Security situation in Afghanistan
Implications for Europe

SUMMARY

Just over two months after the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021, the movement remains politically isolated. So far, no country has recognised the caretaker government that the new leaders announced on 7 September 2021. The humanitarian situation in a country that largely depended on foreign aid to survive is deteriorating rapidly, so much so that international aid organisations describe the situation as a 'humanitarian meltdown'. Aware that the collapse of the economic and financial system in Afghanistan would impact heavily on the stability of the country, the region and beyond, the international community has mobilised large amounts of funds, including €1 billion in humanitarian aid from the EU budget. While no major population movements out of Afghanistan have been detected so far, the EU is determined to avoid a crisis reminiscent of the 2015 refugee crisis prompted by the Syrian civil war. EU assistance is partly destined for countries in the region hosting Afghan refugees.

In the longer term, the EU is concerned that Afghanistan could revert to being a safe haven for international terrorists who might target EU countries. The EU's preparedness to deal with the threat from terrorism has evolved significantly over the past decade. In response to events in Afghanistan, the Council published a counter-terrorism action plan on Afghanistan in September, setting out four clear objectives, and making 22 recommendations for action. The United States government's determination to leave Afghanistan according to a set timetable, irrespective of allies' reservations, has reignited the debate over the need for greater EU strategic autonomy. The EU's 'strategic compass' process provides a framework for these discussions, including negotiations over a potential future rapid reaction or 'initial entry' force, able to provide a European capability to react to events such as those that unfolded in Afghanistan. Members of the European Parliament have called on the EU to reinforce significantly its capacity to act autonomously and for the strategic compass to address the terrorist threat from Afghanistan.

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Afghanistan once more a safe haven for terrorists?

Taliban rule from 1996-2001

The last time the Taliban ruled Afghanistan (1996 to 2001) the country became a safe haven for al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden, a Saudi national. Hosted by the Taliban, al-Qaeda used the country as a base from which to launch terrorist attacks against United States (US) interests abroad, most notably the August 1998 attacks targeting US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which killed over 200 people. Afghanistan also served as the logistical base for the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, the deadliest terrorist attack ever to have occurred in the US, killing nearly 3,000 people. Following the 9/11 attacks, the US asked the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden, and to close all of al-Qaeda’s training camps. When the Taliban refused, the US government launched a military campaign against the group on 7 October 2001. Two months later, in December 2001, a coalition of Afghan parties supported by the US removed the Taliban from government.

For 20 years, the Taliban operated as an insurgent force in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, fighting NATO forces and seeking to remove the democratically elected Afghan government. Following the August 2021 US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) withdrawal and subsequent collapse of the Afghan government, the Taliban are back in control of Afghanistan, raising fears that the country could, once more, become a haven for terrorists operating beyond the country’s borders, and a magnet for foreign fighters. The Taliban have been subject to international sanctions for the past 22 years, initially on the grounds that they hosted al-Qaeda, and most recently on the grounds that the group constitutes a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan (see text box on ‘Sanctions’ below). In the US, some Republicans have called on the Biden administration to designate the Taliban as a foreign terrorist organisation and the new Taliban government as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Strong links to al-Qaeda

The Taliban also comprise the Haqqani network, a militant Islamist group active in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Haqqani network has been designated by the US government as a foreign terrorist organisation. The leader of the Haqqani network, Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Taliban’s newly appointed interior minister, is on the FBI list of ‘most wanted terrorists’, with a bounty on his head of up to US$10 million. According to the April 2021 report of the United Nations (UN) sanctions monitoring team, the senior leadership of al-Qaeda, including the current leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is believed to be present in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The UN also reports that relations between the Taliban, particularly the Haqqani network, and al-Qaeda remain close, based on friendship, a history of shared struggle, ideological sympathy and intermarriage. The Taliban are reported to have regularly consulted with al-Qaeda during negotiations with the US and to have offered guarantees that they would ‘honour their historical ties’. UN monitors consider it impossible to assess with confidence that the Taliban will live up to their commitment – made to the US as part of the 2020 peace agreement – to suppress any future international threat emanating from al-Qaeda.
in Afghanistan. UN estimates concerning the strength of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan range from several dozen to 500 people; the group is reported to have an active presence in 15 out of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. This includes al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, a formal, separate al-Qaeda affiliate in south Asia set up in 2014 to appeal to regional actors. The group reportedly consists primarily of Afghan and Pakistani nationals, and individuals from Bangladesh, India and Myanmar, all operating under the Taliban 'umbrella'. By contrast, the core leadership of al-Qaeda is predominantly Arab. Many counter-terrorism experts consider it likely that al-Qaeda will regain strength in Taliban-rulled Afghanistan, and that the group will seek to resume its attacks on Western targets.

Sanctions

Following the August 1998 attacks al-Qaeda carried out on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, in July 1999, US President Bill Clinton designated the Taliban a sponsor of terrorism and imposed sanctions on the group. In October 1999, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1267, imposing travel and economic sanctions against the Taliban for their support for Osama bin Laden. The resolution also imposed sanctions on members of al-Qaeda. This was followed by UNSCR 1333, adopted in December 2000, which imposed an arms embargo on the Taliban. On 17 June 2011, the UNSC split the list of individuals and entities subject to restrictive measures originally imposed by UNSCR 1267 (1999) in two. The split was in response to efforts by the Afghan government to negotiate a peace process with the Taliban and establish national reconciliation in Afghanistan. UNSCR 1988 (2011) would henceforth apply to the Taliban, imposing an assets freeze, a travel ban and an arms embargo. UNSCR 1989 (2011) would henceforth apply to al-Qaeda and associated individuals and entities. On 17 December 2015, the UNSC adopted resolution 2253 (2015) expanding UNSCR 1989 (2011) to include individuals and entities supporting Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL or Da'esh). In 2016, the Council of the EU gave itself the power to apply restrictive measures autonomously to persons and entities associated with IS and al-Qaeda. Before that, restrictive measures could be applied only to those members of the groups listed by the UN Security Council.

Smaller militant groups

A number of smaller militant groups operate in Afghanistan, allied with or fighting alongside the Taliban. These include the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), an umbrella group for several Pakistan-based extremist groups focused on combating Pakistani security forces; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a Salafi-jihadist militant organisation operating in central Asia; and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, a Muslim separatist group active in south Asia, central Asia and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China.

Islamic State Khorasan Province

Afghanistan is also home to adversaries of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, affiliated with Islamic State, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). The Khorasan chapter of Islamic State was set up in 2014 by fighters active in Afghanistan and Pakistan formerly associated with TTP, al-Qaeda and the Taliban. ISKP is responsible for some of the worst attacks in Afghanistan (and Pakistan) in recent years, killing people in mosques, public squares and even hospitals. The group also claimed responsibility for the 26 August 2021 attacks outside Kabul airport that killed an estimated 200 people, including 13 US soldiers, and for a rocket attack targeting Kabul airport four days later. Expert believe that, in the immediate term, ISKP poses a threat mainly to Afghan civilians and the newly formed Taliban government in Afghanistan, potentially increasing the risk of civil war. However, as part of the larger Islamic State franchise, which has been behind numerous deadly terrorist attacks in Europe – including the November 2015 attacks in Paris that killed 130 and seriously injured more than 350, the March 2016 bombings in Brussels that killed 32 and wounded 270, and the 14 July 2016 attacks in Nice that killed 84 and injured more than 300 – ISKP fighters ultimately also pose a threat to European security. The US intelligence community has assessed that Islamic State in Afghanistan could have the capability to attack the United States in as little as six months. A series of attacks carried out by ISKP since the Taliban takeover of the country, some specifically targeting the Taliban, have prompted questions as to whether the Taliban can actually contain the group.
Foreign fighters in Afghanistan

The UN sanctions monitoring team estimates that the number of foreign terrorist fighters in Afghanistan amounts to between 8,000 and 10,000. They hail mainly, but not exclusively, from central Asia, the north Caucasus region of the Russian Federation, Pakistan and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. Most are affiliated with the Taliban, but many also support al-Qaeda. Others are allied with Islamic State or sympathise with the latter. Following the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, policy-makers in Europe became acutely aware of the security risk posed by European foreign fighters, radicalised citizens of EU Member States who had been indoctrinated to reject Western values and trained to fight in the war zones of Syria and Iraq. Al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan are believed to have played a key role in fomenting the phenomenon of foreign fighters in the first place. There is a sense that the terrorist threat emanating from Afghanistan may now be made worse by the weapons and military equipment that the Taliban have seized from the Afghan security forces – including combat aircraft, armoured vehicles, machine guns and ammunition – which in a worst-case scenario could be used by extremist groups in attacks, including in Europe.

The EU’s response to the terrorism threat

The EU and its Member States are acutely aware of the security risks that the Taliban’s takeover of power in Afghanistan could pose. They have vowed to ‘do their utmost to ensure that the situation in Afghanistan does not lead to new security threats for EU citizens’. On 10 September 2021, the Council published a counter-terrorism action plan on Afghanistan, prepared jointly by the Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Council Presidency and relevant EU justice and home affairs agencies. The action plan identifies four clear objectives, namely to prevent jihadists from infiltrating into the EU by improving security checks; stop Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorist organisations; monitor and counter propaganda and mobilisation of the Jihadi ecosystem; and tackle organised crime as a source of terrorist financing. To achieve these objectives, the plan sets out the following main recommendations for action.

Screening Afghan nationals and others evacuated from Afghanistan

The Member States’ competent authorities are encouraged to systematically check biographical and biometric data of Afghan nationals or presumed Afghans and other nationals coming from Afghanistan and arriving at the EU’s external borders, including individuals evacuated to the EU, against all the relevant databases. The plan also recommends improvements in information-sharing, so that updated ‘battlefield information’ collected in Afghanistan – such as ‘fingerprint found on explosive devices or biometric data of fighters detained in Afghan prisons and who have been released by the Taliban’ – is available to the competent national authorities and Europol. The plan calls for screening to cover both Afghan citizens evacuated by the US to the western Balkans who may seek to enter the EU, and those evacuated to US bases in the EU, some of whom have requested asylum in EU Member States. The plan encourages Member States to use the language expertise of qualified security-screened Afghan citizens who have been evacuated to Europe and have already worked for the EU or Member States in Afghanistan.

Sharing strategic intelligence

The action plan highlights the importance of assessing the presence and activities of terrorist groups in Afghanistan and their financing, and of monitoring terrorists’ travel between the EU and Afghanistan. It calls on EU Member States to share strategic intelligence on the terrorist threat resulting from developments in Afghanistan, especially through EU INTCEN, the EU’s in-house intelligence analysis and reporting service. For the purposes of monitoring social networks and other media, the plan recommends setting up an EU-level pool of security-vetted specialists in Afghan languages, including Pashtu, Dari, Urdu and Farsi. The regional political platform that the EU is seeking to establish with countries neighbouring Afghanistan should be used to strengthen
dialogue and strategic information exchange with these countries, also in the context of counter-terrorism dialogues with countries in the region.

Countering the spread of extremist Islamist ideology internationally

The action plan recognises that the Taliban takeover constitutes a 'propaganda victory', resonating with and encouraging jihadist and Islamist extremists globally, including in Europe. It calls on EU INTCEN, the EU Internet Referral Unit at Europol and the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) to monitor the impact of the Taliban’s takeover in Afghanistan on the global Islamist extremist and jihadist propaganda scene, including the Afghan diaspora and Muslims in Europe. The EU is particularly concerned about the potentially negative impact of strategic communication campaigns that the Taliban or al-Qaeda might launch, in particular concerning the Taliban’s policy towards women and girls. The EU will also increase efforts to counter the spread and influence of Islamist extremist ideology in Afghanistan and the region.

Cutting off sources of Taliban funding

The action plan proposes to cut off two sources of Taliban funding: the drugs trade and arms trafficking. The UN estimates that in 2020 Afghani farmers produced some 6 300 tons of opium, accounting for more than 90% of illicit global supply. There has also been a surge in the production of synthetic drugs in Afghanistan. According to some estimates, the Taliban may have earned US$400 million a year in recent years, equivalent to a quarter of the country’s overall revenue, from drug-related activities, including opium production and the production of ephedra, methamphetamine and cannabis. According to the UN, this remains the Taliban’s largest single source of income. The action plan proposes to consider making any recognition of the Taliban government and resumption of development assistance conditional, in part, on an effective ban on poppy cultivation and trafficking of opiates and synthetic drugs. The plan also calls for more effective monitoring and control of criminal networks behind the drugs trade. On arms, Afghanistan has not been a source of firearms trafficking in the past. However, the plan draws attention to the risk that weaponry seized by the Taliban after the withdrawal of US and allied troops, and taken from Afghan security forces, may be sold. To lower the risk of weapons from Afghanistan being trafficked into the EU, the plan highlights the importance of implementing the 2020-2025 EU action plan on firearms trafficking, particularly with respect to the western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine.

Counter-terrorism at EU level

Over the past decade, there has been a growing realisation that ‘foreign fighters’ – defined as ‘individuals who join insurgencies abroad and whose primary motivation is ideological or religious rather than financial – pose a serious threat to the security of both individual Member States and the EU as a whole. The UN began to address the phenomenon of foreign fighters on a global scale in 2014, with the adoption of a specific resolution on the issue. The EU has been actively engaged in international initiatives to counter the threat. Within the EU, security in general, and counter-terrorism in particular, have traditionally been the responsibility of Member States. However, the EU has coordinated Member State activities on the prevention of radicalisation, the detection of travel for suspicious purposes, the cutting off of terrorist funds, the criminal justice response, and cooperation with third countries. Since 2015, the fight against terrorism has been one of the key priorities of the European agenda on security, the main policy instrument setting out the EU response to security challenges for the years 2015 to 2020. Protecting Europeans from terrorism is also a key objective of the security union strategy for the 2020-2025 period, adopted in July 2020. In the context of these broader strategies, the EU identified further steps in specific action plans on: firearms and explosives (2015); strengthening the fight against terrorist financing (2016); strengthening the European response to travel document fraud (2016); protection of public spaces (2017); preparedness against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear security risks (2017); maritime security (2018); and most recently, firearms trafficking (2020) and money laundering and terrorist financing (2020).
EU Member States’ participation in security assistance missions in Afghanistan

On 12 September 2001, a day after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1368 (2001). The resolution deemed the 9/11 attacks to be an armed attack on the US, recalled the inherent right of any UN member state to individual or collective self-defence in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter, and called on all states to work together urgently to bring the perpetrators, organisers and sponsors of the 9/11 terrorist attacks to justice. On the same day, NATO’s North Atlantic Council decided to treat the terrorist attacks as attacks covered by NATO’s mutual defence clause, laid down in Article 5 of NATO’s founding treaty, the North Atlantic Treaty, according to which an armed attack against one or more of the allies in Europe or North America is to be considered an attack against them all. On 4 October 2001, NATO declared that it would operationalise Article 5 and that member states would take eight measures, individually and collectively, to support the fight against terrorism.

On 7 October 2001, the US launched a military operation – Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) – targeting the al-Qaeda leadership and Taliban forces with a bombing campaign. The United Kingdom (UK), then still part of the EU, was the only EU Member State to join the operation. This initial operation aimed at supporting local Afghan anti-Taliban forces to topple the Taliban, an endeavour in which they succeeded. Anti-Taliban forces took over Kabul on 12 November 2001, and the Taliban regime was officially defeated two months later on 9 December 2001. However, even though the Taliban lost control of all provincial capitals and the capital Kabul, the movement remained present, to varying degrees, in the provinces. The US military declared ‘major combat’ against the Taliban to be over in 2003; however, OEF continued as a counter-terrorism operation against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, sustaining military operations until 2014. Arguably the biggest success of the operation was the capture and killing of Osama bin Laden, mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, on 2 May 2011, at his home in Pakistan.

Following the departure of the Taliban from government, a UN-led process supported by Afghan factions led to the adoption of an agreement on provisional arrangements in Afghanistan. The ‘Bonn Agreement’, signed by all factions, with the exception of the Taliban, on 5 December 2001, was endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 1383, and called for the creation of an international peacekeeping force to maintain security in Kabul and surrounding areas. A subsequent resolution, UN Security Council Resolution 1386, adopted on 20 December 2001, established the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In the post-Taliban era, ISAF was to help defend and develop the new Afghan government and its fledgling army. In August 2003, the Afghan government – then called the Afghan Transitional Authority – asked NATO to take command of ISAF. UN Security Council Resolution 1386 passed in 2001 established ISAF and its mandate to support the Afghan government and its forces, and to provide security in Kabul and its surroundings.

Figure 1 – EU participation in international security assistance missions in Afghanistan

![Number of international personnel](source:SIPRI Multilateral peace operations in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, 16 September 2021.)


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Council Resolution 1510, adopted in October 2003, extended and expanded ISAF’s mandate to cover the whole of Afghanistan, providing security support for ‘reconstruction and humanitarian efforts’ and ‘the performance of other tasks in support of the Bonn Agreement’.

By 2006, ISAF troops numbered 30,000 and were present throughout Afghanistan. As international troops spread to all parts of Afghanistan, they were increasingly engaged by insurgents, particularly the Taliban, who tried to regain control over parts of the country from their safe haven in Pakistan, and had expanded their influence in the north, south and east of Afghanistan, threatening several provincial capitals. ISAF responded, in 2009, with a new counterinsurgency strategy, while newly elected US President Barack Obama ordered a ‘surge’ of some 30,000 additional US troops, increasing the total number of US troops in ISAF to a one-time high of 90,000 (and bringing the total number of US troops in the country both under US and NATO command to just short of 100,000). In 2011, ISAF troop numbers reached a peak of more than 130,000, with troops from 51 NATO and partner nations. 26 EU Member States, including non-NATO members Ireland, Austria, Finland and Sweden, and the UK (which left the EU in 2020), participated in ISAF, in various ways and to different degrees, over the course of its existence.

The surge is deemed to have been successful in forcing the Taliban out of areas in the north, east and south of Afghanistan and in relieving the pressure the group was putting on provincial capitals. However, given that President Obama had declared his intention to limit the increase in troops to 18 months, the Taliban ‘went underground and waited it out’.

From 2011 onwards, security responsibilities were gradually transferred to the Afghan National Security Forces. This process culminated in the winding-down of Operation Enduring Freedom and ISAF, and the withdrawal of large numbers of foreign troops from Afghanistan, by the end of 2014. 2015 marked the start of a new phase, with Afghan forces assuming full responsibility for security nationwide. ISAF was replaced by NATO’s noncombat Resolute Support Mission (RSM) – a mission requested by the Afghan government and approved by UN Security Council Resolution 2189 – entrusted with providing the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces with further training, advice and assistance. Twenty-five EU Member States, including non-NATO members Ireland, Austria, Finland and Sweden, and the UK (which left the EU in 2020), participated in the RSM. The US contribution to the RSM was called Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS). OFS had the added responsibility, separate from its responsibilities within the RSM and involving additional troops, to conduct counter-terrorism operations against the remnants of al-Qaeda and the Khorasan chapter of Islamic State. During this period, the Taliban moved back into traditional strongholds and started clashing with the Afghan national army. Under OFS command, US forces also provided the Afghan security forces with combat support, such as aerial strikes and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, as they fought the Taliban.

EUPOL Afghanistan

From 2007 to 2016, the EU deployed a civilian mission to Afghanistan under its common security and defence policy (CSDP), with the objective of contributing to the establishment of an effective civilian police force. Staffed by law-enforcement and rule-of-law experts seconded by EU Member States, the EU police mission (EUPOL) in Afghanistan worked with the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and the Afghan National Police. From an initial strength of 100 experts, EUPOL Afghanistan grew to 350 personnel in 2012; before it closed in 2016, staff levels had dropped back to 100. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), EUPOL succeeded in increasing the professionalism of the Afghan National Police: it helped to introduce the community policing concept to Afghanistan, helped to increase the capacity of the Afghan Ministry of Interior, and brought Afghan legislation in line with human rights standards. EUPOL also played a key role in the establishment of the Police Staff College and the Crime Management College for advanced training.

Nevertheless, in January 2018, a BBC study found the Taliban to be ‘openly active’ in 70% of Afghanistan, and in full control of 4% of districts. At the end of 2018, Donald Trump, US President
at the time, announced that the remaining US troops in Afghanistan, then numbering 14,000, would start to leave the country. On 29 February 2020, the US signed a bilateral peace agreement with the Taliban, who had ‘refused to engage in talks’ with the Afghan government. The essence of the agreement was the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan within 14 months, with an initial reduction in troop levels to 8,600 by July 2020. In return, the Taliban committed to put in place guarantees and enforcement mechanisms to prevent the use of Afghan soil by any group or individual – including al-Qaeda – against the security of the US and its allies. The Taliban also committed to participate in intra-Afghan negotiations. On the same day, the US issued a joint declaration with the Afghan government, as a prelude to those intra-Afghan peace talks. Peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, which started in September 2020, remained inconclusive. Nevertheless, on 13 April 2021, President Joe Biden confirmed that all US troops would leave Afghanistan, although he extended the deadline for departure beyond the originally agreed period of 1 May 2021 to 11 September 2021. For its part, NATO began withdrawing its RSM on 1 May 2021. The April announcement of the final withdrawal of US troops triggered a dramatic Taliban offensive that culminated in the fall of the Afghan government and the Taliban entering the capital Kabul on 15 August 2021 without a single shot being fired. Minimal levels of resistance from government security forces had allowed the Taliban to re-establish control over most of the country in less than four months. By the time US and NATO forces boarded the last plane out of Kabul airport on 31 August 2021, the Taliban were essentially back in control of the entire country (with the exception of the Panjshir valley, which the Taliban overran a few days later).

Afghanistan has not served as the base for a terrorist attack on the scale of the 9/11 attacks over the past 20 years. Nevertheless, there is a widespread sentiment that counter-terrorism in Afghanistan has failed. NATO military leaders have clearly stated that a top priority for the alliance must be to prevent a resurgence of terrorism in Afghanistan. For that purpose, NATO is seeking to enter into agreements with countries in the region, including some of Afghanistan’s neighbours, on intelligence sharing, overflight rights and the setting up of military bases. At the same time, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, counter-terrorism experts assembled by the Atlantic Council were debating whether there is a need to ‘reset the fundamental assumptions, policies, and practices’ that have guided counter-terrorism measures over the past 20 years, to respond to terrorist threats in the future. According to these experts, there is every reason to believe that civilian security, law enforcement, and prevention programmes can reduce the threat from terrorism ‘to a level where the threats can be handled by individual governments without the need to resort to large-scale, decades-long military efforts such as those in Afghanistan, Iraq, or the campaign to defeat [Islamic State]’.

A boost for international jihadism?

The Taliban’s victory in Afghanistan represents a symbolic victory for the jihadist cause in general. The Economist has called it the most ‘trumpetable’ moment for jihadists since Islamic State established a ‘caliphate’ in western Iraq and eastern Syria in 2014. Further according to The Economist, this victory is arguably an even greater one, as, for the first time since the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in 1989, ‘Islamists have taken a country from a superpower’.

Of particular concern for Europe should be the ideological boost for jihadist movements in sub-Saharan Africa. African leaders, in particular the Nigerian president Mohammadu Buhari, have drawn attention to the implications of the ‘winding down of the war against terror in Afghanistan’ for the African continent. Sub-Saharan Africa has become a new global hotspot for jihadist activity. Armed groups have increasingly developed strong Salafi ideologies and forged ties with movements predominantly active in the Middle East, namely al-Qaeda and Islamic State, and even the Taliban. The spike in violence attributed to jihadist groups, and the destabilising effect this is having on the countries and regions involved, has prompted international stakeholders, including the European Union, to launch counter-terrorism operations and to deploy civilian and military missions. The
ideological boost of the Taliban victory has the potential to further destabilise regions that are already marked by a highly volatile security situation.

The humanitarian crisis and its wider implications

Afghan refugees have, for decades, constituted one of the largest refugee populations in the world. With the return to power of the Taliban on 15 August 2021, there was widespread concern that fear of the Taliban and their harsh rule would prompt many Afghans to flee the country. However, early fears of a mass exodus of Afghans have yet to materialise. Two months after the Taliban took over Kabul, EU Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson noted that no major population movements out of Afghanistan had been detected and that there had been no increase in the number of Afghan migrants arriving in the EU. At the same time, the UN and the World Food Programme are painting a dire picture of the humanitarian situation in the country. Nearly half the population, more than 18 million people, require assistance to survive. The country’s health system is failing, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) has stepped in to pay the salaries of 25 000 doctors, nurses and other workers, to save it from total collapse. According to some estimates, the economy is set to contract by up to 30% this year. In early October, the UNCHR renewed its warning that up to half a million Afghans could flee their homeland by the year’s end, if the situation deteriorates further.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that nearly 3 million Afghans – of a population of around 40 million – were internally displaced as of December 2020, and that the armed conflict that preceded and accompanied the Taliban takeover of the country has led to the displacement of a further 665 182 Afghans in 2021. Other estimates are even higher. In December 2020, 2.2 million refugees and asylum-seekers from Afghanistan were registered in neighbouring countries (essentially Iran and Pakistan); since then, UNHCR has registered a further 52 540 Afghan refugees in the countries bordering Afghanistan (figures retrieved on 28 October 2021). Of these, most sought shelter in Iran (23 990) and Pakistan (23 130), and the rest in Tajikistan (5 420). The northern neighbours Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have clearly stated that they can host refugees only temporarily. Pakistan has also stated that it cannot take in more refugees. Unofficial estimates of the number of Afghan refugees residing in Iran and Pakistan, often for many years, are much higher. According to UNHCR data, 780 000 registered Afghan refugees, 2.6 million undocumented Afghans and 600 000 Afghan passport-holders reside in Iran, a total of nearly 4 million. By the end of August 2021, Pakistan was host to 1.435 million registered Afghan refugees and home to between one and two million more displaced Afghans.
EU action and reaction

Since the takeover of the country by the Taliban on 15 August 2021, EU Member States have evacuated around 22,000 Afghans from Afghanistan, including Afghans affiliated with Member States and the EU, and Afghans who are in a vulnerable situation – such as human rights defenders, women, journalists, civil society activists, police and law enforcement officials, judges and professionals of the justice system – and their families. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, expects that 85,000 Afghans will have to be resettled within five years, and has asked EU Member States to receive half of that number. At its meeting of 31 August 2021, the Council – in its Justice and Home Affairs configuration – concluded that individual Member States could decide, on a voluntary basis, on the number of Afghan people at risk whom they were willing to evacuate and receive in their respective countries. The Commission convened a high-level resettlement forum on 7 October 2021, but EU Member States did not make any firm commitments regarding the numbers of refugees they were willing to receive. The meeting did agree on a common list of vulnerable Afghans whom the Member States intend to evacuate or resettle, including female judges and journalists fleeing the Taliban regime.

Member States have asked the Commission to coordinate work on evacuations, humanitarian admissions, and the medium and long-term resettlement of Afghan refugees having taken refuge in neighbouring countries. The Commission will set up a task force for this purpose and is also planning to convene regular meetings on resettlement. Overall, however, the EU will aim to curtail migration from Afghanistan to Europe by focusing on neighbouring and transit countries, to reinforce their capacities to provide protection, dignified and safe reception conditions, and sustainable livelihoods for refugees and host communities. Under the auspices of the EEAS, the EU is planning to initiate a regional political platform for cooperation with Afghanistan’s neighbours.

EU funding for Afghanistan

EU funding for Afghanistan comprises both humanitarian assistance and development aid. Since 2002, the EU has provided Afghanistan with more than €4 billion in development aid, making the country the biggest recipient of EU development aid in the world. Since 1994, the EU has also provided the country with around €1 billion in humanitarian assistance. At the 2020 Afghanistan Conference held in Geneva, the EU promised another €1.2 billion in humanitarian aid and development assistance to Afghanistan for the 2021-2025 period. However, in light of political developments in Afghanistan, the Commission has suspended development cooperation with Afghanistan. The Commission and the EEAS are currently reviewing the Afghanistan development aid portfolio to determine its future, given the political uncertainty and security challenges in the country and the conditions the EU has placed on its engagement with the new Taliban government, namely: (a) the fulfilment of the Taliban’s commitment to let foreign nationals and Afghans leave the country; (b) respect for human rights, in particular women’s rights, the rule of law and freedom of the media; (c) free access for, and delivery and distribution of, humanitarian aid; (d) the commitment of the Afghan government that Afghanistan will not serve as a basis for the export of terrorism to other countries; and (e) the establishment of an inclusive and representative transitional government through negotiations among political forces in Afghanistan.

At the same time, to respond to the unfolding humanitarian crisis in the country, the Commission has now pledged around €1 billion in support to Afghanistan and neighbouring countries. This support is intended to serve several purposes. First, it includes humanitarian aid for Afghanistan, which will be used to provide humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable, and to provide basic needs, shelter and vaccinations. Humanitarian aid for Afghanistan will be channelled through international organisations working on the ground, and will not go directly to the Taliban government. Second, it includes aid to support refugees and internally displaced people in Pakistan, Iran and central Asian countries, to help bring about conditions to allow the displaced Afghan population to settle in the region. Third, funds will also be used to establish safe and legal pathways for Afghans to seek protection in the EU, and for targeted reception and integration measures for Afghan evacuees. The US will provide nearly US$64 million in new humanitarian assistance to the people affected by the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, bringing US total humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan to nearly US$ 330 million this fiscal year. The assistance will flow through independent humanitarian organisations and will also target Afghan refugees in the region.
Security situation in Afghanistan

This political platform will consider, among other issues, the management of population flows from Afghanistan; the prevention of the spread of terrorism; and the fight against organised crime, including drug trafficking and people smuggling. The EU has also acknowledged the key role that partners in the Gulf can play in relation to the crisis in Afghanistan. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), Josep Borrell, announced on 18 October 2021 that the EU would open a delegation in Qatar in 2022.

Implications for European defence and strategy

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has reignited the debate over the need for greater European strategic autonomy. It has become clear, as HR/VP Josep Borrell stated in early September, that ‘the need for more “European Defence” has never been as evident as today – after the events in Afghanistan’. In a September 2021 newsletter to citizens, European Council President Charles Michel asks: ‘What other major geopolitical event do we need to lead Europe to aim for more decision-making autonomy and capacity for action?’. His answer appears to be a ‘full-scale exercise in strategic autonomy’. The decision-making and unravelling of the withdrawal from Afghanistan seem to have exposed deficiencies in Europe’s ability to influence events, and in its capabilities to provide security in the country by itself, in the absence of an American military presence. Contributing to this momentum is also the alliance (including a billion-dollar submarine deal) between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) announced on 15 September 2021. The deal came at the expense of a previously agreed deal between Australia and France, causing protest on the part of the French and the EU as a whole. Taken together, these two events may have strengthened the momentum for EU-level discussions about increasing self-reliance and ability to act in defence and security matters, although Member States remain divided on what precisely this means. The EU’s ‘strategic compass’ process is providing a framework for such discussions, including negotiations over a potential rapid reaction or ‘initial entry’ force, able to provide, in the future, a European capability to react to events such as those unfolding in Afghanistan.

Experts are divided on whether EU countries had the ability to take over from US forces in Afghanistan and either secure Kabul airport or even provide a transitional force on the ground. Some indeed argue that ‘European leaders would not have had the capabilities at their disposal to back up their position’, not being able to ‘even keep Kabul’s airport open without US support’. The main reason for this, the author argues, is ‘weak political will’, the absence of which is detrimental to European ambitions ‘to achieve true strategic autonomy’. The momentum needed to strengthen political will might be provided by regional security prospects, including the possible re-emergence of Afghanistan as a terrorist sanctuary or another migration crisis. On the other hand, an expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations notes that it is ‘unconvincing to argue that this industrial giant [the EU] is really not capable of providing logistical support for some 10 000 troops’ or to replace the logistical support for the Afghan army previously provided by the US. The two authors agree on the ‘lack of political will’ as the reason for EU inability to secure Afghanistan.

The manner in which the Afghanistan withdrawal was conducted, including the short timelines and limited consultations, has implications for the long-term future of the EU-US relationship. First, the deal struck by former US President Donald Trump with the Taliban – a policy taken over by the Biden administration – caused the European allies discomfort from its inception. Second, the overall optimism and energy to bring about a positive common transatlantic agenda after President Biden’s election appear to have been dampened by both the withdrawal from Afghanistan and AUKUS. HR/VP Josep Borrell observes a ‘certain disengagement of the US in the world arena’, and that the US is no longer ‘willing to fight for the other people’s wars anymore’. This crisis, he notes further, is an opportunity to balance the transatlantic relationship by reinforcing European strategic autonomy and by, therefore, also strengthening NATO. Experts at the Centre for European Reform note that the withdrawal ‘drives home the reality that the US is reducing its footprint in the Middle East and potentially other areas in ways that threaten Europe’s security’, thereby reinforcing the need for Europeans ‘to take on more responsibility’. Indeed, during a phone call between US
President Joe Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron on 22 September 2021, in the aftermath of the AUKUS deal, the US President recognised ‘the importance of a stronger and more capable European defence, that contributes positively to transatlantic and global security and is complementary to NATO’.

In early September, the Commissioner for the Internal Market (including defence industry), Thierry Breton, noted that with Afghanistan the EU had ‘learnt the hard way’ the need to strengthen defence capabilities and to build the ‘attributes of hard power’. This remains a sensitive subject for the transatlantic military alliance, NATO. Reacting to EU discussions about a possible ‘initial entry force’, NATO’s Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, warned against ‘any attempt to weaken the bond between Europe and North America’, cautioning against building parallel and duplicative structures. Commissioner Breton, however, argues that the EU intends to complement NATO ‘in areas where the alliance is less active’. The evolution of these debates will be shaped in the ongoing ‘strategic compass’ process on the EU’s side and the revision of the ‘strategic concept’ on NATO’s side, with both strategic documents due in the first half of 2022. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen also announced two important elements in her State of the Union speech in September 2021: a third joint declaration between the EU and NATO by the end of 2021, and a European defence summit scheduled for February 2022. These initiatives could shape the future of EU action in security and defence and the transatlantic relationship – with the US and with NATO.

European Parliament position

In a resolution on Afghanistan adopted on 16 September 2021, Parliament described the withdrawal of US and international forces from Afghanistan as the ‘manifestation of a collective failure of Western foreign and security policy and strategy’, noting that it had damaged the credibility of the West, presaged a crisis of confidence, and might have ‘possible long-term detrimental consequences’. Parliament stated that the Afghanistan crisis proves the need for the EU to reinforce significantly its capacity to act autonomously and thus strengthen EU defence cooperation by building a genuine European defence union, which should go hand in hand with the strengthening of the European pillar of NATO. Parliament urged Member States to preserve and share whatever intelligence was gained through their military and law enforcement presence in Afghanistan, with a particular emphasis on biometric data that is critical in helping Member States and third countries identify any returning foreign fighters. In this context, Parliament asked for thorough registration and security checks on those being evacuated from the region. Parliament also called for the strategic compass to address the terrorist threat from Afghanistan resulting from the Taliban takeover as a matter of priority. Parliament called for additional support for Afghanistan’s refugee-hosting neighbouring countries, but also called on the EU to prepare to respond to a potential migration and refugee crisis. In this context, Members called on the Commission and the Member States to ensure a coordinated European effort to pursue a humane asylum policy in which the EU shoulders its moral responsibility for reception and integration, in full compliance with the 1951 Geneva Convention.