The EU in Afghanistan – Growing Engagement in Turbulent Times
By Eva Gross

Introduction

For the past six years Afghanistan has been a staging ground in the war against terror and for the past four it has proven a test case for NATO. Afghanistan has also posed a challenge for international actors concerned not only with post-conflict reconstruction but also economic development. Given the EU’s complex institutional and policy-making structure, as well as the lack of a public diplomacy strategy to make visible its commitment, activities of the EU have not been the focus of attention to date – despite the fact that the EU has made a substantial political and economic contribution to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. As the EU expands its efforts in the field of police reform through the recent launch of an EU police mission, EU activities in Afghanistan are moving into the focus of analysis. Growing instability in Afghanistan means that expanding EU efforts come at a time where there is urgent need for sustained international engagement – but also at a time when such growing engagement must be co-ordinated with other international actors in order to maximise chances for success. This means that sustained commitment and co-ordination are the two key challenges facing the EU in Afghanistan.

EU Engagement in Afghanistan – An Overview

Although the EU has not assumed a role in the military aspect of post-conflict reconstruction, it has played a significant political and economic role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan both in terms of its financial contributions, as well as exerting political influence in Afghanistan through the appointment of an EU Special Representative (EUSR), a post held since 2002 by Francesc Vendrell. As far as the EU’s political influence is concerned, EUSR Vendrell has a small team of political advisers and is to act as the EU’s face and voice in Afghanistan with a mandate to contribute to the integrity and full implementation of the EU-Afghanistan Joint Declaration; encourage positive contributions from regional actors; and support the pivotal role played by the UN and the work of the Secretary General/High Representative Javier Solana in the region.¹

The EU is also the second largest donor to Afghanistan. The European Commission initially drew 4.93 million Euros from the Rapid Reaction Mechanism (RRM) for use in Afghanistan after the Bonn Agreement in 2001 in order to help legitimise the political transition. In the period of 2002-2006, the EU contributed 3.7 billion Euros (EC budget and EU member states) in aid to Afghanistan.² The commission is also striving to develop a portfolio of EU-wide programmes with member states, such as the Kabul-Jalalabad-Torkham road project in co-operation with Sweden, the electricity rehabilitation of Kabul with Germany, or the co-financing of Civil Military

Cooperation (CIMIC) operations with Finland and Sweden. Lastly, the European Community has also allocated over 10 million Euros to the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). But, despite these financial commitments, the commission has recently noted that “real progress towards creating a democratic, stable and prosperous Afghanistan is seriously threatened by the significant deterioration in security and by the exponential growth in opium poppy production.” Additional challenges that include the insurgency, persisting insecurity, drug trafficking networks, and weak law enforcement agencies have led to deteriorating conditions and in turn resulted in the suspension of projects in high risk areas.

EU efforts are complemented by initiatives of individual EU member states that have taken the lead in certain issue areas in addition to their activities as part of the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF): The UK is the lead nation on Afghanistan’s counter-narcotic programme that includes border and police training and the promotion of sustainable, alternative livelihoods. France has been co-ordinating international efforts in support of the establishment of the Afghan Parliament, working closely with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and European partners, whereas Italy has taken the lead in the justice sector. Individual member states have also made large contributions to security, providing around half the ISAF personnel, and participating in PRTs. There is a significant degree of co-operation and overlapping goals between the commission and member states as well as bi-lateral co-operation in member states’ specific fields of expertise in Afghanistan and within PRTs.

EUPOL Afghanistan: Building on National Efforts – Missed Opportunities

With the launch of EUPOL Afghanistan on June 17, 2007 in Kabul, the EU has added a new element to its reconstruction efforts. Given weak law enforcement agencies and, more generally, a weak justice sector, building a professional police force is key to addressing the challenges facing Afghanistan. The mission builds on police reform efforts already deployed on the ground, notably the German Police Project Office (GPPO), and the ESDP operation will incorporate the German contingent already present in the country. EUPOL Afghanistan will cover the whole of Afghanistan and will consist of some 160 police, law enforcement, and justice experts that are to be deployed at central (Kabul), regional (the 5 regional police commands), and provincial (in provinces, through Provincial Reconstruction Teams) levels. The aims of EUPOL Afghanistan are to contribute “to the establishment of sustainable and effective civilian policing arrangements under Afghan ownership and in accordance with international standards. More particularly, the mission will monitor, mentor, advise and train at the level of the Afghan Ministry of Interior, regions and provinces.” The history of international efforts in post-conflict reconstruction, including police reform, coupled with the current political situation in Afghanistan makes this a challenging operation. A joint exploratory mission prior to the launch of EUPOL Afghanistan in September 2006 noted that future engagement should “provide added-value to the work currently ongoing, and aim to build greater coherence amongst actors rather than increasing the multiplicity of effort.”

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“Coherence” and “added value,” however, are problematic terms — and it is questionable whether either will be achieved — for two reasons. First, the neglect of police reform at the expense of military reform has been termed a missed opportunity on the part of international actors, including the United States. In addition, different actors involved in police reform activities have so far pursued different strategies and objectives. Germany’s reform strategy proceeded in stages, beginning in Kabul and then spreading out to the provinces. As of mid-October 2004, 2,624 personnel had been trained at the Kabul Police Academy, including 1,831 non-commissioned officers (of which 55 were female) and 752 border police. The US also put in place a programme for police reform, but one that focused on training police recruits: To date 27,200 police have received basic training through United States’ government-supported programmes. The US has also devoted substantial financial commitments to police reform, by far outspending the EU. This indicates two very different and furthermore not necessarily co-ordinated and coherent approaches. Lack of co-ordination is a luxury the international community cannot afford, especially not at this juncture.

Given the challenges for inter-institutional co-operation that arise because of the security situation in Afghanistan, as well as the growing profile of EU crisis management, it is not surprising that it is exactly these conditions that strongly circumscribe what the EU can hope to accomplish on the ground. Challenges facing the rule of law include security, governance, corruption, narcotics, and economic development. All of these are interlinked and overlapping, thus threatening the establishment not only of the rule of law but also institution building more generally (the aim of this particular mission). Analysts note that President Karzai has not succeeded in gaining credibility and legitimacy among the general population and is instead dependent on the international community. And, although there has been progress in building formal institutions of government, these institutions are not operational. Add to this that 93% of the budget is paid for by external actors and it becomes clear that Afghanistan runs the risk of being permanently dependent on international aid. In light of these obstacles it is not unreasonable to ask what is achievable for ESDP within, but also beyond, the three-year term allocated to the current mission.

The current mission poses several key challenges: First, co-locating personnel, given the numbers involved but also the environment in which co-location is to take place, may not be sufficient. Second, it is doubtful what sort of impact the ESDP operation may have on local policing. And third, given public perceptions of the Afghan police, which are all too often seen as the problem rather than the solution to improving the rule of law, the ESDP operation faces an uphill struggle in fostering effective policing. Challenges thus include establishing working relationships in an environment that is not likely to welcome ESDP as EUPOL Afghanistan is likely to confront vested interests; developing police reform among the Afghan community; and strengthening local ownership.

Increasing Commitments and Improving Co-ordination

Given the currently deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, it is key that the EU maximises its efforts — and also its impact. Three areas warrant particular attention when it comes to the formulation, planning, and execution of policy.

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7 See also Citha D. Maas, Afghanistan: Staatsaufbau ohne Staat. SWP Studie, February 2007.
1. The co-ordination and visibility of EU initiatives has to be improved: Given the security situation in Afghanistan but also the volume of EU activities in the country, it is vital for the EU to better co-ordinate its policies. More importantly, these efforts must become visible not just to a European but, more importantly, to an Afghan public. This means that (a) co-ordination and communication between policies located in the first and the second pillar must be improved but also that (b) an effective public diplomacy strategy must be developed and put into place to make visible the EU’s political, economic, and security policies.

2. The co-ordination with other international actors in Afghanistan has to be improved. This particularly concerns NATO. It has been noted elsewhere\(^8\) that so far, information has not been shared between NATO and the EU, with the result that the economic, political, and security dimensions of the international engagement in Afghanistan are frequently being viewed in isolation. On a political level, the EU-NATO relationship is not as co-operative as it could be, although EU officials note that so far engagement with NATO during the planning of EUPOL Afghanistan has been ‘good.’ However, it remains to be seen how this co-operation will work in practice. As long as relations between the two organisations remain ‘frozen’ the task of co-ordination and co-operation will likely be left to personnel on the ground – this is hardly a long-term solution.

Commitment to Afghanistan’s police reform has to increase: The current ESDP operation is a much needed and crucial component of the reform of the rule of law sector. However, in order for this effort to succeed, the current number of personnel is inadequate. Although their task is to advise and monitor local personnel rather than to perform police work themselves, it should be apparent that a 160-strong mission is hardly sufficient to effect a positive change in police reform. Lastly, the EU should also make a firm commitment to remain in Afghanistan beyond EUPOL Afghanistan’s initial three years.

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