

BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

Afghanistan: Criteria for a Military Withdrawal of the International Community¹

President Obama just recently declared that the U.S. had largely achieved its goals in Afghanistan 2011, setting in motion a resolute timetable for the withdrawal of American troops. After almost ten years of international involvement in Afghanistan, the discussion on a strategy for Afghanistan of the international community seems to be more and more reduced to the question of how quickly the U.S. and NATO troops can be withdrawn. The question, what sort of country we want to leave behind, what the political minimum goals are for the international community keeps fading into the background. With popular support for the military involvement in Afghanistan decreasing everywhere, the U.S. and Europe alike, and the economic and financial crises dominating the political agenda and public debate in the West, is there really no other option than focussing solely on a face-saving withdrawal of U.S. and NATO- troops or should (and can) the U.S. and Europe at least commit themselves to minimum guarantees for the Afghan people which should not be abandoned under any circumstances? Can safety from terrorist threats be guaranteed without rule of law and good governance in Afghanistan?

“Our main objective has to be to leave Afghanistan as a functioning state – not a perfect one.” This pretty much sums up the new credo given out by the international community involved in Afghanistan since its decision to focus on 2014 as an approximate exiting year. Ten years involvement in Afghanistan have led to considerable changes in society, politics, the rule of law, etc., but will it be enough to set the country up for its own walk on the road to independence?

The minimum goal of any sovereign state has to be that its people have a stake in their own country – otherwise there is no legitimacy for the government. But many other things need to be in place, too, in order to form a state that is here to stay and that can provide its citizens with some basic rights and offer them protection.

With the 10th anniversary of the Bonn conference on the horizon, what will be the general approach of the main actors, the EU and especially the US, in Afghanistan and how are they going to exit the country without leaving the place in total chaos? What about the Taliban, the neighbouring countries, basic human rights and what will be the impact of the global financial crisis?

Political Background

¹ **Guest speakers** were: **Prof. Dr. Eva Gross**, The Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel; **Emily Katkar**, Political Officer, U.S. Mission to the European Union; **Bettina Muscheidt**, Afghanistan Desk, European External Action Service and **Dr. Jamie Shea**, Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges Division NATO HQ. The meeting was moderated by **Claude Weinber**, Director Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union. The event was held under Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

The question has been posed whether the sole reason for the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan might be the upcoming presidential elections in 2012 and the unpopularity of the war in the US. There was no clear reason (such as a peace agreement with the Taliban) for the sudden announcement of the military drawdown. However, the international community's strategy, as well as the US's strategy, has never been about military goals alone, but has always been a three-legged one and the military component has always been accompanied by civilian and diplomatic efforts. That said, the medial focus and NATO's engagement have mostly been concentrated on the military sector and all involved parties today agree that much more time and money should have been spent on the other two sectors, too.

The fact that the upcoming elections do indeed have an effect on the US strategy is undeniable but then again that is a normal repercussion in any democratic system. To say that the US are simply walking away from Afghanistan does not do them justice, especially considering the details of the upcoming drawdown. The troops that are being withdrawn at first are the 30 000 that only just came to Afghanistan in the troop surge of 2010, which still leaves over 100 000 soldiers in Afghanistan, essentially until 2014. These troops will help to keep the situation stable and create the pre-conditions for the other two strategies (civilian and diplomatic) to kick in. Furthermore, it is expected that the savings that are made by the involved countries by withdrawing their troops are re-invested in training, education, infrastructure, etc., thereby creating even more leverage for the civilian and diplomatic efforts.

What is needed now for a smooth transition in Afghanistan is a comprehensive strategy, both up to 2014, when the last foreign troops will presumably leave Afghanistan, and after 2014. The EU, with the appointment of Lady Ashton as the High Representative for Foreign Affairs in the wake of the Lisbon Treaty, feels that it has gained more weight in the situation. China is starting to invest heavily in Afghanistan – some fear to exploit the Afghan people's situation and the resources of their land. But any foreign investments are necessary, especially as Afghanistan has recently been ranked 167th of 183 countries in the World Bank's "Ease of Doing Business Index".

Another controversial issue is the role of Pakistan. While being left out of most negotiations in the past, the international community has now seemingly come to acknowledge Pakistan's role as a direct neighbour to Afghanistan. Relations are tense between the two countries and although both have agreed to cooperate more closely on the border, some have expressed their fear of a renewed Taliban insurgency, fuelled by extremist cells from Pakistan or even the Pakistan government itself. The reasoning behind this is at least doubtful, because even though Pakistan might be wary that India does not get too much attention in Afghanistan, it cannot really be in its interest to destabilise its neighbouring country and make room for extremists which could just as well turn the other way and attack Pakistan itself. Of course, the recent tensions between the US and Pakistan in the wake of the killing of Osama bin Laden have not improved the overall situation, but the US isn't the only country involved in Afghanistan and so it might be up to its European partners to deescalate the situation.

Following the drawdown

The construction of the ANA (Afghan National Army) and the ANP (Afghan National Police) remain major challenges on the road to independence. Especially the size of the forces for it to be sustainable is heavily disputed, with recent numbers of approx. 370 000 troops (ANA and ANP combined) considered much too high by some researchers. At the same time, a security force of that size requires continuous efforts by NATO to train its members and provide sufficient tangible input, a role that NATO hopefully will recognise and continue after 2014.

But establishing a functioning police in Afghanistan can only be one small part of the comprehensive approach the international community is aiming for. Another one would be a functioning justice system, setting out the preconditions for the rule of law. This justice sector is mandatory if Afghans are to feel that they are treated fairly by their state, otherwise it will just play into the hands of the Taliban again. If bribery and blackmailing are the only ways to achieve personal redemption, then extremists and their postulate of vigilantism are highly encouraged in their efforts to convert the population. There should be an Afghanistan that is stable and at peace with its neighbours, which will benefit from its political settlement but without throwing away the gains in human rights that have been made.

So in order to establish confidence in the state, Afghanistan needs not only a functioning police but also a justice sector that is able to process criminal charges and which is sufficiently independent from the legislative and the executive branch. At the moment, the link between the justice sector and the police seems to pose a major problem, especially as the Afghan state still lacks a reasonably strong institutional apparatus which could serve as the basis for any reform.

Nowadays, the Afghan Security Forces have taken the lead in about 25% of ISAF missions and the rest of the responsibility will subsequently be handed over along with the withdrawal of NATO troops. But it will not suffice to simply hand over the parts of the country that already are 100% secure. Alongside with the engagement of Afghanistan's own forces, reconciliation with the remaining Taliban finally has to be pushed forward. So far, it is estimated that about 2000 of the 25 000-35 000 Taliban have been reintegrated into Afghan society; a number, that will have to improve in the next three years. It looks like talks between NATO and the Taliban are taking place, although in an atmosphere of discretion and with uncertain outcomes.

If the assumption that a majority of Taliban are not in fact religious extremists but rather members of the Pashtun majority who feel that the 2001 settlement favoured the Northern Alliance (Tajiks & Uzbeks), then some kind of settlement could be reached, favouring decentralisation and regionalisation, especially in the south. The potential for violence between different ethnicities, as we have seen in so many other instances before, might also be reason for concern for the time after 2014. Although Afghanistan as a country has existed before 2001, it is disputed whether the ethnic tensions between Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks etc. will erupt into violence after the international community has left Afghanistan. There are very different empirical values in this area of research but until

now, the ethnic divide in Afghanistan does not seem to pose a major problem. This, of course, might change once independence is at hand, so it would be preferable to dispel potential sources of conflict before leaving Afghanistan.

Quality of life

Quality of life for the average Afghan citizen has improved over the past 10 years – at least statistically speaking. Education rights, access to healthcare, infant and maternal mortality rates, access to micro-financed loans for individuals are just a few things to name. But on a closer look, the situation still is quite bad.

For instance, the educational system at lower levels has improved significantly. There are about 7.1 million students in school; women and girls now have (at least formally) access to education. Still, higher education is lagging behind, places at university are very rare and many people just don't have that many opportunities after leaving school. Also there is a massive workforce but no work to be done. About 65% of the Afghan population is below the age of 27 and ready to work, but only about 4% of Afghanistan's GDP is created in the private sector – the rest is aid money, military, state, etc.

The only business sector that really is up and running seems to be the agricultural sector, but it offers only limited employment opportunities. Afghanistan needs foreign investments to boost its economy but without security, there won't be any investments and even the aid money has a tendency to follow the troops. Especially infrastructure is of utmost importance in this respect. Afghanistan's surface is quite rough and a lot more roads will need to be built, alongside with some other infrastructure, like ports or internet infrastructure, as today, only about 6% of the Afghan population are hooked up to the internet.

The financial crisis didn't leave Afghanistan untouched. The Central Bank's governor has fled to the US in June, the biggest bank, the Kabul Bank, has been declared insolvent and the second-largest bank, the Azizi Bank, seems to be near to collapse as well. The IMF is reckoned to freeze 900 million dollars in assistance until these banks are cleaned up and it is clear that unless Afghanistan's whole banking sector is cleaned up, it is going to be very difficult to establish the confidence for aid money and investor money to flow in. Furthermore, the collapse of the Kabul Bank led to the very awkward situation that many people in public service – like the police, the army, etc. – are not getting paid any more because the bank was responsible for dealing out their salaries.

Alongside with the banking sector, most of the Afghan institutions and administration seem to be in desperate need of reform. The above-mentioned private foreign investments will only take place if the Afghan state can provide a clear separation of powers and prove that it functions – its justice sector, an independent parliament, etc. The political elite, which will now more and more take over responsibilities from the international community, needs to be made accountable for what they do. Decisions and judgements need to be legitimised, otherwise people won't feel represented by the state, which leads to a weak government and that, in turn, would cause renewed insurgencies.

The one institution that does seem to perform quite well is the media, which has been described as the one success story in Afghanistan. Broadcasters like Tolo TV are mainly self-financed and apparently they do a good job in checking politicians, institutions, etc. The concern here is that should the state want to, it wouldn't be too hard to repress these institutions again and send them back into oblivion. It is therefore mandatory that the media is protected in its independence with the help of the international community, long after 2014.

Conclusions

In summary, there still remains a lot to do for the international community in Afghanistan. Although the announcement of a withdrawal until 2014 has been criticised by many as solely driven by elections in the US or elsewhere, the positive outcome of the new political timeframe is a re-thinking of the engagement in Afghanistan. Actors have realised that as much as the military component is necessary in a conflict like Afghanistan's, it is just as mandatory to have a civilian and a diplomatic component to accompany the military effort. Wars, after all, are never ended by military means alone and exactly because the unstable situation in Afghanistan was the reason the international community stepped in to intervene, it cannot be an option to leave the country again in a state of political, social and economic suspense. The Taliban have been driven back, the base for peace has been established – now the international community needs to focus on institution-building, reconciliation, the rule of law and many other things. If, in the end, a fixed exit date is going to make things better or worse, will have to be seen.