the collapse of the Afghan government in 2021, it would be possible to dismiss the importance of the 2014 election and the lessons that should be learnt from it. However, as one Senior EU diplomat stressed at length when interviewed for this Study:

'Democracy gained a lot during the time that we were there. We had an amazing situation. There is absolutely no doubt that Afghans turned out in very large numbers to elect the government that became the coalition government between President Ghani and Doctor Abdullah. Yes, it wasn't a great government and the elections were flawed. But the elections were very, very interesting from a democratic point of view. They created a new political reality in Afghanistan. And that's what democracy does, it changes where the power is. So, if you look before the elections, as much as they were chaotic, neither has a strong indigenous power base. Then you have elections happening... the vote gave them legitimacy to become the rulers of the country. And that is democratic success ... I hear a lot of people discounting this ... I think it's a very dangerous thing to say, you know, democracy didn't play a role or was discounted in Afghanistan or the Afghans didn't care. This is simply untrue. And we know it's untrue because we saw it happen ... [it was a] democratic triumph... Mr Ghani and Doctor Abdullah were the two people the Afghan people voted for. This is completely uncontested. So, the two people that the Afghans wanted to lead the country came into power. Got legitimacy, got political power through the vote.'

5.3.3 2019 Presidential elections

The **2019 Presidential election took place against the backdrop of delays** and President Ghani's constitutional tenure expiring four months before the 28 September voting began. The election also took place as the USA was negotiating with the Taliban in Doha. There were calls to delay the elections and maintain an interim government pending peace negotiations. However, **Ghani pushed forward with the elections to shore up his international legitimacy** (Cookman, 2020). Amid lengthy disputes, the results were returned in February 2020. **President Ghani was re-elected with 50.64 % of the vote compared to Abdullah Abdullah's second place, 39.52 % of the vote** (BBC News, 2020).

The result triggered a political crisis, further undermining the legitimacy of Afghan political institutions. Rejecting the results, Abdullah Abdullah sought to set up a **parallel government**, and both Ghani and Abdullah held rival inauguration ceremonies. The US response was to announce a USD 1 billion cut in assistance and threatened further cuts should they be needed (Cookman, 2020). By May 2020, in the mists of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Ghani agreed to appoint Abdullah as the head of a new High Council for National Reconciliation, allowing him to negotiate future peace talks with the Taliban.

With the 2019 Presidential election witnessing the lowest turnout of all modern national elections in Afghanistan, it became highly evident that **electoral insecurity significantly impacted political**

participation (SIAGR, 2021). Over the twenty years in Afghanistan and with considerable international assistance, it was clear that a lack of security undermined democracy and the perception that democratic elections were a way of influencing government. **Growing insecurity across the country contributed to undermining democracy in conjunction with a failed constitutional system.** However, EU efforts to address broader security concerns were left wanting.

Recommendation 21: The international focus on elections detracted from peacebuilding and reconciliation activities that previous lesson-learned activities have highlighted as central to the long-term success of state-building activities. Community-level conflict was often ignored, as national elections were considered sufficient to provide legitimacy. To correct this imbalance and build additional European capabilities, the institutionalisation of a PRC with specialist mediation training should be considered. It should focus on local dialogue and peacebuilding in line with European values and work with the EU's NGO networks to reach beyond the concerns of urban areas.

Recommendation 22: Previous lesson learnt activities were largely ignored in Afghanistan because policy-makers assumed that Afghanistan could be treated as a blank slate. This resulted in an inappropriate centralisation of power designed at Bonn and resulted in a winner takes all election. Moving forward, the EU should seek to have lessons learnt expertise embedded within its institutions and have advanced expertise concerning European relations with other regions of the globe.

Recommendation 23: In future crisis responses, EU institutions should consider the success of democratic elections to be highly likely to fail within insecure locations. An emphasis on peacebuilding and enhancements in human security should accompany a focus on elections.

5.4 The European Union's EUPOL mission and growing insecurity

In 2007, under the auspices of the Common Security and Defence Policy, the Council of the EU established a police mission in Afghanistan. **EU's Common Security and Defence Policy mission (EUPOL) was a civilian mission designed to establish and support an Afghan-led police force.** EUPOL was the EU's most visible contribution to helping establish Afghan security in what was a diminishing security environment. Between 2007 and 2014, its mission was to **monitor, mentor, advise and train.** This was adjusted in 2014 under the revised Operation Plan, reflecting the end of OEF and the start of Resolute Support Mission (RSM). The mission was terminated in 2016 amid uncertainty about what would come next (European Court of Auditors, 2015). At its peak in 2012, EUPOL maintained 350 staff but struggled to recruit up to the target of 400 staff, with Member States reluctant to second personnel to the mission. EUPOL activity was carried out in 16 provinces but it was assessed to be 'rather poor and its impact marginal'. As a result, provincial offices were cut back to two by 2013. In sum, **EUPOL was assessed by the Court to be a 'European effort' but to provide no overarching European approach** (European Court of Auditors, 2015).

Reputationally, EUPOL officers collectively were known to 'punch above their weight in terms of influence' within an international mechanism seeking to coordinate police training activity. This was because the organisation was able to offer administrative expertise and was staffed by former police personnel rather than members of the military (SIGAR, 2022b). This was particularly the case in EUPOL's engagements with the International Police Coordination Board of Afghanistan. However, this had a **negative impact**, with SIGAR and an EU Audit confirming that this had the **undesired effect of lowering international member buy-in because stakeholders believed it represented an attempt by the EU to take the lead in police development** (SIGAR, 2022b; European Court of Auditors, 2015). Given its limited size and budget, **EUPOL ultimately had little impact**, was undoubtedly not game-changing and, as a result, was largely seen to be **ineffective**. As a Senior EU diplomat interviewed for this study concluded, EUPOL was 'a failure'. It also demonstrated the EU working at cross purposes with the USA. The US wanted the fast production of

a **militarised police force capable of undertaking counter-insurgency operations**; the **EUPOL was focused on building a long-term force capable of community policing**. In 2007, the EU took over a police training role because the 2002 German-led police training mission was problematic. As the academic literature on this has shown (Hassan, 2019) and as agreed by Ambassador Cautain (2022), this is because **the EU in the first decade was seen as an instrument the Member States could use to 'get rid of difficulties' as it was 'easier to pass them over'**.

Insecurity in Afghanistan began to increase steadily in 2003 but the technical firepower of **US forces on the ground and in the air limited a large-scale insurgency**. Nevertheless, by **mid-2006, the security situation in Afghanistan had begun to deteriorate** significantly, with a rise in terrorism, violence and an increasing Taliban insurgency. Progressively, the tactics adopted began to resemble those in Iraq, with an evolving threat from improvised explosive devices and suicide bombings. For example, in 2008, a year after EUPOL had been established, 85 % (44 of 52) of Afghan police weekly reports contained instances of attacks against the police by suicide bombers or with improvised explosive devices (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2008). This was reflected in fatality rates across all stakeholders, from the US military, coalition troops, contractors, the Afghan National Army and ANP, humanitarian workers and Afghan civilians (Gollob and O'Hanlon, 2020).

As the security situation deteriorated, calls for greater European action mounted. For example, in EUSR Sequi's first exchange of views meeting with the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs in October 2009, he called for EUPOL to be strengthened as it was already faltering. He stressed the need for **'Afghanisation' of the security forces** if the security situation on the ground were to be improved. As Sequi outlined to Parliament, 'since 2007 the insecure areas have grown and the insurgents have established a foothold in zones previously considered safe'. The reasons for this were that the 'institutional dimension of security' was lacking and 'the absence of service provision by the local state enables the Taliban to flourish' (European Parliament, 2009).

Recommendation 24: EUPOL reveals the complexities of operating in Afghanistan and demonstrates that there were no quick fixes to often insurmountable problems. Where the EU demonstrated international leadership in this instance, it had the undesired effect of fracturing international cooperation. Moving forward, the EU should consider the implications of taking on new roles with limited capacity for tangible impact on the ground.

6 The European Union's political dialogue with Afghanistan

6.1 The role of the European Union representative in Afghanistan

The position of the EUSR and Special Envoy has been significant over the two decades of EU engagement in Afghanistan. Due to their unique position, **the weight they have given to issues within the EU's political dialogue has often steered the practical application of EU policy and cooperation with allies and partners**. The position of the EUSR in Afghanistan was filled by five holders between December 2001 and August 2017, followed by the deployment of two Special Envoys as listed below:

- EUSR Klaiber (December 2001-June 2002);
- EUSR Vendrell (June 2002 – August 2008);
- EUSR Sequi (September 2008- March 2010);
- EUSR Ušackas (April 2010 – August 2013);
- EUSR Mellbin (September 2013- August 2017);
- EU Special Envoy Kobia (September 2017- June 2021);
- EU Special Envoy Niklasson (June 2021- Present).

Their role in Afghanistan has been to **personalise and represent the EU with the backing of all Member States**. As such, these officeholders have provided an operational instrument in Afghanistan and steered the EU's political dialogue with key stakeholders. In this capacity, the EUSRs provided support for the HR/VP, overlapping with the times in the office of Javier Solana (1999-2009), Catherine Ashton (2009-14) and Frederica Mogherini (2014-19). The need for this role was confirmed as the issue of Afghanistan's reconstruction quickly rose to the EU's political agenda in late 2001. As early as December 2001, the Commission co-chaired an Afghan Reconstruction Steering Group in Brussels (other co-chairs consisted of the USA, Japan and Saudi Arabia) to discuss a common approach to coordinating international contributions to Afghanistan's reconstruction.

Within Afghanistan, **the EUSR was a particularly effective instrument for multiplying the EU's influence**. Throughout the last two decades, the EUSRs and Special Envoys have maintained a continual dialogue on the ground, working with EU institutions, Member States, NATO, the USA, the GOA and regional partners. EUSR Klaiber, for example, actively sought to represent European-level interests and **reassure Afghanistan that European cooperation would be sustained over the long term** (United Nations News, 2002). Based in Kabul, Klaiber was able to explain the EU's role and added value to the Afghanistan campaign directly with allies and partners. This was particularly important as the EU's complexities are often misunderstood; hence, **increasing EU visibility** provided early opportunities to influence policy from a marginalised position.

Before the Bonn agreement was enacted, the EUSR attempted to persuade the interim Afghan Authority that various political measures should be adopted. Ambassador Klaiber stated that early on, the most important of these was 'impressing the importance of a Human Rights Commission, a political assembly, a judicial commission to consider the new constitution and a new legal system'. By June 2002, Klaiber believed that 'we [the EUSR] had convinced the countries leaders of these imperatives' (Klaiber, 2002). This was a valuable role for the EUSR to play at this early stage, even as a unified European approach was sidelined by Member States¹⁷.

From the beginning of the conflict, the EUSRs could **facilitate political dialogue and add a capacity to EU-Afghanistan relations that had not been present in the 1990s**. Rather than showing *de facto* leadership on the humanitarian agenda, the EUSRs were able to represent the EU's expanding role and commitment directly. Klaiber was, for example, able to speak on behalf of the EU and assist the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan under the terms of its mandate to lead and coordinate international

¹⁷ In Klaiber's own reflections, he warned early on that 'Europe's culture is one of the nation-states. I went back to Brussels after my third month in Afghanistan and told my Ministers that the Common Foreign and Security Policy will never succeed if the nation states' Foreign Ministers continue to discuss bilateral issues. Diplomacy must be pitched in multilateral terms if the EU's agenda is to be advanced' (Klaiber, 2002).

civilian efforts (United Nations News, 2002). Similarly, Klaiber was able to lobby international partners to expand the ISAF mission beyond Kabul. Horizontally, Klaiber was able to **lobby Member States for a more active EU political role** rather than simply making financial contributions (Gross, 2009). More broadly, the EUSR was also to act as a voice for Afghanistan in Europe to ensure that Afghanistan did not slip down Member States' political agenda. The EUSR's ability to speak with 'one voice' was especially helpful in **furthering international coordination efforts and European integration**, both of which were needed given that the EU was marginalised in a very crowded and complex environment dominated by the USA.

6.1.1 EUSR expertise, knowledge, credibility and adaptability

In 2003, the Commission released the *Country Strategy Paper* for Afghanistan, followed by the 2005 EU Joint Declaration, and in May 2007, the European Council established a Common Security and Defence Policy mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL). Within this timeframe, **the EU delegation garnered a reputation for having genuine expertise and extensive knowledge of Afghanistan**. As Edward Burke (2014) noted about the EU, 'One diplomat from that time reflected that 'It is hard to quantify political skill or knowledge. It doesn't fit into an Excel chart or PowerPoint very well. But it is indispensable [...] And we had all the advantages''. The second EUSR, Francesc Vendrell, proved adept at realising an 'ever-expanding' EUSR role and pushing for greater cooperation with Afghanistan at EU level. **The EUSR role grew because the political environment in Afghanistan itself was changing, and the EUSR role was forced to adapt**. Often this adaptation has been portrayed as a weakness but navigating a complex, evolving political situation requires adaptation, and the EUSR position was suited to these needs, even if there was some confusion resulting from an ill-defined set of structures (Crisis Group, 2005).

It is widely considered that **Vendrell's extensive experience provided the EU with a credible and competent voice inside Afghanistan**. This allowed the EUSR role to grow in influence and, with it, the EU's credibility inside Afghanistan. This was evident when Vendrell gained access to the elite Policy Action Group chaired by President Karzai, consisting of officials from the Afghan government and various international bodies (Quigley, 2007; European Commission, 2005). Contemporary evaluations of the EU's efforts suggested an essential lesson for the EU moving forward, as

'many believe the EU gets a place at the table in Afghanistan because of his [Vendrell's] personal standing, rather than his EU title. He has far more Afghanistan-specific experience than most member state representatives in Kabul, his multilingual staff is well-versed in the region, and the political reporting of his office is widely seen as the best – and most realistic – available.' (Crisis Group, 2005)

Having expertise and visibility through the EUSR enhances the EU's influence within ongoing conflicts and can be used to send important signals about the level of EU engagement. As such, their appointment should be considered carefully in any ongoing crisis. For example, the appointment of Vygaudas Ušackas as EUSR in 2010 was controversial and seen by some as sending a damaging message about the EU's commitment to human rights in Afghanistan. As an EU parliamentarian pointed out when referring to Ashton's appointment, 'She took the inexplicable decision to replace the Italian Sequi, who is extremely well regarded in Kabul, with the Lithuanian Ušackas, who has no experience of the dynamics of the local situation and, indeed, is suspected of having collaborated with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) between 2002 and 2006 over the unlawful detention of Afghan prisoners in Vilnius' (Rossi, 2010). This was three years after the European Parliament's Temporary Committee on the alleged use of *European countries by the CIA for the transportation and illegal detention of prisoners* (European Parliament, 2007) report detailed Afghanistan's involvement in rendition networks. This included the **extraordinary rendition of European citizens transported to Afghanistan and subjected to degrading and inhuman treatment**. There remains considerable investigative work to be done in this area. However, as the European Parliament (2016) has noted, the USA failed to cooperate with European investigations

into **European complicity in the CIA programmes** and no perpetrators have been held to account, demonstrating impunity for both the USA and EU Member States.

6.1.2 The impact of the Lisbon treaty and the 'double-hatted' EUSR

The **Lisbon Treaty** entered into force on 1 December 2009. It would positively impact **the EU's approach to Afghanistan** and set in motion the **most important and successful period of EU engagement and political dialogue**. Notably, the Lisbon Treaty brought the EEAS into being. As one EEAS officer interviewed for this Study explained, 'with the Lisbon Treaty, we became a standalone diplomatic actor ... it's something EU officials' value more than the outside world'. Multiple interviewees highlighted this as an important marker in the EU's development capabilities and overall external action in Afghanistan. This is because the **EEAS added capabilities for coordinating EU Member States' presence on the ground and allowed the EU to play a bigger role. When the EU's coordination was consolidated, it was more effective and acted as a force multiplier**. One interviewee set out the importance of this gradual progression:

'[initially] the EU presence on the ground was always spread out across different boroughs. For a long time, we had a police mission. We had an EU delegation that was responsible for economic assistance. And then we had an EU Special Representative since 2002, that was helping with political reporting and unifying Member States. This was the case for a long time. Three different operations, three separate offices within Kabul; one office having the money, the other having the policeman and another having the political influence. So, the idea was always to consolidate these different roles. And once the Lisbon Treaty was ratified the delegations also became functional embassies. Legally, that meant that the head of the delegation had Ambassador-like functions.'

The point made by this interviewee is essential. It was neither the EU's policy agenda nor values that changed in 2009-2010 but rather the EU's institutional capacities. **Establishing a HR/VP combined with a European diplomatic service lay the foundations for more effective coordination**. It also transformed the EUSR role in Afghanistan into a double-hatted position, by combining the position of EUSR with the Head of the EU Delegation (Costa Reis et al., 2019). **This combination allowed for more effective EU representation in Afghanistan** because it prevented confusion over two EU officials participating in Afghanistan's Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (Dirkx, 2017). This was also identified in the *Third Action Plan Implementation Report* published in April 2011, which recognised that **the EUSR's enhanced coordination role increased EU visibility and cooperation with international partners** (UK Government, 2011). Although concerns have been made that the double-hatted position was defunct given the Lisbon Treaty enhancing the mandate of delegations, Member States have feared that this would lead to the loss of a 'privileged ear' that reports directly to the Political and Security Committee (Costa Reis et al., 2019). In and of itself, reporting material gathered in Kabul directly to the Political and Security Committee **partially filled the EU's intelligence gap** and hence the **EUSR provided an important role beyond coordination**. Conversely, **the acting EUSR would also maintain a 'face' and 'voice' for the EU inside Afghanistan whilst also allowing the EU to move more 'quickly and decisively' than it would if it had gone through the EU Presidency** (Crisis, 2005).

6.1.3 Internal tensions and the downgrading of the EU's Afghanistan agenda

Despite the benefits of the EUSR position in 2017, **the EU downgraded its engagement with Afghanistan to the level of Special Envoy**, thereby abandoning the double-hatted role. In part, this can be seen as a wider position adopted to reduce the number of double-hatted EUSR positions and phase them out to reflect the enhanced role of delegations (Costa Reis et al., 2019). However, it is also important to recognise the growing **tensions between the EEAS in Brussels and the EUSR's position in Kabul**, as this provides an important set of lessons for the EU moving forward.

In the Parliament's recommendations on the use of EUSRs, a key benefit of the EUSR position is the ability to contribute direct experience to policy and strategy formulation (European Parliament, 2019b). In 2016, at the request of the Foreign Affairs Council, the *2014-2016 EU strategy for Afghanistan* was due to be updated. As outlined in a Joint communication, **the decision was taken not to carry out a full evaluation** but rather 'mostly update and enhance the existing EU strategy' without an accompanying impact assessment. The Joint communication states that its primary source of information would be through the missions, delegations' commentary and implementation reports. However, when conducting interviews for this Study, serious tensions were demonstrated between the Office of the EUSR and the EEAS around this review. A Senior EU diplomat recalled, 'I remember that paper, I was quite disgusted when I got a draft', and although written feedback was provided, it was subsequently edited out, as a result of which staff on the ground concluded that 'I'm not going to touch it'. The level of disagreement between the EEAS and the EUSR's office at the time is deeply problematic. **It marks a missed opportunity and a failure to recognise the changing strategic context that Afghanistan presented.** This was reflected by the UK's European Scrutiny Committee, which responded to the review by stating, 'While many of its objectives may be straightforward, their means of delivery are not. Given the deteriorating security and economic situation in the country, the priorities set by the Commission and the EEAS seem highly ambitious' (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2017). As one Senior European diplomat argued, it was devoid of 'strategic reality'.

Some of these tensions were also born out in the wider understanding and embedding of the EU Global Strategy, whereby proximity to Brussels was a good marker of how important interviewees viewed the new document. In 2016, the EEAS released *A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*. Afghanistan is mentioned twice in the document: firstly, the need for a multi-dimensional and multi-phased approach; and secondly, the EU's commitment to supporting state-building and reconciliation processes. When the interviewees were asked if the *Global Strategy* had any impact on Afghanistan, the first replied 'No', whilst the second explained that it was the other way around, in that 'the Afghanistan experience fed the threat assessment or analysis of priorities for the EU'.

Further tension was reported over the EUSR engagement with the GOA on corruption issues during EUSR Mellbin's tenure. During interviews for this Study, it was pointed out that Mellbin's **mandate was to deal with corruption** and that this was 'a promise to the [European] Parliament'. Yet at times 'headquarters felt' that the EUSR Office was 'too tough' and it was 'making working with the government too difficult'. Indeed, **the EUSR Office was asked to call off an anti-corruption conference, only to receive the backing of Member States stressing its importance back in Brussels.** Fighting corruption was seen as directly relevant to Member States' interests as Afghanistan was a 'terribly corrupt, extraordinarily corrupt country and corruption was tearing the country apart and was making peace impossible'. These tensions are important as they demonstrate the realities of pursuing an **overly ambitious set of objectives set out in EU documents when balancing them with strategic realities on the ground.** Further evidence of tension emerged in the form of an anecdote to provide insight into this relationship:

'I'll give you an anecdote which I think is very telling about, you know, [about] what happened ... because it was a shocking experience to me. We're sitting at a meeting and there are some very high-end people involved and we're talking about Afghanistan [...] We start talking about where a lot of the Member States are and where they want to go. And then somebody says 'who gives a **** what the Member States want'. This was the exact language 'who gives a **** what the Member States want'.'

This runs counter to the Parliament's recommendation that the EUSR position should operate with the legitimacy built on the backing of the HR/VP and Member States. **Tensions between the EEAS and the EUSR were highlighted as the reason why the EUSR's double-hatted position was abandoned.** As explained:

'it was a big advantage to have the EUSR mandate, but it frustrated the EEAS a lot. And that's also why they killed it [...] they [took] the EUSR position back and [got] a bureaucrat to do that work. Then what happens when you split it? The EU becomes a nobody. It happened immediately [...] they should have kept the structure.'

As a Senior EU diplomat interviewed for this study explained that **this was an 'internal trick'**. The fifth and final EUSR for Afghanistan was EUSR Mellbin, albeit he was said to be considered a 'free rider' by the Asia directorate, able to circumvent the system and go 'directly' to HR/VP Mogherini. **Changing the EUSR position to a Special Envoy was a 'downgrading' of the EU's presence in Afghanistan** but it created a position that is 'part of the EEAS, and reports to the directorate'. Not only did Member States lose a 'privileged ear' at the Political and Security Committee with this decision but **the EU split a clear line of intelligence reporting**.

Recommendation 25: With EU delegations being recognised as maintaining genuine expertise and extensive knowledge, it is unfortunate that this did not feed into a comprehensive review of EU strategy in 2016. It suggests that issues within the bureaucracy of EU institutions prevent the flow of information and intelligence. The European Parliament should raise concerns about the need to reorganise and restructure EU intelligence infrastructure given the scale of failure Afghanistan presents. Enhancing European intelligence infrastructure will protect European interests and better protect its citizens. Afghanistan demonstrates the need for enhanced threat analysis, greater information sharing, better strategic and operational planning as well as sustained European intelligence management.

Recommendation 26: Given Afghanistan's challenges and complexities, the EUSR position was well-suited and provided multiple functions beyond what the role immediately suggested. In future crisis management situations, the EU should strongly consider the continued deployment of a suitable and experienced EUSR to enhance the Union's influence in coordination with Member States. This will allow the EU to take advantage of the reforms under the Lisbon Treaty.

Recommendation 27: Although the passage of time has diminished interest in European involvement in rendition, the European Parliament should renew efforts to hold those accountable.

7 EU Peacebuilding Efforts in Afghanistan

7.1 The EU's post Kabul process peace objective

The EU's institutional reforms strongly reinforced the EU's position in Afghanistan. As a result, **2009-2010 represents a transformative moment for the EU's approach**. However, in addition to the Lisbon Treaty, the EU's operational policy benefited greatly from *The Plan for Strengthening EU Action in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, approved by EU Foreign Ministers at the External Relations Council meeting on 27 October 2009. The Action Plan began to embed itself into EU policy throughout EUSR Ušackas' tenure, laying the foundations for more substantial and compelling EU assistance over the ensuing decade. In part, this is because it **demanded implementation reports that acted as something akin to their own lessons learnt exercises**. For example, early on in the process, it was identified that there were mismatches between the aspirations of the Action Plan and resources on the ground.

Increasingly, the EU's policy objectives began to sharpen and respond to changing events. Of particular importance was navigating the **Kabul Process**. By 2010, considerable fatigue from the conflict had set in. As one contemporary Congressional Research Service report noted, **European powers were coming under considerable pressure from their citizens and parliaments to bring military involvement in Afghanistan to an end**:

‘This pressure led Britain, France, and Germany to ask the United Nations to organize the international conference that took place in London on January 28, 2010. The conference did, as these countries sought, endorse the concept of transition to Afghan leadership on security and improvement of its governance. The London conference also encouraged more regional assistance from India, China, and Russia.’ (Boone, 2011)

The **London Conference was unsuccessful in adding a significant regional level to the conflict** and is somewhat representative of the **EU-India Strategic Partnership losing moment from around 2009** (Sachdeva, 2015). However, the London conference was followed by the July 2010 conference in Kabul, which laid out a process whereby the **GOA would take responsibility for security development and reconstruction after 2014**. Simultaneously, there would be a gradual increase in aid to the Afghan national budget. At the November 2010 Summit in Lisbon, **NATO announced plans to withdraw international forces by the end of 2014**. Ending this transition period, NATO completed its ISAF mission, and on 1 January 2015, operation RSM began. **RSM aimed to continue training, advising and assisting the Afghan security forces and institutions**. The 9 800-troop presence was maintained but the terms of engagement changed to **self-defence combined with US air support** provided to Afghan security forces (McInnis and Feickert, 2017).

The European Council concluded a new strategic framework to improve the coordination of the EU and Member States' civilian engagement in Afghanistan from mid-2014 to 2016 (European External Action Service, 2014). The new *Elements for an EU Strategy in Afghanistan 2014-16* determined that:

‘the overarching strategic goal of the EU's future role in Afghanistan should be the development of Afghanistan's institutions to provide the resilience needed to safeguard progress to date and provide a countrywide platform for a more effective and ultimately sustainable Afghan state.’

Repeated and underlined within the document, this was the clearest, boldest and most succinct articulation of EU strategy to date. Underpinned by the *Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework*, a donor agreement was in place for Afghanistan's transformational decade from 2014-2024. Herein lay a significant crystallisation within EU strategy. **There was a new emphasis on 'systemic reform' to enable 'progress in Afghanistan'**. Four objectives were drawn up to meet the EU's aims: (1) **Promoting peace, stability and security in the region**; (2) **Reinforcing democracy**; (3) **Encouraging economic and human development**; and (4) **Fostering the rule of law and respect for human rights, in particular the rights**

of women and children. These were not new objectives, but the EU strategy in Afghanistan provided greater direction and clarity moving forward. It marked the beginning of the EU's most successful and high-profile period of engagement with Afghanistan, whereby its presence in Afghanistan was able to **refocus international attention with the 2016 Brussels Conference and help conclude peace negotiations with Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG).** Outwardly, the EU was projecting itself as adopting a peace-making role, negotiating a significant peace settlement and cheerleading the Brussels conference on 'prosperity and peace'.

7.1.1 Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin peace negotiations

In **September 2016, a peace agreement was signed between HIG and the GOA.** The peace process started in 2008 and was deemed 'historic' by the US government upon its completion. Moreover, the GOA believed it could be a model to pave the way for a future peace deal with the Taliban. Initially, the USA opposed negotiations with HIG and its leader, the former mujahedeen warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, 'the Butcher of Kabul', and US involvement was limited throughout. Upon the HIG agreeing to **disarm, disband and cut ties with terrorist organisations** as well as illegal armed groups, an **agreement was made that saw Hekmatyar removed from the UN sanctions list and return to Kabul in May 2017.** EUSR Mellbin's role in this was significant, as the EUSR position allowed him to act on behalf of the EU and intervene at moments when the peace deal was close to collapsing. As one Senior EU diplomat stated, 'We did it, not others. We made it happen, and you can hardly find a trace of it anyway. The EU brokered a peace deal ... It played a very significant role in showing the Afghans that peace is possible'. Indeed, Ambassador Cautain (2022), confirmed that EUSR Mellbin's role was instrumental at critical moments. Instructively, the US' lessons learnt' process has highlighted as a key finding that 'The US government's willingness not to oppose a peace process with HIG was an important factor in the eventual conclusion of a deal' (SIGAR, 2019). That is to say, it was **EU leadership on the ground in Kabul that helped facilitate the most significant Afghan peace agreement since the 1980s and one that is considerably longer lasting.** The EU's actions in this instance were pragmatic, but questions of impunity for war crimes and crimes against humanity have arisen from this deal. Notwithstanding that, **it demonstrates a strategic departure from the EU's commitment to a principles-based policy and is noteworthy for its enduring success.**

7.1.2 The 2016 Brussels Conference

The EU's successful peace-making was followed up in **October 2016 by the Brussels conference.** With representation from over 100 states and international organisations, Brussels signalled its ongoing commitment to Afghanistan. This was at a time when international attention and focus on Afghanistan were diminishing. This high-profile conference **successfully drew ongoing commitments and attention to Afghanistan.** International participants confirmed their intention to maintain EUR 13.6 billion in development aid, almost 40 % of which EUR 5 billion was contributed by the EU and Member States.

International donors and the GOA agreed to a new *Self-Reliance Through Mutual Accountability Framework* and agreed to 24 new 'SMART' (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound) deliverables for 2017 and 2018 (European Council, 2016). Moreover, issues with overall sustainability were addressed, culminating with concrete outcomes. It was noted that **Afghanistan would not be able to sustain developmental processes without continued international support.** Donors pledged to continue supporting the Afghan National Budget through 2020, financing 'approximately 69 % of Afghanistan's USD 6.5 billion fiscal year 1395 national budget (December 22, 2015–December 21, 2016), mostly through grants' (SIGAR, 2017). Similarly, high-level events on women's empowerment and regional cooperation took place, at one of which, 'Empowered Women, Prosperous Afghanistan', First Lady Rula Ghani delivered a keynote address. **The GOA agreed to greater reporting of these issues through**

National Action Plan reports. Outwardly, this was a successful conference with the strapline, ‘partnership for prosperity and peace’.

7.1.3 Fault lines in pursuing peace

Ostensibly, the HIG peace agreement and the Brussels conference were very successful. However, when interviewing a Senior EU diplomat for this Study a more nuanced view emerged, whereby the Brussels conference was regarded as a formalised success in the face of international fatigue. However, the momentum to pursue a comprehensive peace settlement fell apart shortly after¹⁸. **The USA and the EU abandoned the aspiration to pursue a negotiated peace settlement throughout 2017.** As one Senior EU diplomat explained,

‘We also had this extraordinary first regional meeting. All the key stakeholders in the neighbourhood on Afghan peace. There was a peace which is about the Afghans agreeing. And then there's the peace with the externals. Especially Pakistan and Iran. Of course, but also China [and] India. The USA and EU hosted. You have the north-south dichotomy between China and India to a certain extent. Russia played a role but it was more marginal. I mean there were all kinds of intersections. We got people together at a very high level. And so, there was on that level also a foundation to go for peace. The Americans said they were not ready to sit down at the conference and open the door for peace talks. On the final day, John Kerry said the USA was willing to discuss peace talks with the Taliban. It was a breakthrough – there was optimism. But the reality afterwards was it fell apart quickly from there. Clearly, the political will for peace did not exist.’

Pushed on the EU's role, it was reported that the ‘the [Commission and the] EEAS wasn't ready for peace. Nobody was ready for peace. Nobody wanted to upset the Americans’. This image is reinforced in US lessons learnt exercises carried out by SIGAR:

‘US government decisions in Afghanistan helped ensure there would be no peace to keep in the first place. For perspective, Bosnia benefitted from a proper peace settlement in 1995 that has prevented mass violence ever since. In contrast, in Afghanistan, the US government refused opportunities to reconcile with the defeated Taliban and declined to implement an inclusive, post-conflict peace process, so the Taliban soon rebuilt itself as a powerful insurgency’ (SIGAR, 2021).

On the issue of peacebuilding, tensions built between the office of the EUSR, the EEAS and EU Member States, whereby early in 2017, **the strategic direction of Afghan policy was contested inside EU institutions and between Member States** themselves. The fault line between them was whether the EU should **emphasise a peacebuilding strategy to deal with the growing insurgency or continue with a state-building strategy that continued to support existing partners** without adding friction. Ambassador Cautain (2022) explained that **the state-building strategy won out**, even though it was a losing strategy because a ‘path dependency’ had been created. The EU ‘bureaucracy had its own track’. After asking why he believed this was not addressed by the strategic reviews at this point in time, Cautain replied, ‘EU colleagues were not listening and not reading the reports about the deterioration’.

A Senior EU diplomat interviewed for this study highlighted that, the Commission and its aid strategy formed a ‘big ship’ which was unable to ‘adapt’. Moreover, whilst the EU was negotiating what became the 2017 EU-Afghanistan Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development, the EEAS was unwilling to explore a peace agreement with the Taliban and adequately challenge the GOA. Notably, the EU Parliament was only partially informed about these negotiations throughout, noting that the Council's negotiating directives for the EEAS were provided on 16 March 2018 rather than at the start of the process

¹⁸ Quotation: ‘Peace was the only viable future trajectory for Afghanistan. So, you have a kind of formalised success. The international community was tired and fed up with Afghanistan ... but actually rallied behind the idea. OK, now we go for peace, and that was a wonderful moment ... we're all celebrating. But that was it. It didn't happen. People didn't want peace and it sort of fell apart from there.’

in November 2011. Indeed, whilst the Parliament was stressing ‘that a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan is needed and that all efforts should be directed towards that most urgent objective’, this was not being undertaken (European Parliament, 2019a). **The development process was placed ahead of other strategic interests, including long-term peace and security.** As one EU official informed this Study, the Commission failed to recognise ‘realistic strategic options’; ‘the EU wasted several years and then the Americans started the peace process’.

7.1.4 The Doha agreement – EU marginalisation and engagement with the Taliban

The paradox of pursuing development at the expense of peace was made evident in 2017 with two contrasting events. The same year that saw the EU-Afghanistan Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development being signed also saw one of the largest explosions in Kabul since 2001 and a direct attack against a Member State (Rasmussen, 2017). **The German Embassy was struck by a massive explosion that killed 90 people and wounded 461 others.** For one EU official interviewed for this Study, this was a significant turning point. It was identified as a clear example of the deteriorating security conditions; ‘as a result of this attack, most diplomatic missions were significantly downgraded. At the time we [the EU] were trying to establish a different sort of diplomatic presence ... our presence in Afghanistan was significantly reduced because of the security [situation]’. With a reduced delegation, the EU official confirmed that ‘five or six people in the delegation was not enough to do proper reporting or be engaged with the government on the reform agenda’. Indeed, whereas throughout 2016, development cooperation was prioritised over security concerns or dealing with corruption, it was a growing insecurity that was stymying work on the ground.

In addition, 2017 would also see new challenges in the transatlantic relationship emerge. The newly inaugurated Trump administration began considering proposals to broaden RSM and deploy additional ground forces. It was becoming increasingly clear that the **Taliban were advancing**, the GOA’s geographical areas of control were diminishing and according to General John Nicholson, Commander of US Forces–Afghanistan, a ‘**stalemate**’ had set in. Symbolically, the Taliban were making gains in Helmand Province, where British service personnel had been active until 2014.

In August 2017, the Trump administration began to lay out a new strategy in Afghanistan, referring to a ‘political settlement’. The USA was **removing any preconditions for peace talks** between the Taliban and the GOA, with the Secretary of State Rex Tillerson arguing that ‘the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban representatives need to sit down and sort this out’. Over time, such statements weakened international unity on this position, exacerbated by growing transatlantic tensions between the Trump administration and European capitals. By **July 2018, the Trump administration had entered into direct negotiations with the Taliban without consultation or representation from the GOA.** This action not only reversed the long-held international position that all peace should be ‘Afghan-owned and Afghan-led’ but also abandoned a cornerstone of the US-initiated war on terror. National Security Presidential Directive 9 set out that there was to be no distinction between terrorists and those that harboured them, a proposition that helped justify the war in Afghanistan in 2001. The Trump administration made that distinction, ending a central principle of US policy that had been in place for seventeen years. Moreover, the EU and Member States were not consulted. Similarly, in NATO’s ‘lessons learnt’ report, **a key finding was that ‘Allies would have benefitted from more meaningful discussions on the negotiations of the US-Taliban agreement.’**

Special Envoy Kobia identified the manner in which international unity broke down as a **tipping point that allowed the Taliban to gain power** (Kobia, 2022). In September 2018, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad was appointed Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. By January 2019, Ambassador Khalilzad declared, ‘The Taliban have committed, to our satisfaction, to do what is necessary that would prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a platform for international terrorist groups or individuals’. With this

confirmation, it became clear that the USA was preparing for a full withdrawal. Special Envoy Kobia subsequently stated that ‘we need to be ready ... This diplomatic and political activity has created totally new dimensions you never know — it could take longer, or it can go fast’ (Mashal and Nordland, 2019). This was a tacit admission that **the EU was neither being updated nor consulted about events in Doha**. As one EU official interviewed for this Study set out ‘the European Union ... was not consulted, whether one or two other Member States were consulted about the process, you have to go to the Member States’. This situation was confirmed by another EU official, who stated that ‘There were a few countries that were more in the know than others, like, Germany or Norway, for example, the UK with extensive contacts but the EU was never really part of the club.’ **In the most profound and far-reaching decision taken since the USA launched OEF, the EU was marginalised just as it had been at the start of the conflict.**

Whilst conducted discreetly in 2019, Special Envoy Kobia (2022) has since confirmed that there were separate talks with the Taliban between the EU and the Taliban. A Taliban spokesperson confirmed one such meeting in May 2019. This places the overall timeframe of EU engagement with the Taliban after Khalilzad’s announcement on 12 March 2019 and that an agreement ‘in the draft’ had been made but considerably before the 29 February 2020 Doha signing of the Doha Agreement.

Special Envoy Kobia has described **talking to the Taliban as a tough lesson for the EU to learn** but stated that a wider lesson needs to be taken away from this process:

‘As somebody who’s been involved in peace processes and peace talks for over 20 years. If I have learnt one thing, it is that you need to talk to everyone. ... I think at a certain time you need a change of paradigm.’ (Kobia, 2022)

The need to speak to Taliban representatives earlier in the conflict was a repeated theme that emerged throughout interviews with EU officials. For example, when asked about lessons learnt for the EU’s development processes, a Senior EU official highlighted success on the development side but argued that ‘the issue of corruption could have been taken into consideration more ... also the perception of corruption’ and ‘have a more inclusive government from the start... meaning dealing with the Taliban from the beginning’.

It should be noted, for lessons learnt, that in December 2007, the EU’s second most senior official, Michael Semple, was expelled from Afghanistan for communicating with the Taliban (Semple, 2010). In 2013, even as the GOA suggested that they would engage in peace talks with the Taliban in Qatar, President Karzai halted security talks with the USA because they had announced possible peace talks with the Taliban. However, interviewees for this Study disclosed a **missed window of opportunity for the EU to engage the Taliban between 2015-17 when the Office of the EUSR’s ‘begged’ for greater engagement and conference invitations, which were declined by Senior officials at the EEAS in Brussels**. The option of EU peace talks with the Taliban was particularly pronounced after the peace agreement with HIG and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The EU and its Member States did not want to provide perceptions of legitimacy to the Taliban and favoured unity in the international approach. International unity would itself break down shortly after this time window.

In February 2020, the USA and the Taliban signed a formal agreement and a timetable for withdrawal was announced. The USA would draw down its forces by mid-July 2020 and complete its withdrawal by April 2021 (Thomas, 2021). For some within EU Institutions, it was hoped that President Biden’s election would change the strategic calculus. However, as one EU official informed this Study, **there was genuine concern that the country would collapse** and once ‘President Biden confirmed the withdrawal of US troops when he was elected ... that was the moment we started knowing, the entire international community knew that it was going to be the end.’ Nevertheless, a Senior EU diplomat interviewed for this study detailed a more serious failure, whereby in **the EU’s own conflict analysis** held between October 2020 and February 2021, many inside the process **did not believe the USA would genuinely leave Afghanistan**; ‘they were bluffing’. For many involved in that analysis, **Afghanistan was considered ‘too big to fail’** and scenarios,

whereby the Taliban retook the country were 'refused' and not considered in full. This was as much a **failure of imagination** as it was 'blindness... denial... and an unwillingness to listen to bad news'. In Spring 2021, an EU task force was set up to 'monitor the situation and try to get prepared' but it was conceded that EU institutions were unprepared because it was too difficult to predict and prepare for what followed.

Recommendation 28: The focus on 'systemic reform' was introduced with clear strategic goals in 2014 to assist with the Kabul process and Afghanistan's transformational decade. This was 13 years after reconstruction began. In future crisis management situations with a state-building component, systemic reform should be at the heart of EU policy if the EU is to seize initial opportunities for success.

Recommendation 29: The EU was successful in 2016 partly because of a refocusing of policy but also because the EU was able to achieve more autonomy as international attention diminished. Within this context, it was unfortunate that the EU did not take the lead in furthering peacebuilding activities. Failure to engage with the Taliban and ongoing corruption was seen to be the two most significant mistakes by EU officials. This highlights the need for the EU to prioritise its independent peacebuilding activities that include talking directly with all parties irrespective of the concerns of the USA.

8 The collapse of the government of Afghanistan (2021-present)

Tomas Niklasson took on the role of Special Envoy to Afghanistan in June 2021, just two months before the GOA's collapse. Before this period, there was considerable **confusion within the international community about the timetable for US troop withdrawal**. Various contradictory communications were made within the Trump administration, which seemed to have more to do with the US presidential election timetable than the reality in Afghanistan or the US military's capacity to withdraw in an orderly fashion. This situation moderately improved under the newly elected Biden administration. In March 2021, Biden remarked that he could not 'picture' US troops in Afghanistan in 2022 but there was no solid timeline. In April, it was declared that the 'final withdrawal' would begin on 1 May 2021 and be completed by 11 September 2021. By July 2021, most NATO allies and US partners had withdrawn; hence, it was concluded that the military mission would end on 31 August 2021 (Thomas, 2021). From the outset, Niklasson's period as a Special envoy was marked by considerable uncertainty and change within the international approach to Afghanistan and the overall architecture into which the EU fits.

It has been widely suggested that the collapse of the GOA was unpredictable. As one EU official explained, 'It was a shock; it wasn't part of our imagination or what we believe to be possible'. Whilst EU officials believed that the Taliban would become part of the strategic equation and potentially come to power, the speed at which this occurred could not have been predicted. As one EU official outlined, 'there were no analyses showing that the moment the West switches off the light, the next day, you will have a completely new regime. If we were sure of that happening, we would have reacted differently'. As another EU official was eager to illustrate, 'The EU has no intelligence of its own. I just want to make a very strong point that the EU has no intelligence agency [...] We always rely on EU Member States and allied countries' intelligence being shared with us'.

In May 2021, the Taliban began sweeping throughout the country's rural areas. As one congressional research service report highlights, 'the Taliban's seizure of other districts was more surprising: some northern areas had militarily resisted the Taliban when the group was in power in the 1990s, making their 2021 fall to the Taliban particularly significant' (Thomas 2021). On 15 August, the Taliban began entering Kabul, thus cementing their takeover of the country. Whilst the timeline of these events is clear and it is agreed that **the US troop withdrawal precipitated the government's collapse**, there is more debate over the underlying causes. A range of positions was put forward by EU officials and diplomats when interviewed that echo the analysis presented throughout the multiple sections of this Study. These included:

'Twenty years of mistakes by the international community and the Afghans themselves were made. Firstly, corruption was incentivised, leading to the elite capture of aid. Second, impunity. NATO for the first 10 years never dealt with 'collateral damage' and compensated families. Then the same was done by Afghan security forces, which was corrupt. This benefited the Taliban. Thirdly, the peace dividend was never shared. Wealth and aid never trickled down outside of the cities.' (Cautain interview, 2022)

'The withdrawal changed the balance of power, with the GOA, the USA and allies on one side, and the Taliban and Pakistan on the other. The GOA was entirely reliant on Western intervention and so with the withdrawal, you change that balance of power. Pakistan's involvement with the Taliban helps explain the quick collapse.' (Senior EU Diplomat interview)

'This was not a mono-causal event, it was years in the making. Several factors were in play. Firstly, overdependence on the USA. For international presence and support for the Afghan National Security Forces. The US withdrawal took away capacities and capabilities. Secondly, the Taliban negotiations broke

the trust and confidence of the Afghan military and the political class. It undermined the position of the Afghan government and the security forces. The broader legitimacy of the Afghan government in the eye of the people was also damaged. Thirdly, in August 2021 you had a government that was abandoned by the international community. So initially the USA but then NATO withdrew. Fourthly, the Taliban advance shifted the military balance, on whether to support the government. Fifthly, there was an intelligence failure. This was something that we underestimated across the board over the years; the strength of the Taliban. Not just militarily but also the support they were able to gain from non-government-controlled areas. Sixth, a lack of imagination, we didn't want to allow this to be a possibility.' (EU Official interview)

'The direct reason was the withdrawal of US troops followed by the withdrawal of NATO. The problem was, the government was never completely, independent and self-subsistent. It was never able to fulfil basic duties without borrowing subsistence in terms of money, technical support, security. That is why the collapse happened quickly. The main indirect reason for the failure was the lack of Taliban involvement in the Bonn Agreement. The decision not to invite part of the population represented by the Taliban to Bonn and not make them part of the reconciliation process is perceived as the main capital sin of everything that happened later.' (EU Official interview)

Whilst there was a broad consensus on US troop withdrawals being the tipping point, international NGOs operating on the ground offered overlapping but distinctly more societal perspectives. The reasons for collapse were stated as:

'1) A lack of legitimacy. That has been an issue since 2001. The bigger picture is that the population was never satisfied with the government and did not see sufficient progress. Development did not trickle down to the provinces, to the districts and, of course, fraud and corruption. It has always been a very weak government.

2) The elections and the political battles between the main competitors were not really helpful. You saw that also in the turnouts during elections. The first elections [voter turnouts] and interest were high but the population was not really satisfied with the way their country was governed.

3) The Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police could not resist because their loyalty and support to the Afghan government were not very high.

4) People made the calculation that it would be better not to resist and put up a fight.

5) The country was totally dependent on foreign aid. There was no real infrastructure in economic terms.

6) Over 20 years, there has been a huge increase in corruption.

7) The leading cause is that Western countries could not recognise the Taliban.

8) No focus was on infrastructure being built, very minimal. There were things, it is not that nothing was done. But it was not rooted in the country, it was never owned by the Afghans. Never.'

What emerges from these interviews is a broad agreement across all stakeholders that corresponds with much of the leading academic literature and lessons learnt reports produced by international partners. **Afghanistan was too dependent on US military support and international aid. It was a mistake not to include the Taliban early on in the process and fail to seek a peace settlement backed by international unity.** Levels of corruption were too high and undermined development projects, more comprehensive societal trust and government legitimacy. Afghan society and the military had little purchase on the GOA's success. The Taliban gained legitimacy by offering greater physical security from aspects of civil war, even if they undermined human security for women, LGBTI communities and other marginalised groupings in society. These issues illustrate **failures to build trust, legitimacy and credible institutions necessary for the state's basic functions.**

The reasons outlined by EU officials and international NGOs provide long-term structural reasons why state-building failed, ultimately undermining the GOA. These reconcile with the six, primarily more immediate, reasons for the GOA collapse identified in SIGAR's (2022c) assessment of *Why the Afghan Government Collapsed*. First, it was not just EU officials that did not believe that the USA would withdraw but also the Afghan government, which rendered it unprepared for the US withdrawal. Second, the US-Taliban talks weakened the government and emboldened the Taliban to seek a military victory. Third, progress on intra-Afghan negotiations was hindered by a weakened government insisting that the Taliban be integrated into the Republic. Fourth, the Taliban were unwilling to compromise, obstructing a negotiated political settlement. Fifth, the GOA was destabilised at a critical juncture because President Ghani relied on a highly selective and narrow circle of loyalists. Sixth, long-term factors include the 'Afghan government's high level of centralization, struggle to attain legitimacy, and endemic corruption' (SIGAR, 2022c).

Outside Afghanistan, these issues also point directly to a complex dynamic within transatlantic relationships, raising questions about the stability within Atlantic solidarity and international unity. HR/VP Josep Borrell has argued that 'There are lessons to learn from the failure of this nation-building operation. The USA has spent USD 300m a day – a day – for 20 years, ultimately with very modest results' (Rogal, 2021). Borrell's comments are reflective of broader shifts that could become embedded within EU institutional-level thinking. **The viability of 'state-building' during an ongoing conflict is now contentious among EU officials.** As one EU official summarised:

'If you put me in another country now, after the Afghanistan experience, I would be looking twice, if that place, if that context was heavily dependent on the success of the military intervention. What I have seen, is the collapse was a 'one-to-one' simple formula - soldiers out, collapse in. I would be far less ambitious next time around and be more realistic about the dependency of a political context that relies on a military presence.'

From a wider perspective, following calls from HR/VP Borrell, the experience in Afghanistan is drawing calls for the greater development in European capabilities and strategic autonomy (European External Action Service, 2021b). These calls are not new but they do show a renewed willingness to develop EU capacity along the lines of more traditional security instruments. The question remains over whether or not this can be done whilst maintaining the CPE identity but one possible solution would be to nest or complement NATO operations, whilst having distinctly autonomous capabilities from both NATO and as a result the USA. With the strategic compass being at an early stage in its development and with a 5-10-year horizon from March 2022, EU officials interviewed for this Study were reluctant to make early assessments of its practical applications (European External Action Service, 2022). There was little forthcoming communication over what role such a force would have had in the evacuation of European citizens and, retrospectively, whether or not this would have allowed for the coordination of the evacuations. The introduction of further military force may well have added to the complexity and chaos of the evacuations themselves.

8.1 Five benchmarks for engagement

In the aftermath of August 2021, interviewees stressed how important the **five benchmarks agreed upon within the European Council on 3 September 2021** would be moving forward. These benchmarks provide a roadmap for the EU and member states to navigate. Summarised, they are:

- (1) The commitment of the Afghan government that Afghanistan would not serve as a basis for exporting terrorism to other countries.
- (2) Respect for human rights, particularly women's rights, the rule of law and freedom of the media.

- (3) The establishment of an inclusive and representative transitional government through negotiations among political forces in Afghanistan.
- (4) Free access to and delivery of humanitarian aid.
- (5) Fulfilment of the Taliban's commitment to let foreign nationals and Afghans leave the country (Immenkamp, 2021).

Contrary to nearly two decades of its policy, **the EU does engage with the Taliban inside and outside Afghanistan**. Precipitated by the US engagement and the Doha agreement, the EU began a dialogue with the Taliban. This has not stopped since the Taliban's seizure of power in August 2021 but the nature of those talks reflects the changed circumstances. There are also limited technical discussions with the National Resistance Force and the extent to which this facilitates continued EU humanitarian assistance. As an EU official explained:

'The EEAS and the European Commission operate within the five benchmarks set in autumn 2021 by our Member States, so we fulfil the mandate given to us. We are having contact with the *de facto* authorities regarding the delivery of humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and the day-to-day running of our EU delegation in Kabul. And this is being done at the technical, not political level [...] Equally, we meet with the opposition. We talk to them; we deliver assistance to opposition health provinces and disputed provinces. Likewise, we have been delivering humanitarian assistance to Taliban health provinces before they came to Kabul. There are no development cooperation projects with the National Resistance Force taking place [...] we are not having contact with the armed opposition.'

When interviewees for this Study were asked if the Taliban were making progress on the five benchmarks, the answer was consistently negative but it was often stressed that **EU visibility outside of Kabul is extremely limited**. The EU Special Envoy Tomas Niklasson, in Kabul between 2-6 October 2022, outlined a bleak set of situations facing the Afghan people. Progress is not being made on the EU's five benchmarks, particularly given a rapid deterioration of human rights; the shrinking of spaces for civil society as well as women's and girl's rights; along with the 'rights of ethnic and religious communities, LGBTI persons, human rights defenders, journalists and media workers'. Niklasson highlighted reports of 'arbitrary arrests, torture, summary executions and enforced disappearances [...] systematic attacks against Hazaras [...] which bear hallmarks of international crimes including crimes against humanity' (Niklasson, 2022). There has also been a failure by the Taliban to meet their counter-terrorism commitments, which was demonstrated by the al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri appearing openly inside Kabul before being killed by a US drone strike in August 2022. This is in conjunction with growing terrorist attacks across the country as tensions with so-called Islamic State-Khorasan Province grow.

Moreover, the Taliban leadership consider themselves victorious and battle-hardened against the USA and Europe. They have significantly more fighters rising from approximately 30 000 in the 1990s to 70-100 000 in 2021. The Taliban are in a stronger economic position today than in the 1990s, having built financial networks abroad, which are said to include links to Pakistan, Iran and Russia, along with private contributions from the rich Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirate and Qatar (Azami, 2021). Similarly, although briefly banned whilst previously in power, the Taliban continue to benefit from an illicit narcotics economy that goes unabated. In 2022 estimated income from opium sales have tripled from USD 425 million to USD 1.4 billion (UN News, 2022). Whilst Afghanistan's licit economy is faltering, the illicit economy is thriving (UNODC, 2022).

Similarly, in 2022 the Taliban are in a position to benefit from Afghanistan's vast mineral wealth, which was unattainable in the 1990s. Pakistan, Russia and China are increasingly working with the Taliban to gain access to large deposits of iron, copper, cobalt and other rare-earth metals. Afghanistan has been termed the 'Saudi Arabia of lithium', instrumental in transforming the global economy and lowering carbon emissions (Martin, 2021). With Afghanistan joining the growing 'push-back' from global authoritarians (Carothers, 2006), European powers are less likely to exert external influence over the Taliban than they

were in the 1990s. The Taliban have consistently demonstrated that they can resist complex adaptive change at political, social and economic levels in the face of international pressure.

8.1.1 Leverage and Basic Needs programming

The current EU and Member States' policy objectives are currently nested within those of the UN and call on the Taliban not only to allow for an inclusive government but also to engage in Afghan reconciliation and dialogue. In the meantime, humanitarian assistance and some development aid have continued to flow to Afghanistan under what EU officials have termed their new 'Basic Needs' approach. Originally termed Humanitarian 'aid +', this term was withdrawn because it implied political impartiality of funds that does not adequately describe the 'Basic Needs' approach. **'Basic Needs' does not follow the traditional rules of impartiality suggested by the term 'humanitarian', nor does it follow the term implied by 'development' because capacity building with the government is not being carried out.** As explained by one EU official, 'it's a bit different to humanitarianism, or pure lifesaving. With 'Basic Needs', we go a bit further, it's also life-sustaining. It's also a bit longer term, like when we support women entrepreneurs for livelihood programmes, it's not pure lifesaving'. Beyond this, all development cooperation has ceased so as not to legitimise the Taliban government. The 'Basic Needs' approach emerged from a complete portfolio review in 2021, asking how to support the Afghan population without doing traditional development cooperation. Development projects implemented by civil society organisations to support human rights defenders were not stopped. As one EU official explained:

'The bulk of the portfolio, which was implemented through governmental channels, or in support of government channels, like technical assistance to the Ministry of Justice, or UNESCO programme in support of the Ministry of Culture, all this was stopped. [Then we] carried out a portfolio review, some were suspended until further review or reorientation, some were stopped, it took a few months to sign the actual closure agenda. But from that day, there were no activities. And then some that meet the criteria of basic needs assistance could continue. So, we had some projects with [REDACTED], for example, that continued because it was clear that it would not channel money to the Taliban and that it will continue supporting the population at the local level.'

This speaks directly to how EU institutions are attempting to apply leverage on the Taliban. In developing the 'Basic Needs' approach and complementing the UN, a **'new aid architecture'** has been developed, which includes, for example, the Afghanistan Coordination Group, along with other working groups. EU actors quickly and successfully put this aid architecture together with the UN. The key to leveraging the Taliban is now seen in buttressing UN mandates and UN action. As one EU official argued:

'I think just like for the 20 years before, it's an illusion to think that the EU itself can have any leverage or influence [on the Taliban]. It's more the international community as a whole if we remain united [...] it's only by being united that we can have some influence. This is why the EU has had influence, by really putting lots of pressure on the UN system to organise itself. Officially, I mean, it's clearly, [showing as] the UN in the data, [but] it's only by being united that we can have some influence.'

What has emerged since 2021 bares a strong resemblance to the 1990s and this not simply because the Taliban are in power. The EU is marking a return to the more traditional developmental/humanitarian mixture/ambiguity of action from that time, under the auspices of the UN. As one EU official explained, they are going back to 'UN organisations like UNICEF, WHO, the World Food Programme and local and international NGOs'. This is not out of deference but a pragmatic response to the situation. As described by one EU official, **the EU is distrusted by the Taliban, whereas the UN are more highly respected:**

'I think we are lucky in the sense that the Taliban have always respected the UN, if it had not been the case, we would be in a very different situation now to channel our [EU] support. The UN is somehow respected. And when there were some incidents at the local level, the UN also reacted at some point very firmly saying, we will stop all support in this or that province [...]. By a miracle the problems were solved thanks to that pressure. The CIO [Chief Information Officer] on the UN side had a big chunk of our aid and that's good.'

However, there have been repeated shortfalls in this approach regarding women's rights. EU officials, civil society actors and NGOs reported serious issues when interviewed, ranging from offices having to be closed and women having to work from home and an 'overall extra barrier'. This situation is said to have 'stabilised' but this is at a very low basis point. For example, the EU delegation staff have described a situation whereby Afghanistan's health sector has remained **stable after the government's fall because there are strong parallel structures in place**. This success story suggests that **reliance on local and national NGOs is an effective strategy in conflict zones**; albeit not perfect, it provided a structure outside GOA control that has continued to function. This may be an oversimplification because NGO interviewees described how the Taliban allowed 'technical people within the Ministry of Health in particular in the postgraduate department not to move', which included the 'National Post Graduate Programme for surgeons, gynaecologists and paediatricians'. Similarly, the Taliban confirmed that women could remain in the health sector. Qalandar Ibad, the Taliban's Minister for public health, a urologist, has been able to steer health policy to keep women working in the health sector. Although this has led to contestation with the Taliban hierarchy in Kandahar, Ibad has sought to maintain a firm line. Nevertheless, the situation is deteriorating, with NGO personnel interviewed for this study detailing how staff and patients are being subjected to 'violation and abuses' whilst 'freely coming to hospital'. The Taliban have also banned women from universities adding to growing restrictions on women and girls' education, in contradiction to previous reassurances.

Herein, the EU should expect hostility from the Taliban, even when its objectives are to assist the Afghan people by providing aid and assistance. However, the Union has shown its ability to engage with this and lead as a key strategic actor capable of mitigating the worst effects of Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. Accordingly, the EU has a model of operationalisable action to adopt in the face of the new Taliban regime. The EU demonstrated significant humanitarian leadership in the 1990s and the need to build, operationalise and resource networks of NGOs on the ground. NGOs' autonomy allowed them to navigate the complex systems and landscapes Afghanistan presents. These were not exclusively humanitarian, adopting a quiet political agenda where there was demand. A number of these NGOs still continue to operate in Afghanistan today and their senior officials have contributed interviews to this Study. The EU's previous leadership should provide the framework for today's engagement. Indeed, considerable progress has already been made with the EU's 'Basic Needs' approach, which strongly resembles European policy in the 1990s. Historical parallels suggest that this will have a tangible but limited impact, even as the EU faces a more challenging international environment. This approach cannot, however, provide the sole model of the EU's bilateral engagement because lessons from the 1990s demonstrate the vulnerability of NGOs operating within Afghanistan. Indeed, the Taliban's December 2022 ban on women working within NGOs demonstrates the potential risks of this approach and mirrors the Taliban's previous emphasis on interfering with NGOs in the 1990s. The EU should seek to steer events away from potential tipping points, which could lead to NGOs being asked to leave the country given the catastrophic humanitarian consequences this could exacerbate.

The EU must be heavily engaged in working all international levers and operational foreign policy tools to assist Afghanistan's move towards a comprehensive peace agreement. With the Taliban retaking power, this objective is further from being reached than at any time since 2001. The Taliban have not been willing to reach out to other sections of Afghan society, with its current government dominated by former officials and long-term loyalists. Accordingly, there is no established nor operational pathway towards peace in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, a failure to prepare for peace in advance and act should a decisive juncture arrive, is a failure of international leadership that can have dire long-term consequences.

The European Parliament has an influential role to play in this area, given the Parliament's capacity to engage with all Afghan stakeholders in parallel to the Commission navigating the complexities of engaging the Taliban government. With an active policy of 'broad engagement', the Parliament should identify substantive stakeholder issues and a potential roadmap to peace from indigenous sources and

Afghanistan's diaspora in the region and Europe. Peace in Afghanistan cannot be left to other regional players, given the diverse and hostile interests of Russia, Pakistan and Iran.

8.1.2 Continued humanitarian aid

Since starting 'Basic Needs', the EU has designated over EUR 600 million to the people of Afghanistan. Yet, as Special Envoy Niklasson has stated, 'humanitarian assistance is not enough. But there is also not enough humanitarian assistance' (Niklasson, 2022). Although there have been several UN humanitarian appeals, these have been deemed 'grossly underfunded'. Moreover, the delivery of the EU's humanitarian mission has been complicated by the new *de facto* Taliban regime, which is increasingly interfering and seeking to control humanitarian assistance (Niklasson, 2022).

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that **24 million people inside Afghanistan need Humanitarian assistance**. This represents 60 % of Afghanistan's population and is more than double the population of Belgium. The rise of the new *de facto* Taliban regime has **complicated and compounded a humanitarian crisis driven by decades of conflict, recurrent natural disasters, chronic poverty, drought and the COVID-19 pandemic**. Additionally, Afghanistan is facing a financial and banking crisis exacerbated by international sanctions. Whilst individual members of the Taliban have been sanctioned rather than Afghanistan itself, Special Envoy Niklasson has highlighted that financial institutions are 'over-complying' with sanctions, 'which makes it difficult to transfer money into or out of Afghanistan' (Niklasson 2022). This 'over compliance' is limiting Afghanistan's private sector recovery. This is an area in which the EU, particularly the European Parliament, could intervene. Currently, USD 2.1 billion of the reserves reside within European territory that could be made accessible to the Central Bank of Afghanistan. Within the purview of trenches and a monitoring system, the Parliament could request that European Banks incrementally release these funds¹⁹. This would also clarify issues around over-compliance by European banks themselves. As Ambassador Cautain (2022) argued, 'humanitarian aid is not a substitute for a functional economy'. **Making Afghanistan's population more dependent on aid will empower the Taliban further**. People are not in a position to challenge the Taliban as they battle existential threats and reports of the population falling prey to criminals harvesting organs and trafficking children grow.

Taking such action would support the EU Commission's humanitarian aid policy and be direct action undertaken by the European Parliament. At present, the EU's aid supports health, education and livelihoods through UNICEF, UNDP, WHO and the World Food Programme. Projects launched in early 2022 are important and are likely to have mitigating effects across the areas of Afghanistan the EU can reach (European Commission, 2022b). Yet to paraphrase the lessons learnt in the 1990s, outlined in the European Commission's *2003-2006 Afghanistan Country Strategy*, **these policies are only likely to reduce the extremes of vulnerability but unlikely to mitigate these extremes for women and girls**. More structural solutions to today's crisis are needed.

This is not to suggest that the more immediate humanitarian aid mandate is unnecessary. However, the added value of a 'Basic Needs' approach is that there may be space for the EU to work within a medium-term horizon and open more development projects. These will be needed in the long term, as Afghanistan faces population growth and simultaneous deterioration because of climate change. These are not accounted for within the Afghanistan portfolio and represent a blind spot. **The subject of climate change is high on the EU's agenda, as is Afghanistan but the two mandates have yet to connect because of**

¹⁹ This policy was discussed with Ambassador Cautain during the interview for this Study and it builds upon the papers shared by the Ambassador to the author before publication and dissemination. The abovementioned papers have detailed the issues around the present sanction regime.

the immediate crisis. Given Afghanistan's changing context, how such foresight can be applied raises questions. That this needs to be undertaken should be less contentious. As one report from Chatham House set out, 'Afghanistan is among the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world due to its geography, sensitivity to changing weather patterns and an infrastructure unable to cope with global warming' (Hakimi and Brown, 2022).

8.1.3 The impact of Russia's war in Ukraine

In the more immediate crisis, nine million Afghans are on the edge of starvation, with food insecurity and energy markets being exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine. As one NGO worker informed the Study, these issues have complex emerging effects:

'There is no fuel; there is a huge inflation. The money that you need to travel is too much to afford. So, it is not a disease or access to healthcare, so much, sometimes when patients come to the hospital the situation is already too severe. And this complicates the follow-up and treatment.'

In large part, these complex issues are a direct result of the war in Ukraine, which has damaged food and energy supply chains. As a SIGAR quarterly report described earlier this year:

'Disruptions drove a 9 % increase in the price of fuel in the second week of March 2022 alone. While food prices began to edge lower in February 2022, renewed price hikes will push food even further out of reach for most citizens. Wheat-flour prices in Kabul that month were already 81 % above the five-year average, according to UNICEF.' (SIGAR, 2022)

The effects of Russia's war in Ukraine were also reported by one NGO worker, who said that **NGOs are being forced to pull out of Afghanistan due to its lack of financial viability** and 'all the complications that are in the country'. The world's focus has moved to Ukraine. This view was somewhat at odds with other interviews, though, where there was initial concern about Ukraine possibly diverting funds and the EU's attention. Yet, the contrary was reported. When interviewing EU officials about these concerns, it was confirmed that:

'Yes, lots of fear that due to the war in Ukraine, money would be diverted to Ukraine and not to Afghanistan. This is not at all the case. Not one cent has been diverted, even to Central Asia. This is really the money that was allocated for Afghanistan at the beginning of the Multiannual Financial Framework and it is still there ... we still think that the money is needed and we keep it. This is thanks to the rigidity of the Multiannual Financial Framework, when allocations are fixed, they are there.'

In this respect, it was noted that this was not just a technical issue, as **the political will for supplying funds to Afghanistan still exists throughout EU institutions**. Afghanistan is seen as particularly high on the EU agenda, and the stability of Afghanistan is high amongst EU interests. The area where Ukraine is benefiting from the war in Afghanistan, conversely, is through the US transfer of military equipment originally procured for Afghanistan. This included 11 former Afghan Mi-17 helicopters and 16 million rounds of varied nonstandard munitions (SIGAR, 2022). Moreover, as the NATO 'lessons learnt' exercise illustrated, Afghanistan has improved the integration and military interoperability of the overall alliance, which has enhanced the political strength and combat capabilities should they be needed in Europe. Thus, rather than signalling weakness, and whilst Russia and China have utilised the campaign in Afghanistan for anti-

Western propaganda, the war in Afghanistan has strengthened transatlantic cooperation and capabilities, which have benefited the fight against Russian expansionism and the war in Ukraine²⁰.

Recommendation 30: For many EU policy-makers, the EU was blindsided in Afghanistan because of a lack of intelligence processing and evaluation in Afghanistan, Doha and the USA. Whilst in part this is the case, there was intelligence within the EU itself that could have been better utilised. This is further evidence that there are issues within the bureaucracy of EU institutions preventing the flow of information and intelligence. To reiterate a previous recommendation (see above) the European Parliament should raise concerns about the need to reorganise and restructure EU intelligence infrastructure given the scale of failure Afghanistan presents.

Recommendation 31: The viability of state-building during an ongoing conflict is now contentious among EU officials, which have less faith in their ability to deliver the EU's strategic objectives. Akin to Vietnam, the EU should not allow 'Afghanistan Syndrome' to set in but rather use this opportunity to learn lessons and expand upon its ability to embed lessons learnt into policy-making practices. For best practice in this area, SIGAR could provide an excellent model.

Recommendation 32: The European Parliament should use its powers to ease the economic crisis in Afghanistan. This could include clarifying issues around over-compliance and making funds available to the Central Bank of Afghanistan.

²⁰ All interviewees were asked to comment if events in Afghanistan had invited other international actors to act, such as Russia in Ukraine and China in Taiwan. The answers to this were inconclusive, given that there is little concrete evidence. However, one EU official correctly evaluated the situation, arguing that 'China [...] they're on a sort of anti-Western [...] I don't want to say crusade but they're challenging the western model in many fronts. Last year, Afghanistan was certainly evidence, or one incidence that proved how weak the West is, but before Afghanistan, it was COVID. And since Afghanistan they've been trying to blame the sanctions for food insecurity. Afghanistan was one thing that they were trying to spin. I think Russia is not doing so well in the global popularity game at the moment. So even though China continues to commit itself to us the blame the US, you know, blame NATO for the war [in Ukraine], which is not a war, they've never called it a war. They blame sanctions, US actions, but I think this doesn't tell us anything. I mean, it's not Afghanistan, that that's the issue here. The issue is they have an agenda to challenge us. Of course, we shouldn't give them the gift of failures to be able to challenge us more successfully. But I don't think Afghanistan has anything to do with their political line or their strategic objectives. I mean, Afghanistan is just another occasion [they] highlight'.

9 Conclusion and recommendations

Assessments of the EU's external policy in Afghanistan have not been positive. Since 2004, it was unlikely that EU policy was likely to succeed. This strongly resonates with assessments over the last 20 years. For example, although EUSR Vendrell was well respected and the longest longest-serving EUSR to Afghanistan, his assessment of EU policy has been highly critical. Within days of leaving the EUSR role he had held for six years, he argued that the 'EU is rather pitiful' and that 'we [the EU] look pretty pathetic at times' because the USA 'ignored' EU concerns and left EU officials' frustrated' (BBC News Channel, 2008). His overall view was that the EU only in 'small ways had some impact' and despite the considerable levels of assistance and aid, 'we [the EU and the international community] have all failed', allowing Afghanistan to turn into a 'criminal narco-state' (BBC News Channel, 2008). In framing his argument about Western strategy more widely, he argued that:

'In 2002, we were being welcomed almost as liberators by the Afghans. Now we are being seen as a necessary evil, perhaps something that they need to put up with because our departure would probably mean a civil war.' (BBC News Channel, 2008)

Pushed further, it was clear that the source of these tensions lay within the transatlantic approach and the manner in which the EU embedded its policy inside of US military leadership (BBC News Channel, 2008).

Today, as Ambassador Cautain (2022) described, the Taliban now 'see themselves, rightly, as the winners'. Under US leadership, the international community was unable to make sustainable progress in Afghanistan. For the EU's part, it is clear that the overarching strategic goal set out in the *Elements for an EU Strategy in Afghanistan 2014-16* has catastrophically failed. Afghanistan has not developed resilient institutions able to safeguard progress. With the Taliban regaining power, progress made over the last two decades is being rapidly reversed.

With the initial collapse of the GOA and the seizure of power by the Taliban, HR/VP Josep Borrell declared that 'This has been above all a catastrophe for the Afghan people. It's a failure of the Western world and it's a game changer for international relations. We cannot avoid recognising as much' (European External Action Service, 2021a). Borrell added, 'During these 20 years, something has been done. We can't be negative about that, because – among other things – we brought three million girls to school. But the aim to build a modern society has not had time to grow deep roots. Certainly, we Europeans share our part of the responsibility, we cannot consider that this was just an American war' (European External Action Service, 2021a). Ostensibly, this is correct.

Events in 2021 undermined transatlantic objectives to such an extent that it was no longer feasible to construct a credible pathway towards a stable Afghan state in the short to medium term. Afghanistan risks civil war and has the growing potential to become a safe haven for international terrorism and an exporter of surplus small arms and military equipment around the region and into Europe itself. The transformational decade has collapsed, and once again, Afghanistan entered into what now appears to be a protracted period of internal crisis and external crisis management. As a Senior EU diplomat exclaimed, 'we are back to square one'. The situation in Afghanistan may be even worse than 'square one', as two decades of international assistance was unable to steer Afghanistan to the relative stability and progressive trajectory it was on in the early 1970s.

Within this context, the international community needs to learn lessons from Afghanistan, and this Study should be considered the start of Europe's public process in undertaking this task. Whilst the USA has been reflecting on its role publicly since the end of 2008 by institutionalising SIGAR, the existence of European assessments remains inaccessible, unacknowledged publicly and unpublished. This will only serve to

hamper the production of evidence-based policy in the future. Accordingly, it is important to draw together the primary lessons from the EU engagement with Afghanistan.

9.1 Pre-2001 lessons for the EU's contemporary engagement

Section 2 of this Study has demonstrated that it was a mistake to treat Afghanistan as a *tabula rasa* following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. Afghanistan has not recovered from the turmoil of the 1970s and the impact of the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. Whilst in need of a comprehensive peace agreement with mechanisms to resolve internal disputes, the 1988 Geneva Accords fell woefully short. Perceptions of Pashtun decline have continued and were not addressed by the Bonn Process that installed the NA. This included warlords that terrorised the Afghan population to such an extent that the Taliban were seen as heroic figures when they took power in the 1990s. The failure to prioritise and address a comprehensive peace agreement in Afghanistan has hampered international efforts at state-building because the unfolding of war and continued high levels of ongoing insecurity are incompatible with building democratic norms and the functioning of a modern state. The EU's experience in Afghanistan illustrates the need for ongoing peacebuilding exercises that promote indigenous pluralism, build institutional mechanisms for peace and enhance local peacebuilding capacities.

Section 2 also shows that the EU can show leadership in Afghanistan. Europe's experience as the primary humanitarian actor in the 1980s and 1990s demonstrates that whilst there will be ongoing tensions, the EU can mitigate the worst excesses of the humanitarian crisis without formally recognising the Taliban. Previous experience shows, however, that this will not be the case for women and girls, given that the 'Basic Needs' approach adopted in 2021 strongly parallels EU policy at the end of the 20th century. EU institutions should be prepared for the regaining of power by the Taliban to be accompanied by widespread human rights violations, worsening conditions for women and girls, and the renewal of punitive justice, including public executions, extrajudicial killings and the death penalty. As in the 1990s, this will require the EU to innovate as it operationalises the resources and networks of NGOs on the ground. It will also require international unity, operating through the UN, if incremental progress is to be made.

More broadly, the notable lack of information about European history and involvement in Afghanistan prior to 2001 should be troubling to European policy-makers. Responding to international crises requires an advanced level of expertise and knowledge. This needs to be available in advance if they are to inform the policy-making process when it matters. Policy-making requires doing the right thing but, just as importantly, at the right time. Future conflicts and crises will require analysis that considers longer time horizons than most policy-makers have identified and conceptually operated with. The EU should seek to build a pre-emptive knowledge base that combines area studies with an understanding of EU engagement in the world. As part of this, there is a need to correct the narrative and assert the positive role Europe has historically played in Afghanistan.

9.2 Post-2001 lessons for the EU's contemporary engagement

Whilst section 2 demonstrated that during the Cold War, 'solidarity of the West' was prioritised at the expense of constructing integrated crisis management instruments, section 3 demonstrates the pitfalls of this in the 21st century. Transatlantic solidarity was the key motivation for European engagement in Afghanistan. Collective action was deemed essential to European security because of the need for future collective defence against the threat posed by Russia. Helping the USA in Afghanistan was underpinned by an implicit belief in reciprocity. In these terms alone, supporting the USA in Afghanistan has paid dividends to European security and the war in Ukraine (see section 8.1.3). The campaign in Afghanistan has

enhanced NATO's combined military capabilities. This wider international context demonstrates the importance of collective defence and the maintenance of transatlantic solidarity.

However, the EU and Member States can no longer afford to implicitly yield unquestioned international leadership to the USA, as they did in the hegemonic moment of the 1990s and early 2000s. This approach is holding the EU back from being the critical friend that the USA will need as the transatlantic relationship faces relative decline in the face of multipolarity (see section 3.2). Questions of the EU's strategic autonomy have been exacerbated in the post-2021 context but these are, to some extent, disingenuous. It is widely agreed that the EU never attempted an autonomous approach to Afghanistan. The EU was partially autonomous on the 'civilian side', even as its efforts were 'dwarfed' and its commitment to Afghanistan was genuine and in line with EU values. However, Afghanistan was a test of Europe's strategic autonomy to the extent that the EU could carry out its autonomous civilian agenda whilst nesting this within the continuation of US military power and the political choice to remain engaged in Afghanistan. US military power underwrote the transatlantic campaign in Afghanistan because European powers lacked the political will to imagine an alternative or to deviate from the strategic direction provided by the USA. This included times when it was clear that the US strategy was incoherent and failing. It is not the EU's lack of capabilities that restrains it from acting autonomously but political choices. In the case of Afghanistan, this was the political choice to follow US leadership for two decades, to not pursue independent peacebuilding efforts with the Taliban (see section 7.1.3), and to not seek to prioritise tackling corruption (see section 5.2). The decision to prioritise development assistance and state-building over pursuing peace and tackling corruption are not issues of capacity but strategic judgement. Thus, an important lesson from this Study is that as the USA shifts its grand strategy and becomes less willing to be the world's policeman, the EU will need to do more than add a modest layer of EU capabilities that is unlikely to be game-changing for EU actions around the world. Currently, the EU and its Member States continue to lack the necessary threshold of security capabilities, undermining Europe's global influence and ability to act autonomously.

A significant lesson from the EU's experience in Afghanistan is that greater strategic autonomy would allow Europe to become a more desirable partner in crisis management. It would provide greater international influence within the transatlantic alliance. In 2001, European powers were marginalised because the USA saw them as lacking capabilities and having low expectations of what they could achieve. This continued throughout the 20 years of engagement in Afghanistan and culminated in the EU being marginalised from the Doha Process (see section 7.1.4). The EU would have benefited from more meaningful engagement in talks between the USA and the Taliban but the EU has largely been regarded as a sideshow. Having more influence in the transatlantic relationship could have, counterfactually, opened greater discussion on the pitfalls of the war on terror, the option of tackling terrorism through criminal justice, and opposing the folly of the Iraq war. These policies stretched the US commitment, leading to Afghanistan's calculated and intentional neglect and the misalignment of ways and means. They also provided a recruitment tool for the Taliban's jihadi fighters (see section 3.1.2). Problematically, there is no evidence of the EU recognising or adapting its approach to Afghanistan in light of the growing risk the US strategy was accumulating as a result of the war in Iraq.

On the contrary, the EU continued its long-term strategy even as it was clear that the USA was operating with short-term horizons. These were incompatible and have led to the tensions playing out following the USA and NATO withdrawal in 2021. Much greater attention and understanding of the USA was needed to avoid the surprise of the USA following through on its stated timeline and commitments. This may have alerted EU institutions to the US struggle to build a long-term strategy for Afghanistan.

Section 4 highlights lessons concerning the EU's regional strategy. EU policy towards Asia has prioritised trade and aid and lacked strategic depth bilaterally and regionally. Nevertheless, it has long been understood that success in Afghanistan would require a comprehensive regional strategy. EU institutions

have made the connection between regional instability, drug trafficking and international terrorism since the 1990s. Yet, regional cooperation on state building in Afghanistan has been limited, because Afghanistan was seen as too 'American-ised'.

Conversely, Afghanistan is marginalised by its neighbours because it is frequently regarded as a source of regional instability, inhibiting its regional integration. The EU was never able to reconcile these factors, and as the experience of EUPOL demonstrated, when the EU demonstrated international leadership in multilateral efforts, this was rejected because Europe was seen to assert leadership (see section 5.4). Regionally, there is little leadership in Afghanistan and efforts by the USA and EU are themselves rejected. Indeed, rather than favouring stability, Pakistan has long favoured nefarious actors generating the right levels of instability to provide an advantage over India (see sections 2.3, 3.1, 4.1 and 4.1.1). Extensive relationships between the Taliban, al-Qaeda and Pakistan remain, which makes it very unlikely that Pakistan, the Taliban and al-Qaeda will part ways today (see section 4.1).

The area of counter-terrorism has been the largest international and regional area of cooperation over the last 20 years. However, it is not immediately clear that counter-terrorism objectives in Afghanistan have been met beyond temporarily reducing terrorist capabilities. Terrorist organisations, including al-Qaeda, are now operating more freely within Afghanistan and al-Qaeda still intends to carry out external terrorist attacks even if it currently lacks the capability (see section 4.1.2). Moreover, there are growing fears that stockpiles of weapons left by the USA and NATO will add to the offensive capabilities of terrorist groups. Through various routes, the EU should expect an increase in narcotics, small arms and military equipment finding their way to European borders, even as the EU's experience in Afghanistan suggests that there is too great a deficiency between expectations and the EU's independent intelligence capabilities to deal with these issues. Further regional instability, expected after the Taliban takeover, will exacerbate these issues for the EU and create further irregular migration within the region, which will inevitably impact the EU (see section 4.1.4).

There are significant lessons that the EU can learn from its bilateral engagement with the GOA and its overall aid objectives (see section 5). There can be no doubt that EU humanitarian aid has significantly contributed to people's lives in Afghanistan. This is an area where EU institutions should take significant pride, not for work over the last 20 years but for the last 40. Yet, it is difficult to make the same clear-cut conclusion about EU development assistance. International efforts to reconstruct Afghanistan became overly dependent on the GOA, building a wide range of national capacities whilst improving the security situation and promoting reconciliation and justice. With development assistance struggling to adequately reach the widespread regions of Afghanistan, power was centralised with the GOA, which demonstrated itself to be corrupt and inefficient. Whilst the USA was using the military for traditionally civilian development tasks, the EU lacked leverage and serious issues with aid absorption hindered Afghanistan from making significant progress.

On the contrary, the lack of aid coordination and the presumption that spending was itself an indicator of success fuelled rampant corruption, which in turn helped fuel the insurgency. Within that environment, high levels of development aid are counter-productive and exacerbate the human misery that humanitarian assistance sought to mitigate. The USA and the EU were slow to recognise this. For this Study, it is clear European taxpayers' money was not spent wisely, was in part stolen and EU institutions were too slow to react. European development assistance exacerbated problems with corruption and is deemed to have contributed to a significant culture of clientelism and corruption. Afghanistan remained underdeveloped and one of the world's most corrupt states before the Taliban takeover in 2021.

Moreover, EU officials in Brussels were sometimes unaware of the shape and scale of US activity creating problem even as the USA's lessons learnt activities had been revealing the problem since they were

routinely published in 2008. Information about partner activity in Afghanistan was lost within EU structures and institutions. At times, EU delegations have maintained the best available information about the situation on the ground, but this has not been readily monopolised throughout the last 20 years.

Significantly, although the introduction of systemic corruption undermined transatlantic efforts in Afghanistan, so too did decades of international peacebuilding, failing to account for the persistence of deep-rooted sources of internal conflict. Centralising power in Kabul ignored these tensions, making any formal democracy garnered through an electoral process very hard to resolve without outside interference. A winner takes all system was inappropriate and unable to garner internal legitimacy (see section 5.3). Elections were an accomplishment, given the growing insecurity surrounding them, but electoral insecurity impacted political participation. So too, did the realisation that national elections failed to provide legitimacy to the GOA because they did not result in citizens' concerns being addressed beyond urban areas. In addition, lessons learnt from previous national elections were consistently not applied to the next. Over the last 20 years, there was a consistent pattern to ignore lessons learnt analyses, demonstrating the need to entrench them more meaningfully into crisis management structures.

Although growing insecurity across the country contributed to undermining democracy in conjunction with a failed constitutional system, EU efforts to assist with civilian security efforts provided no overarching European approach. Before being eventually withdrawn, EUPOL struggled to recruit sufficient personnel and its activities within the provinces were assessed as rather poor with only a marginal impact (see section 5.4). This is unsurprising because, within the first decade, the EU was seen as an instrument Member States could use to eliminate difficulties.

Internal changes within the structure of the EU did provide positive changes to its policy in Afghanistan. Most notably, the Lisbon Treaty and the creation of the EEAS. The EEAS added an additional set of capabilities for coordinating EU Member States' presence on the ground and allowed the EU to play a bigger role. This was important because Afghanistan has shown that when the EU's coordination is consolidated, it is more effective, and at times, EU action operates as a force multiplier (see section 6.1). Establishing a HR/VP combined with a European diplomatic service lay the foundations for more effective coordination. It also transformed the EUSR role in Afghanistan into a double-hatted position combining the position of EUSR with the Head of the EU Delegation. This combination allowed for more effective EU representation in Afghanistan and enhanced the EUSR's coordination role. Although there were serious tensions between the office of the EUSR and the EEAS, these overwhelmingly resulted from misguided policy that failed to tackle corruption and push for a peace agreement. Indeed, there were missed opportunities for engaging the Taliban between 2015-17 (see section 7.1.4). Downgrading to a Special Envoy in 2017 did not further the EU's objectives, even as 2016 represented the high watermark of EU success in terms of the Brussels Conference and the peace agreement with HIG. As Afghanistan has shown, given the need to prioritise peace in Afghanistan, it is time for the EU to change its paradigm and 'talk to everyone'. Not talking to the Taliban has proven to be a costly lesson to learn for Afghans and the international community as a whole (see section 7.1.4)

9.3 Moving forward

EU relations with Afghanistan have undoubtedly entered a new phase. To assist, this Study has drawn together 32 recommendations directly from the lessons learnt exercise (see Appendix 1 for consolidated list). These provide evidence-based recommendations covering 40 years of collective European engagement in Afghanistan. Whilst some are specific to Afghanistan, others are potentially transferable to other environments and crisis management situations. Nevertheless, they all demonstrate the need for EU institutions to maintain international engagement in Afghanistan over the coming decades. Decades of

experience show us that there is a cost to international neglect and the assumption that Afghanistan is an 'old story'. EU institutions must provide international leadership and not allow Afghanistan to decline on the international agenda. This should be an essential part of the Commission's agenda, but the European Parliament has a vital role to play.

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11 Appendices

Appendix 1: Consolidated list of recommendations

1. Future conflicts and crises will require analysis considering longer time horizons than most policy-makers have identified and conceptually operated with. The EU should seek to build a pre-emptive knowledge base that combines area studies with an understanding of EU engagement in the world.
2. Lessons learnt in the 1980s and 1990s illustrate the need for ongoing peacebuilding exercises that promote indigenous pluralism, build institutional mechanisms for peace and enhance local peacebuilding capacities.
3. There is a need for EU institutions to correct the narrative and assert the positive role Europe has historically played in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s and 1990s.
4. EU institutions should be prepared for the regaining of power by the Taliban to be accompanied by widespread human rights violations, worsening conditions for women and girls and the renewal of punitive justice, including public executions and the death penalty.
5. As the EU steps forward to fill the humanitarian vacuum and demonstrate international leadership, it should expect tensions with the Taliban to be increasingly exacerbated.
6. Although undesirable, in the medium term, if tensions with the Taliban become irreconcilable, the European Parliament should be willing to use its platform to elevate the profile of partners it sees as a workable opposition to the Taliban. Such action should be approached cautiously.
7. The EU should expect its Basic Needs programmes to have a tangible impact based on lessons learnt in the 1990s. However, it should maintain cautious expectations about this policy beyond mitigating the worst of the humanitarian crisis or destabilising the new Taliban government.
8. When weighing the success and failure of European policy in Afghanistan, the broader international context should be considered. Future decisions concerning Europe's strategic direction will need to continue to consider the importance of collective defence and the maintenance of transatlantic solidarity.
9. Growing US reluctance to be a global security guarantor and the relative decline of transatlantic power calls for the need to develop further EU security capabilities that underwrite EU strategic autonomy in both the security and civilian spaces. These will need to be accompanied by the development of a deep and urgent political resolve if these capabilities are to be more than trivial. This is especially true if the EU continues integrating a civilian agenda into crisis management capabilities. Currently, the EU and Member States continue to lack the necessary threshold of security capabilities, which undermines Europe's global influence and ability to act autonomously.
10. EU institutions should not regard greater strategic autonomy to be in opposition to transatlantic solidarity, as there is considerably more space for convergence than divergence across multiple international issues. Furthering EU capabilities will enhance the attraction of working with the EU in managing international crises, which will multiply the EU's influence and the ability to prioritise civilian objectives rather than diminish them.
11. The dangers of aligning EU strategy with the USA must be better identified and considered throughout any future crisis response and ongoing campaign. Reflecting on lessons learnt by NATO, the EU should continuously monitor and assess its strategic options and avoid mission expansion and commitments that are in danger of failing. In particular, the effectiveness and commitment of international partners should be monitored for risks, such as over-commitment in other strategic spheres and the misalignment of ways, means and strategy. The EU should become particularly resistant to nesting its longer-term civilian policy objectives within the short-term

military horizons of the USA. Within the EU-USA strategic dialogue, EU institutions should be cautious around coordination issues and sensitive to US failure to build long-term strategies.

- 12.** The EU should seek to transform its regional approach to Central and South Asia. This should include a move away from prioritising trade and aid towards a more integrated regional emphasis on achieving strategic depth. This could be achieved by having regional delegations communicate and coordinate with one another and focusing on building greater regional awareness.
- 13.** EU institutions should actively reinforce measures that build trust between India and Pakistan, which has been central to regional power competition. There is space for significant involvement from the European Parliament in helping to facilitate trust-building exercises over the next decade.
- 14.** EU institutions should maintain serious concerns about the rise of the Taliban and continued links to international terrorism. Where possible, the EU should carry out discreet and limited cooperation with the Taliban on the issues of counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics. The EU should also take the lead in working with regional partners to mitigate the risks of small arms and specialist military equipment reaching the EU. This could include sharing best practices and scoping the need for regional training programmes. The EU action plan on firearms trafficking 2020-2025 should be expanded upon to include this new threat.
- 15.** Questions should be raised over whether there is sufficient intelligence capability within the structure of the EU. Considerations should be made concerning how existing capabilities can be enhanced and structured to harness information within and across EU institutions.
- 16.** The EU has the potential to build greater regional cooperation in the area of counter-narcotics with regional powers in the Gulf. There is also space to cooperate with the Taliban in this area, starting with negotiations about opening the licit economy and closing the illicit economy in the short term.
- 17.** The EU's experience in Afghanistan demonstrates the need for greater conflict sensitivity and aid scrutiny in future crisis management scenarios. This need was partly reflected in adopting the new 2021-2027 Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe, which should be monitored. In particular, the soft obligation to provide a conflict analysis when providing aid to war-torn countries should remain under review.
- 18.** The EU should not shy away from creating strong parallel development structures to governments that cannot reach beyond their immediate urban setting. This is mainly the case when the government is considered corrupt and lacking in legitimacy and would allow the EU to build resilience into its development assistance.
- 19.** With EU aid being misused and stolen, further questions should be raised concerning the accountability of a strategy that privileged the levels of aid disbursement over emphasising the efficiency, value, sustainability and overall impact of aid.
- 20.** EU institutions should institutionalise structures that can monitor and respond to issues surrounding absorption capacity and overall international aid levels in future crises. Such structures should prioritise identifying and tackling corruption with a view to counterbalancing the prioritisation of aid spending and ensuring greater accountability for European taxpayers.
- 21.** The international focus on elections detracted from peacebuilding and reconciliation activities that previous lesson-learnt activities have highlighted as central to the long-term success of state-building activities. Community-level conflict was often ignored, as national elections were considered sufficient to provide legitimacy. To correct this imbalance and build additional European capabilities, the institutionalisation of a PRC with specialist mediation training should be considered. It should focus on local dialogue and peacebuilding in line with European values and work with the EU's NGO networks to reach beyond the concerns of urban areas.
- 22.** Previous lesson learnt activities were largely ignored in Afghanistan because policy-makers assumed that Afghanistan could be treated as a blank slate. This resulted in an inappropriate centralisation of power designed at Bonn and resulted in a winner takes all election. Moving

forward, the EU should seek to have lessons learnt expertise embedded within its institutions and have advanced expertise concerning European relations with other regions of the globe.

- 23.** In future crisis responses, EU institutions should consider the success of democratic elections to be highly likely to fail within insecure locations. An emphasis on peacebuilding and enhancements in human security should accompany a focus on elections.
- 24.** EUPOL reveals the complexities of operating in Afghanistan and demonstrates that there were no quick fixes to often insurmountable problems. Where the EU demonstrated international leadership in this instance, it had the undesired effect of fracturing international cooperation. Moving forward, the EU should consider the implications of taking on new roles with limited capacity for tangible impact on the ground.
- 25.** With EU delegations being recognised as maintaining genuine expertise and extensive knowledge, it is unfortunate that this did not feed into a comprehensive review of EU strategy in 2016. It suggests that issues within the bureaucracy of EU institutions prevent the flow of information and intelligence. The European Parliament should raise concerns about the need to reorganise and restructure EU intelligence infrastructure given the scale of failure Afghanistan presents. Enhancing European intelligence infrastructure will protect European interests and better protect its citizens. Afghanistan demonstrates the need for enhanced threat analysis, greater information sharing, better strategic and operational planning as well as sustained European intelligence management.
- 26.** Given Afghanistan's challenges and complexities, the EUSR position was well-suited and provided multiple functions beyond what the role immediately suggested. In future crisis management situations, the EU should strongly consider the continued deployment of a suitable and experienced EUSR to enhance the Union's influence in coordination with Member States. This will allow the EU to take advantage of the reforms under the Lisbon Treaty.
- 27.** Although the passage of time has diminished interest in European involvement in rendition, the European Parliament should renew efforts to hold those accountable.
- 28.** The focus on 'systemic reform' was introduced with clear strategic goals in 2014 to assist with the Kabul process and Afghanistan's transformational decade. This was 13 years after reconstruction began. In future crisis management situations with a state-building component, systemic reform should be at the heart of EU policy if the EU is to seize initial opportunities for success.
- 29.** The EU was successful in 2016 partly because of a refocusing of policy but also because the EU was able to achieve more autonomy as international attention diminished. Within this context, it was unfortunate that the EU did not take the lead in furthering peacebuilding activities. Failure to engage with the Taliban and ongoing corruption was seen to be the two most significant mistakes by EU officials. This highlights the need for the EU to prioritise its independent peacebuilding activities that include talking directly with all parties irrespective of the concerns of the USA.
- 30.** For many EU policy-makers, the EU was blindsided in Afghanistan because of a lack of intelligence processing and evaluation in Afghanistan, Doha and the USA. Whilst in part this is the case, there was intelligence within the EU itself that could have been better utilised. This is further evidence that there are issues within the bureaucracy of EU institutions preventing the flow of information and intelligence. To reiterate a previous recommendation (see above) the European Parliament should raise concerns about the need to reorganise and restructure EU intelligence infrastructure given the scale of failure Afghanistan presents.
- 31.** The viability of state-building during an ongoing conflict is now contentious among EU officials, which have less faith in their ability to deliver the EU's strategic objectives. Akin to Vietnam, the EU should not allow '*Afghanistan Syndrome*' to set in but rather use this opportunity to learn lessons and expand upon its ability to embed lessons learnt into policy-making practices. For best practice in this area, SIGAR could provide an excellent model.

- 32.** The European Parliament should use its powers to ease the economic crisis in Afghanistan. This could include clarifying issues around over-compliance and making funds available to the Central Bank of Afghanistan.

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