Security in Afghanistan: Unfinished business

Even though the NATO-led military operation against the Taliban ceased in 2014, security in Afghanistan is still elusive. A divided government, weak security forces and poor economic performance make the fight against insurgency, terrorism and criminal networks more complicated. To help Afghanistan further consolidate the progress achieved to date and support its growth, the EU is focused on reinforcing democracy, fostering the rule of law and respect for human rights, and encouraging development. The future of Afghanistan is due to be discussed at the NATO Summit in Warsaw on 7-8 July and the Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan on 4-5 October in Brussels.

Political, social and security challenges to Afghanistan's stability

A Pentagon report released in December 2015 stated that Afghanistan's stability is undermined by insurgency, terrorism and criminal networks. The porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan provides a safe haven for various terrorist and criminal groups, including al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and recently the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP). The intensifying attacks by the Taliban – including in Kabul, Kunduz, Helmand and Uruzgan – further undermine the government's standing as a security provider. Bilateral tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan have also increased due to a series of high-profile attacks in 2015, and cross-border firing between the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the Pakistani military. According to the US Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, 'Afghanistan is at serious risk of a political breakdown during 2016, occasioned by mounting political, economic and security challenges'. Indeed, the rivalry between President Ashraf Ghani, and Chief Executive Officer of the National Unity Government, Abdullah Abdullah – rivals in the highly contested 2014 presidential elections – has been one of the main obstacles towards the implementation of the economic, political and social reforms that the country urgently needs. For instance, Afghanistan's mining and minerals sectors could significantly reduce its dependence on international aid flows but investment in those sectors – including from companies in India and China – is scarce due to the volatile security context and the slow pace of reform efforts to curb corruption, strengthen the rule of law, and empower the judiciary. At the same time, Afghanistan’s security is in the hands of the under-staffed, under-equipped and insufficiently trained ANDSF.

International support to Afghan security institutions

The international community has progressively re-examined its approach to supporting Afghanistan – ranging from development aid to military response. For instance, in October 2015, President Barack Obama abandoned the idea of completely withdrawing US forces, and committed to maintaining nearly 10 000 troops during 2016, and 5 500 troops after 2016. As of January 2016, the US military is also authorised to attack ISIL-KP targets. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), launched almost 15 years ago, was replaced by the follow-on Resolute Support Mission (RSM). Launched in January 2015, the RSM aims to 'provide training, advice and assistance for the Afghan security forces and institutions'. All EU Member States – except Cyprus, France and Malta – contribute to the RSM, with a total of around 4 000 troops (of the 13 000-strong contingent). At the ministerial meeting in December 2015, NATO Foreign Ministers agreed to sustain the RSM presence in Afghanistan in 2016. Aid for building the capacities of Afghanistan’s security force and institutions is channelled through three funding streams: the NATO-Afghan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund; the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA) administered by the UN Development Programme; and the US-Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF).

The EU's engagement in Afghanistan is based on the strategy adopted in 2014. Its main aim is the 'development of Afghanistan’s institutions to provide the resilience needed to safeguard progress to date.
and provide the platform for a more effective and ultimately sustainable Afghan state'. On 17 December 2015, the European Commission adopted a proposal for a Council decision on the signing of the Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development between the European Union and Afghanistan, which expresses the EU's commitment to strengthening economic and political cooperation, including on: rule of law, migration, health, rural development, education, science and technology, as well as action to combat corruption, money laundering, terrorist financing, organised crime and narcotics. Human rights issues, in particular the rights of women and children, are defined in the proposal as essential elements of the agreement. In addition, since 2007 the EU has maintained its Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL Afghanistan), launched to provide support to the Afghan government in building a civilian police service that operates within an improved rule of law framework and in respect of human rights. EUPOL Afghanistan operations in 2016 (budget: €43.7 million) will focus on the institutional reform of the Ministry of Interior and the professionalisation of the Afghan National Police. The EU has also provided funding for projects on integrated border management and cross-border cooperation between Afghanistan and its northern neighbours – Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – through the Border Management Northern Afghanistan (EU-BOMNAF) programme. In addition to providing infrastructure and equipment, the project focuses on capacity-building and cross-border cooperation for border and customs officials from Afghanistan and neighbouring countries. The EU also supports the Regional Cooperation Directorate, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in generating the critical capacity that will allow Afghanistan to play an important role in facilitating different regional and multilateral initiatives, such as the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan (‘Heart of Asia – Istanbul process’). Established in 2011, Heart of Asia remains the only regionally owned political process through which Afghanistan and its near neighbours can shift the political focus away from conflict, towards encouraging trade and transit.

The way forward: peace talks
In December 2015, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and China established the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) on Afghan Peace and Reconciliation with the aim of re-starting and supporting direct government-Taliban negotiations. The fourth meeting took place in Kabul on 23 February 2016. It was agreed that the first direct talks between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives will be held in Islamabad by the first week of March. Afghanistan and Pakistan have also agreed to establish a bilateral joint working group to work with religious leaders in both countries with the aim of supporting the 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' peace and reconciliation process. Nonetheless, many unresolved issues still need to be addressed before any final deal is reached. First, the opposition criticises the government for including Pakistan in peace talks – a move which, in their view, will give Pakistan control over the insurgency. President Ghani is supportive of a power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban, which he sees as a way to strengthen his political position. Second, in light of the recent attacks by the Taliban in Kunduz and Kandahar, it is also not clear if the group is interested in returning to the negotiation table. The Taliban camp is split over the prospect of talks with Kabul. The current leader, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, reportedly supports the process, but growing factionalism within the Taliban might undermine his capacity to implement any potential agreement. Furthermore, the list of preconditions set out by the Taliban might be difficult to meet, including the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan and abolishing travel bans imposed on Taliban representatives. Simultaneously with the peace talks, the government is pursuing projects for the reintegration of insurgents, which have already benefited almost 10 000 fighters.

If the security situation permits, parliamentary elections in Afghanistan will take place on 15 October 2016. In November 2015, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on Afghanistan expressing concern over the security situation in the country. The resolution affirmed that national security is an essential basis for social and economic development, political stability and the future of Afghanistan. It also called on Afghanistan and Pakistan to intensify cooperation on security and governance matters to promote peace and stability in the region. It also reiterated that an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process remains a prerequisite for a sustainable solution.