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What the Afghanistan Moment means for Germany,
the EU and NATO

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Preface

Freedom and democracy. Human rights and self-determination.

The international community is drawing up the balance of twenty years of the Global War on Terror. Terrorism has not been defeated and liberal democratic values have not taken hold in the Hindu Kush, let alone been perpetuated. The Western alliance has failed to build lasting peace in Afghanistan and to support a free and secure future for the Afghans.

In the face of constantly revolving politics and rapidly changing world events, there is a real threat that the war in Afghanistan is quietly written off and disappears from the international agenda. At the moment of writing, attention is already turning towards the Indo-Pacific, where the new AUKUS trilateral security partnership has caused a rift between NATO members the likes of which has rarely been seen before. However, losing focus on Afghanistan would add insult to injury to the strategic failure that has plunged the country back into chaos. On top of that, it could lead us to underestimate the resulting security threats that will affect the entire region, if not the rest of the world. And finally, a profound opportunity for strategic learning would be missed.

The departure of the last Western troops from Afghanistan marked the end of America's longest ever war and one of the longest running NATO missions in history. It is estimated that between 1 to 2.6 trillion dollar was spent on the war and reconstruction projects. Even more confronting are the human costs. NATO lost 3.592 troops, the Afghan national military and police had 66.000 casualties and more than 47.000 Afghan civilians lost their lives in the conflict. Despite enormous investments and even greater losses, we are now faced with the very real question: what has been achieved and what can be learned?

The Western alliance has a responsibility to thoroughly review its engagement in Afghanistan. The different stages of the war need critical assessment, as well as the factors that led to the instant collapse of the fragile state. As indicated by the title of this publication, *Weltpolitikfähigkeit*, the West needs to analyse its capacity to play a role in shaping global affairs. For Germany, the EU and NATO this means clearly defining a strategic outlook and objectives, and the means to achieve them. Only an honest and frank assessment can ensure that the lessons learned from Afghanistan can contribute to Europe's future ability to act on the world stage.

This impulse paper deliberately presents different perspectives on Afghanistan, Western engagement, and future scenarios. All contributions should be considered independently; the authors each represent their own views. Our aim is to stimulate reflection, provide food for thought and point to concrete recommendations for action. The dialogue on *Weltpolitikfähigkeit* will continue to occupy us.

The Western alliance needs to assume responsibility, honestly address failures, and develop new strategic goals and means to ensure that the Afghanistan scenario is not repeated. The results of the twenty-year mission currently paint a dire picture. It is up to the Western community to contain the humanitarian disaster that is unfolding and to collect the scraps of progress so that can they contribute to a better future.

1. The failed Global War on Terror

Column by Journalist and War Reporter, Lynne O'Donnell

The world is now a much more dangerous place because of the Doha deal. The Taliban – along with Haqqani and Al-Qaeda – are in power in Afghanistan precisely.

Lynne O'Donnell

Afghanistan is the symbol of the failure and shame of the Western alliance. Since August 15, the country has been controlled by one of the world's biggest criminal gangs and its terrorist cohorts. The economy is in freefall, millions of people face starvation. Women and girls are being beaten on the streets, forced out of work and education. There are no jobs, no civic services, no cash, no aid. Inflation is soaring as food and fuel become increasingly scarce. People are destitute, desperate and afraid.

After 20 years, billions of euros, tens of thousands of lives, and interminable promises of enduring Western support, Afghanistan is now approaching failed state status, friendless, abandoned by those very nations that said they would never leave – including Germany. The United States and NATO have turned their backs on Afghanistan.

In doing so, they have ceded the country to jihadism. *Afghanistan is now, effectively, an ungoverned space where terrorism can, and doubtlessly will thrive.* The invasion of 2001 removed the Taliban from power in retaliation for their collusion with Al Qaeda in the attacks on the United States that killed almost 3,000 people on September 11.

The so-called “war on terror” came full circle on August 15, 2021, when the Taliban re-entered Kabul and claimed victory over America and the Western allies. Two decades of insurgency ended in humiliation. All moral authority has seeped away. The trust of the world has been lost for generations to come, if not forever.

I have just spent three months in Afghanistan reporting on the country's war and collapse. When I arrived, in May, fighting was fierce in the southern poppy-growing belt, coinciding with the harvest and the need of the then-insurgency – which controls opium production – to secure the roads while moving its produce into storage, to heroin processing plants, and over the border into Pakistan. It was seasonal and to be expected.

Soon, however, the fighting moved up north, and the Taliban began threatening and then taking control of border crossings into Tajikistan. Soldiers and police fighting for the republic began to flee. Special Forces commandos were being left without air support to be slaughtered by the Taliban. Army bases were surrounded and besieged for weeks on end, until they ran out of ammunition and food. Government sources would admit off the record that between 300 and 500 fighting men were being killed every day. It was clearly unsustainable.

It was certainly sustainable for the Taliban. As H.R. McMaster, the retired four-star U.S. Army general and one of former president Donald Trump's national security advisers, has eloquently pointed out, the madrassas of Pakistan have for years trained up to a million young boys at any one time to be cannon fodder and suicide bombers in that country's war on Afghanistan.

These are the foot soldiers of the old-new Taliban now in control of Afghanistan. They have no values, no principles, no self-respect. They cannot be integrated into modern life – the life that the Western alliance had promised to all Afghan people for the past 20 years. It cannot be any surprise that we see video footage of Taliban beating women on the streets of Kabul for no other reason than that they are women. These men have been taught since childhood to hate and to kill. They are now the enforcers for a “government” of terrorists, drug dealers, killers and thieves.

That this was happening was clear to me as I witnessed and reported on the Taliban's advance across the country. The border crossings were closed, cutting off vital trade, and revenues, into the landlocked country. Provincial capitals were surrounded as the districts (administrative regions similar to counties) were taken over. First the country was isolated, and then the major cities were besieged. And then the rollover of the provincial capitals began at such speed that there was no time to run.

Nevertheless, the signs were there for the giant brains of Western intelligence to see. Indeed, the U.S. administration of President Joe Biden was warned that the government of former president Ashraf Ghani could fall in a matter of months without the support of international military. This appeared as news on the front pages of American newspapers. It was ignored, not only by Biden's administration and the U.S. military – which kept up the spin of imminent success – but by the entire Western alliance.

There has been much apologia in the weeks since the Taliban took over Kabul from the embarrassed civilian and political leadership of the Western world. General Sir Nick Carter, the British Army chief, said that the Taliban had changed, implying that they had suddenly been transformed into a modern political entity we could do business with.

He was rightly criticised for his foolish comments, which have since been proven so woefully wrong as to be laughable. But there is nothing funny about the Taliban. Many people I know, and love, are living in fear of a knock at the door that will mean the Taliban have come for them, as they have come for many people across the country since August 15. This is a reign of terror.

It was the fatuous Donald Trump who set in motion the events that have led us to this point of horror. He decided that the way to end the “forever war” was to cut a deal with the Taliban so that he could pull U.S. troops out of Afghanistan and portray himself as a hero to American voters weary with the apparent lack of progress in defeating the insurgency. No thought to the schools, hospitals, roads constructed across the country; no thought to the millions of children receiving proper education, going to university, winning international scholarships, entering the workforce; no thought to the vibrant media, the cell phone towers, the solar panels on roofs across the country. No thought to the aspirations of one of the youngest populations of any nation on earth, where most people are aged under 35 and the mean age is 18.

He bypassed the government that the Western alliance had been supporting for 20 years. He ignored the Afghan people who had invested in the democratic experiment and overwhelmingly did not want the Taliban to return to power. Not only did he do a bilateral deal with the world’s biggest criminal cartel, he forced the republic’s government to release 5,000 Taliban fighters from prison, who then promptly returned to the battlefield.

The Taliban only adhered to the conditions in the deal that suited them; otherwise all concessions went their way. They didn’t even stick to their pledge to halt attacks on U.S. and other international military forces. They certainly didn’t reduce their attacks on Afghan civilians, quite the contrary.

The number of people killed by the Taliban soared, on and off the battlefield. They launched a vicious assassination campaign aimed at journalists, government officials, working women, judges, rights advocates. When it became clear that the only real edge the republic had in the war was air support, the Taliban started killing pilots.

2.1 Taliban, Al-Qaeda and Haqqani

Perhaps most importantly, at least for the Western alliance, Trump and his team betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding, or perhaps a willing ignorance, of the relationship between the Taliban and sanctioned terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda and the Haqqani network. The essence of the Trump-Taliban deal, as it was sold to the American public, was that the insurgents had pledged to cut ties with Al-Qaeda and not allow Afghanistan to ever again be used to launch terrorist attacks on the United States.

The Taliban have not cut ties with Al-Qaeda, and they never will.

Al Qaeda is well known for the 9-11 attacks on the United States; those attacks were planned and carried out while Osama bin Laden was resident in Afghanistan as a guest of the Taliban regime then controlling most of the country. The invasion of Afghanistan that began on October 7, 2001, was to remove the Taliban from power in retaliation for their collusion in the 9-11 atrocities.

The Haqqani network should be just as well-known as Al-Qaeda, as it is one of the most brutal terror gangs in the world. It’s leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is deputy leader of the Taliban and now Afghanistan’s interior minister.

The Trump deal was brokered by his “special envoy” Zalmay Khalilzad, a former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan whose career is built on failure. He purports to know and understand the Taliban, and on behalf of the Trump administration set about bringing them in from the cold.

If he ever did understand the dynamics of the insurgency, he certainly didn’t let it hinder him. These groups have a symbiotic relationship that dates back decades; they are intermarried, intertwined and inextricable. As I have said repeatedly, *for the Taliban to sever its links with Al Qaeda would be like removing the salt from the sea. It’s just not going to happen.*

2.2 Resources and funding

In 2020, I was commissioned by NATO to write a report on the Taliban's funding sources; I submitted it on July 1. The report offers a detailed rundown of the Taliban's position as the world's smack kings, controlling almost 100 percent of the global heroin trade. They had by then also taken control of Afghanistan's mining sector, working with other criminal networks to make almost half a billion dollars a year smuggling minerals and gems. I have since written about the Taliban's new business venture in methamphetamine, which is cheaper and easier to produce than heroin, and so earns much bigger profits.

The NATO report also detailed the Taliban's relationship with Al-Qaeda and the Haqqani, and warned of the consequences of acquiescing in Trump's ill-advised venture to pull all U.S. military out of Afghanistan by a deadline of May 1, 2021. I am not aware of what internal distribution the report saw. I do know that it made its way to the U.S. intelligence community, and was circulated at the highest levels of the former Afghan government. It was leaked from sources unknown to some media organisations, including Radio Free Europe.

It contained a range of recommendations that included not taking the Taliban at their word, and to demand evidence that they had indeed cut ties with Al-Qaeda before proceeding with the drawdown. I saw plenty of concern expressed in the months after my report was submitted that the relationship remained as close as it had ever been. I did not see any action, by the United States or any NATO members, to ensure that the Taliban did separate from Al-Qaeda as a condition of the withdrawal of international forces. As it turned out, NATO forces were out long before the United States turned off the lights at Bagram Air Base and left in the middle of the night on the Fourth of July weekend.

2.3 Western hypocrisy

The excuse that the allies cannot function without access to American air assets is pathetic, embarrassing, and makes me wonder what the German Luftwaffe or any of the European air forces are for. Are our taxes paying for multi-billion-euro air show ornamentation? For toys to be deployed only for the games we play with each other every couple of years? Are our defence mechanisms just for show? If NATO countries cannot provide air support to their own forces, why do they have air assets at all? To hear the bleating now that the international military should never have left Afghanistan is like rubbing salt into the wounds of the betrayed.

To see the way Afghanistan's people are being treated in the European countries that have taken them in is to cringe at the appalling hypocrisy of the West. And that comes after the hopelessly botched and inadequate "evacuation" exercise in the aftermath of the collapse on August 15. The new class of Afghan refugee is a middle-class, educated professional who believed in and worked for democracy and the freedoms apparently guaranteed by the international community. Betrayed again, they are reduced to begging for protection from the very people who promised to be their protectors.

Afghanistan is a historic stain on Europe. It is the symbol of NATO's failure. *The fall of Afghanistan into the hands of the criminals and terrorists the country was "saved" from 20 years ago is a shame that Europe should never be permitted to forget. The people of Afghanistan will never forget. And the enemies of the West will never allow us to forget.*

2. In Afghanistan, no stability and peace without protecting women and girls

Report by Human Rights Watch Associate Director for Women's Rights, Heather Barr

Heather Barr

The plight of Afghan women under the Taliban was used in many countries to convince voters to support the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks on the US. "Only the terrorists and the Taliban forbid education to women," then-US first lady Laura Bush famously told Americans. Similar messages in other troop-contributing nations, including Germany, helped encourage support for the war.

On the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban were newly back in power in the Afghan capital, Kabul. The last foreign troops had left at the end of August, and a reckoning about what happened and why was just getting underway. How had the US and its allies spent so many lives – mostly Afghan but also foreign, military and civilian – and so much money, only to arrive at this outcome? What did it say about future geopolitics, the role of the US, and the future of Afghanistan?

The new Taliban authorities, meanwhile, were busy – being the Taliban. They were assaulting journalists. They were hunting down those who had worked against them. They were banning music.

Their old approach to the rights of women and girls was largely unchanged. They fired women journalists from state media. They first warned women to stay home from work for their own safety because Taliban fighters who had "not yet been trained" might mistreat them. Then they just fired women from most government jobs. They issued tough – and, for many universities, impossible – new guidelines on how women could attend a university, requiring strict gender segregation. Then, on September 18, they let boys go back to secondary school, but not girls.

That was only the beginning. They banned women's sports, dismantled the system to protect women from violence, abolished the Ministry of Women's Affairs and replaced it with a revived – and draconian – Ministry of Vice and Virtue, and made it harder for women to access health care.

Women interviewed by Human Rights Watch describe living in a nightmare, as everything changed overnight, with a devastating impact on all aspects of their lives including their mental health. They are largely trapped inside their homes due to fear of the Taliban and Taliban restrictions on women's movement, and are watching work, studies, and dreams they had devoted their lives to vanish, perhaps forever. A university student who had left her home only twice since the Taliban takeover said, "It's not ordinary – you have no studies, no lessons, nothing. Just looking at the walls. This is like a prison."

So where is the reckoning on women's rights? Women's rights activists have made important progress around the world in the 20 years since the Taliban were previously in power, from 1996 to 2001. These advances make the Taliban's violations of the rights of women and girls even more cruel and intolerable than they were in 2001.

1.1 Feminist foreign policy

In recent years, several countries – including Sweden, Canada, Mexico, and France – proclaimed that they have a "feminist foreign policy." According to the Swedish government, a feminist foreign policy "means applying a systematic gender equality perspective throughout the whole foreign policy agenda." Feminist foreign policy is also a recognition that you cannot have human security when half the population is oppressed and living in fear. As Heiko Maas, Germany's foreign minister wrote in 2020, "Numerous studies demonstrate that societies in which women and men are on equal footing are more secure, stable, peaceful, and prosperous."

How should a world increasingly embracing "feminist foreign policy" respond to Taliban violations of the rights of women and girls in 2021?

Concerned governments face a difficult challenge in Afghanistan. They should stand up for the rights of women and girls and use what coordinated leverage they can to push for protection of these rights. Every country should make it clear to the Taliban that violating the rights of women and girls undermines Taliban efforts for international recognition and developing normal relations with the rest of the world, including links to the global financial system and development assistance.

At the same time, donor countries should avoid taking action that would worsen Afghanistan's deepening humanitarian crisis and disproportionately affect women and girls – and work urgently to reverse this situation. Afghanistan is facing a major economic collapse. Prices for food and other essentials have risen, even as most banks remain closed, and the United Nations has reported limited access to cash and possible food shortages.

Before the Taliban takeover, more than 30 percent of the country was facing acute food insecurity; now over 40 percent is. Last December, the UN Children's Fund, UNICEF, said that of the almost seven million children under age 5 in Afghanistan, an estimated 3.1 million, were acutely malnourished

and that, “This implies a staggering 1 in 2 children under-five are in need of acute malnutrition treatment services to save their lives.”

The United Nations Development Program says that by mid-2022, 97 percent of Afghans could be living below the poverty line.

Balancing these priorities – stemming the humanitarian crisis while standing up for rights – requires careful and coordinated actions. The renewal of the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in September was an important step. It provides a mechanism for monitoring human rights from within the country and engaging in regular discussions with the Taliban on meeting Afghanistan’s obligations under international human rights law. These obligations include the duty to ensure full gender equality, as provided under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which Afghanistan ratified in 2003. Germany and other countries will have an important role in ensuring that UNAMA has the resources, staffing, and diplomatic backing necessary to perform these functions.

1.2 Germany’s role

As a nation that sent troops to Afghanistan, Germany should use its influence to push its partners, including the US, to see themselves as having a long-term responsibility to protect the Afghan women and girls whose plight was used to help justify the war. As an important donor to Afghanistan, Germany should sustain its aid assistance to Afghans and urge other donors to do the same. It should take on and help lead the tricky task of finding ways to assist people in desperate need and fund essential services like health care, psychosocial – mental health – support and education without lending assets and legitimacy to the Taliban.

Germany also has an important role to play assisting the many Afghans, especially women, who have fled or will flee Afghanistan because they fear persecution or threats to their lives under a Taliban government. The German government should continue urgent efforts to evacuate people identified as ‘in need of special protection’ and should reopen and expand its list of evacuees to include women’s rights and other rights defenders, high-profile women, nongovernmental organization workers, and journalists. The process to add someone to the list should be streamlined and non-bureaucratic.

Germany should speed up the asylum process by granting humanitarian visas to women and offering them and their families safe and quick passage by air to Germany or, when that is not possible, by negotiating for them to be able to pass through land borders into neighboring countries. The government should ensure that Afghans arriving in Germany are granted temporary residency permits and afforded the right to work, and access to health care, psychosocial support, education, and job opportunities.

Germany should also work with the European Union and other countries to ensure that refugees in countries neighboring Afghanistan and across Europe are being treated according to international human rights standards, including living in sanitary conditions and having access to health care and education. Germany could provide aid assistance to countries that need help fulfilling these obligations.

Twenty years ago, countries including Germany pledged to come to the assistance of Afghan women and girls. Today that assistance is desperately needed, more than ever. The foreign soldiers have gone from Afghanistan, but the promises the world made to Afghan women and girls remain, waiting to be kept.

3. Afghanistan – Before and After

Political Advisor, Journalist and Author, Sandra Khadhouri

Sandra Khadhouri

I spent five challenging years in Afghanistan between 2005-13 as an adviser in various roles for UK, UN and EU, working on counter-narcotics campaigns, strategic communications with Afghan ministries, and investigating electoral complaints. Together with colleagues in Embassies and organisations, we believed in our collective mission to help Afghans build a stable nation in line with their beliefs - a chance denied after the Soviets pulled out. There was more altruism than we ever dared to admit to our publics back home, alongside the need to counter terrorism. We are all now devastated by the humiliating end to our engagement and sense of abandonment felt by our Afghan friends. Our questions are three-fold: why did Biden not alter the narrow Trump strategy; why was the peace process allowed to fail; and why didn't European allies pressure the US for a better exit strategy and conditional withdrawal.

Analysts have offered a variety of answers: Western allies were just not paying attention given other distractions; the failure of intelligence as to the speed of the Taliban advance and Government collapse; lack of European will to modify the US-led timetable and advocate a more controlled withdrawal. In a nutshell, US wanted out, at all costs, and were willing to accept the enduring message of failure, Western unreliability and risks of resurgent terrorism. Other partners didn't have the bandwidth or appetite, to offer an alternative end-game.

3.1 Countering myths

Firstly though, it's important to counter some myths. We did not impose Western-style democracy on Afghans nor 'occupy' the country to exploit its people and resources; after the initial incursion in 2001 to quash Al Qaeda under the right of self-defence, we were invited in by the interim Afghan administration to achieve shared objectives. Most Afghans wanted the promised fruits of democracy: functioning, inclusive and accountable government; fair elections, peace and security, and a range of freedoms. Inevitably, there were tensions between aspects of conservative Islam and liberalism, or between tribal approaches backed by patronage versus a centralised and meritocratic system of governance. In later years, growing disaffection with governance, the foreign troop presence and endless attacks, weakened the legitimacy of the government and international partners in the eyes of Afghan citizens, providing inroads for the Taliban to exploit.

It's also important in terms of lessons learnt that we don't allow the disastrous withdrawal process paint our entire engagement in Afghanistan as a failure.

Many towns enjoyed great progress, media freedom flourish-

hed and the population was a vibrant mix of modernity and traditionalism. Polls show most people felt their lives improved over time as a result of mass support to governance, infrastructure, economy and rights – these gains must be safeguarded.

3.2 The writing on the wall

Around 2006, as NATO and US troops expanded their presence across the country, Western confidence also took a hit; in Kabul, our windows rattled from daily bomb attacks, with Afghan security forces and civilians bearing the brunt. By 2008, analysts questioned whether NATO troops were part of the problem or the solution, and whether our level of ambition was realistic given the tribal complexity and cultural difference. It was also clear that we were not on the same page as President Karzai in terms of countering narcotics, corruption and how to fight the insurgency. Karzai's resistance to accountability was expressed in his insistence on 'sovereignty', and anger at civilian casualties was weighted against foreigners rather than his 'Taliban brothers'.

The Taliban exploited the endemic suspicion of 'foreigners' and discontent with corruption that international spending practises and Government permissiveness allowed to flourish. The 2009 election triggered massive fraud by Karzai supporters and marked a turning point in expectations for good governance. International advisers insisting on accountability were told to 'stop making waves.'

The trends were set, and the writing was on the wall - we were out of step with our Afghan partners and insurgents were never giving up, fuelled by elements in Pakistan.

A final surge led to a high point of 130,000 soldiers in 2011, followed by a drawdown and end to the NATO combat mission in 2014. Still, our involvement drifted on.

The distressing images of panicked Afghans trying to reach the airport in August 2021 has prompted much soul-searching and speculation about historic mistakes and wrong turns. On the peace process, Jonathan Powell in a recent article suggests the Taliban should have been included in the 2001 Bonn process since "inclusive negotiations are the best way to end a war." Others like former Canadian Ambassador Chris Alexander blame Pakistan, an ally in the war on terror, for providing safe havens to the Taliban throughout the conflict. Diplomats now admit they were flummoxed on how to deal with Islamabad's dual role. Some suggest the US should have maintained a limited footprint for security reasons, as it has elsewhere for decades. Others accept the logic of withdrawal as the US pivots to a post-9/11 foreign policy posture, while questioning the manner of departure.

3.3 US end-game: “Get out at all costs”

Biden made clear in his landmark article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine in March 2020, that he wanted to end the ‘forever wars’ in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and narrow the mission to defeating ISIS and Al Qaeda. Yet he accused Trump of emboldening enemies in Afghanistan through the Doha deal. In the same article, he barely mentions Europe. Still, in our roundtables for Keeping Channels Open, a new network aimed at strengthening US-EU-UK cooperation, most diplomats expressed optimism that “America was back”: the Summits in June 2021 defined a shared transatlantic agenda based on ethical multilateralism, commitment to democratic values and coordinated approaches to key challenges. Only a couple of voices warned that consulting with European allies was not as important to Biden as domestic policy and competing with China. His unilateral approach to Afghanistan was a sign of more to come, they argued, and Europe must accept the decline of US interventionism and ruthless focus on national priorities.

Withdrawal was therefore squarely on Biden’s agenda. But was there room for him to change the terms? Trump’s Doha deal in February 2020 excluded the Afghan government and provided legitimacy to the Taliban. Its main focus was to ensure the safe US pull-out and prevention of Afghan soil being used as a base for terrorism. But the agreement also referred to intra-Afghan talks, a roadmap and a ceasefire – these elements should have been the essential focus in ensuing months.

The reduction of US troops down to 2500 in January 2021 and release of thousands of Taliban prisoners did indeed force Biden’s hand and undermine US leverage, but perhaps other options were available. After all, the Taliban had already broken good faith in the months after the agreement by launching thousands of attacks on Afghan forces and systematically killing judges, officials, journalists, and activists. Given this aggression, Biden should have applied conditions and set a longer deadline for withdrawal than September 11, which was set purely for domestic consumption. Pressure on the Taliban for a ceasefire should have increased in line with the tight timetable. The truth was that the will was not there, commitments to the Afghans were deprioritised, and allied investments made over 20 years were swept aside.

Kate Clark at the Afghan Analysts Network states in a recent analysis that the US approach favoured the Taliban and pressured the Afghan Government in unhelpful ways - for example, Afghan forces were advised to act only in pre-emptive self-defence in 2020, allowing the Taliban to conquer more territory. Meanwhile, the Afghan Government was not preparing for the US departure and was uncoordinated in its approach to the peace process, with leaders wrangling among themselves over money and power. By the time of the withdrawal, demoralised Afghan troops short of pay and ammunition and un-

dermined by a weak and disunited administration, collapsed in the face of the Taliban’s strategic advances.

The abrupt departure of US and NATO troops - partners in the war not just donors and advisers - was the final straw. In the end, everyone had tired of war - except the Taliban.

3.4 Failure of peace process

In terms of the negotiations, where were more comprehensive efforts to convene all relevant players round the table to push for a power-sharing agreement and ceasefire? This could have included Russia, Pakistan, Iran, China, India, Saudi, Turkey, Qatar, US, EU, UK as well as Afghan stakeholders and respected Islamic bodies.

History shows the best peace processes have aligned the oddest of bedfellows to push in the same direction and shelve competing agendas. The Europeans, NATO and Australia should not have left this to the US alone.

They had invested heavily over two decades and had a right to push for a more intensive political process. Instead, Ambassador Khalilzad in April 2021 told Congress what they wanted to hear: “I do not believe the government is going to collapse or the Taliban is going to take over.”

Kate Clark says international institutions were preoccupied with how the peace would function even as the talks proved a fantasy. Throughout 2020, the Taliban avoided any compromise or substantive discussions on power-sharing and were instead preparing for a total takeover to impose their interpretation of Sharia. The G7 communiqué in June 2021 called for a ‘sustainable inclusive political settlement’ without acknowledging how remote this was and with little sense of urgency given withdrawal was already underway. The NATO communiqué talked of a “new chapter” supporting the Afghan National Security Forces - *too many assumptions and not enough alternative scenario development.*

Diplomats admit there was little international discussion on a detailed Afghan exit strategy and collective plan, nor challenge to the US timetable. This was due to lack of will and attention with so much else on the table: Afghanistan was a third order issue given the pandemic, climate change, China and Russia. Nobody wanted to precipitate a final withdrawal ahead of the Americans and the groupthink was that the Afghan Government would remain in power till the end of the year. The UK Government did not have the bandwidth to pressure the US due to Brexit and Covid, and there was not a real sense among the new cabinet of the heavy sacrifices made. Only afterwards came the lament- what was it all for?

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3.5 What next?

Everything now needs to happen in reverse. What should have happened *before* the withdrawal, should still be the goal. The international community can still have a moderating effect on Taliban authoritarianism, help avoid a humanitarian catastrophe and ensure terrorists don't once again take root in the country. The Taliban are also weaker, poorer and more fragmented than they seem. They need the former government's expertise to run the country, so we should still press for a pluralistic political settlement to avoid a future civil war and total state collapse.

In terms of rights, the focus of aid conditionality should be on achievable goals such as ensuring secondary school for girls, and preventing discrimination of minority ethnic groups. Regional neighbours largely share these stabilisation goals, which provides opportunity for broad alignment and a joint position with Western allies. Leverage can also be exercised through funding from the UN, IMF and World Bank, UN sanctions, ICC investigations and the influence of moderate Islamic organisations.

The Taliban will also find that ruling by intimidation is no longer an option for citizens who have enjoyed broad freedoms in the last 20 years and where young people constitute the majority; they will need to develop an ability to win hearts and minds, and even perhaps contest elections - Afghans prize their right to vote.

As for the future of interventionism, we are all realists now. Nobody expects a repeat of the comprehensive nation-building model applied in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan– but *as we defend our own democracies, we must still fashion effective joint foreign policies and targeted interventions. We cannot turn away from mass human rights violations, debilitating conflicts, the spread of extremism and effects of climate change.*

To do this, we need trusting transatlantic relationships, clever strategic alignment, and rigorous coordination. The recent AUKUS agreement might make sense in terms of Indo-Pacific stability, but it rode roughshod over an important European ally and missed an opportunity to coordinate with the EU. As with Afghanistan, the US proved unable to accommodate European interests in its decision-making, nor consider the effect on UK-EU rifts. EU leaders are now calling for a stronger independent defence and foreign policy capability.

These are the challenges that transatlantic partners face in a new world order: despite disruption in norms of governance and diplomacy, a new set of challenges and a tendency to turn inwards, we must still stand for something and stand together - or risk losing the power to be a force for good, and ensure our own stability in an inter-connected world.

4. Post-Afghanistan Transatlantic Positioning

Policy Brief by former NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General, Dr. Stefanie Babst

Dr. Stefanie Babst

Is the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan a current political event that soon fades from public awareness? Based on the media coverage, we could almost think so. Some of those responsible might welcome this: Who would want, after all, to plunge into a complex analysis that could reveal unpleasant truths about erroneous assessments and wrong decisions?

A self-critical appraisal of the West's 20 years of involvement in Afghanistan, without prejudging the outcome, would be an indispensable precondition for deriving important lessons from this chapter in Western interventionism.

Ideally, an **independent, competent and recognised body** should design and carry out such a process. It would, of course, be desirable to entrust a lessons learned review to those who themselves participated in the multi-layered political and military decisions. Unfortunately, doing so would risk a clear view of Afghanistan as 'object of investigation' clouded by illicit attempts of self-justification and embellishment.

A self-critical reflection on the three Afghanistan operations (Enduring Freedom, ISAF and Resolute Support) should not focus on the question of political and personal responsibility. Instead, and as impartially as possible, it should serve to illuminate why, and in which critical decision-making phases, strategic, political and military misjudgements occurred in the consecutive missions. Hence leading to the overall outcome that after 20 years of engagement, the West has replaced the Taliban with the Taliban.

The conditions for such a strategic review are not particularly favourable in Germany. For the last several months, the political focus and that of the media have been on the election campaign in the run-up to the Bundestag elections, the end of the Merkel era and domestic topics like the Covid pandemic. The post-election period will be marked by exploratory talks between the political parties, coalition negotiations, the naming of a new federal government and the assembling of the next German Bundestag. It will take months until the new government is fully operational, also as concerns its foreign and security policy.

The minimum requirement for Germany (and NATO and the EU as participating organisations) would be a strategic self-positioning that has to find answers to the following questions: Where are we now? What are the immediate strategic consequences of the failure in Afghanistan? And which consequent foreign and security policy goals should the German government strive to achieve with its allies, by what means?

4.1 Why the termination of the Afghanistan mission is strategically relevant

Credibility and Narratives:

Attempts by individual NATO members and leading representatives of NATO and the EU to qualify the significance of the victory of the radical-Islamic Taliban over the West in Afghanistan cannot obscure the fact that the failure of the West in the Hindu Kush is pertaining to a dramatic loss of credibility. This is not so much to be felt in Western societies, but rather among our strategic rivals (China), adversaries (Russia), other authoritarian regimes (North Korea, Iran), regional powers (Pakistan, India), and in the Muslim world. The essence of the pervasive narrative is that the West lacks sufficient political will, perseverance and strategic competence; that the USA does not stand by the values of democracy and human rights that it promotes; and that Europe has neither its own strategic will, nor adequate operational military capability.

Political credibility cannot be re-established arbitrarily and promptly. Germany and its allies should continue their efforts to help Afghans persecuted by the regime in Kabul, intensify their diplomatic contacts with Afghanistan's neighbours, and talk openly and self-reflectively in the Muslim world about the West's complex involvement in Afghanistan.

Threat of Terrorism:

With the establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (whose members include already convicted and internationally wanted representatives of radical Islamic terrorist networks), the chances of the Western community of keeping militant Islamism in check have not exactly increased. On the contrary, under the protection of those who for years have inflicted heavy losses on NATO troops in Afghanistan, members of al-Qaeda, Haqqani, and the Islamic State will be able to flourish almost undisturbed in the future. A Taliban-dominated Afghanistan will continue to develop beyond Western control and influence. Since militant Islamist groups are well interconnected regionally and globally, Western counterterrorism efforts are likely to become more difficult in the future.

Germany and its Western allies should consider how China, Pakistan, Russia and Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours can be embedded in Western counterterrorism activities.

Global Disorder and Rivalry:

The security environment in which Germany and its Western allies operate will remain highly volatile and characterized by geostrategic rivalry between the great powers and ambitious regional and middle powers. As strategic competition is taking place in all policy fields and military domains, the West's response can only be composed of a holistic, comprehensive approach.

The classical foreign policy instruments (diplomacy, development aid) should be systematically planned, coordinated and implemented with military measures (credible deterrence, defence and crisis management capabilities), economic goals and activities, and measures for reinforcing societal resilience (cyber defence, protection of critical infrastructure and against disinformation campaigns): both at the national (German) and international levels (in the EU and NATO). But the prerequisite for this is Germany clearly defining its national security interests in the world.

4.2 Anticipating how America will act

National Security Interests:

From Washington's point of view, America's withdrawal from Afghanistan, as well as its withdrawal from Iraq at the end of this year, is a logical step. It should not come as a surprise for the European allies as it is fully in line with the 'Interim National Security Strategic Guidance' announced by President Biden in March 2021. From now on, diplomacy and the strengthening of partnerships and alliances are supposed to become the most important instrument of American foreign policy; the use of military force, on the other hand, is described as a 'last resort'. China and the Asia-Pacific region are denoted as military strategic priority.

The creation of the new AUKUS defence alliance in the Pacific region, along with Great Britain and Australia, is recent evidence of this. This is not just about sharing nuclear propulsion technologies for nuclear submarines, in this case for Australia, but also about establishing a new defence architecture in the region based on artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cybersecurity and other new technologies. The fact that, with the exception of London, no other European government is involved in the project should provide continental Europeans ample food for thought.

Washington wants to further adjust its military engagement in the Middle East and other regions. In the future, military interventions should follow clear and realistic objectives and be part of a comprehensible overall strategy. Even if this approach is welcome from a European perspective, it means that America's withdrawal from previously strategically relevant regions (Central Asia, the Middle East, North and Central Africa) will continue unabated. As a consequence, other actors, first and foremost Russia, China and other regional powers, will try to further fill the strategic voids left by America: with military, diplomatic and economic instruments. Europe should find a strategic response to this.

Although key strategy documents of the U.S. administration such as the future National Security Strategy, the Global Posture Review and the Military Strategy towards China are still pending, relevant postulates of the Biden administration have already become clear. Among others, these include:

- a.) the close dovetailing of domestic and foreign policy as well as the credo of a "foreign policy for the American middle class";
- b.) the targeted protection of American security, economic and technological interests;
- c.) the reconstruction of the democratic camp as well as the strengthening of partnerships and alliances in the world with the help of which complex global problems are to be tackled; and
- d.) the firm intention, also and with the help of partners, to win the strategic competition with China.

It remains to be seen how the U.S. government will flesh out and implement its national goals in concrete terms. It would therefore be all the more important for representatives of the U.S. government to regularly inform their European allies about the state of development of these strategy documents (bilaterally as well as within the NATO framework).

Political Expectations:

It is in the logic of these and similar statements by President Biden that Washington continues to expect more political engagement and military capability from its European allies. Although the Biden administration currently gives no indication that it intends to reduce its military commitment in and for Europe in the future, Europeans should assume that prospectively, America will focus primarily on enforcing its strategic objectives in the Asia-Pacific region. This will tie up political energy and resources of all kinds in Washington. This position will also be reflected in the negotiations on NATO's new strategic concept, which have already begun. Issues such as burden-sharing and relations with China will play a prominent role for Washington.

4.3 Contours of a to-do list for Europe

The chaotic withdrawal of the Western allies from Afghanistan has once again made clear how little influence the Europeans actually have on the political decision-making processes in Washington. At the same time, it has underscored their extremely limited military capacity to act. Despite all the lip service paid by Europe to developing more strategic will to shape the world, the Western failure in Afghanistan is also an expression of the erosion of Europe's strategic culture that has been taking place for years. This (bitter) self-awareness should finally give Europeans sufficient reason to end their 'business as usual' policy.

Strategic Priorities – Less is More:

It is imperative for Germany and its European allies to play an active role in shaping NATO's new strategic concept. In order not to dilute the content of the Alliance's strategic reorientation, the European allies would have to give some thought to those core strategic priorities which, in their view, will play a central role in a new 'transatlantic bargain'. The list of security policy issues currently on the negotiating table in Brussels is long – far too long – and all over the place. Topics such as climate protection or the creation of new command structures for military capability programs divert from the Alliance's core strategic tasks. Instead, NATO's European allies should focus on security provision in the Euro-Atlantic area and in Europe's immediate neighbourhood.

This includes the political relationship with Moscow and ensuring effective defence and deterrence capabilities against Russia; actively dealing with the volatile security situation in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, readjusting security partnerships with countries in the Balkan region; and risks such as illegal migration and terrorism threats on the alliance's southern flank.

An actionable European pillar in NATO:

In order to give more than rhetorical weight to a strengthened European pillar within the Alliance, closer strategic cooperation between Berlin, London, and Paris within the NATO framework would be useful. Although the relationship between Paris and London is currently strained by AUKUS, these three countries form an important core group within the European camp without whose close cooperation Europe will not be able to increase its ability to act. Building on the existing E3 format, the three governments could promote both the political dimension and practical and military cooperation within the European pillar. Of course, the NATO E3 format would need to be flexible and include other alliance members where desired; especially those countries in Eastern Europe that are relatively suspicious of this triad or those that are in principle open to thematic groupings.

Among the most important political impulses that could emerge from a European core group are the more than necessary synchronization of the EU Strategic Compass and NATO's new Strategic Concept; concrete proposals for shaping the security policy of the Euro-Atlantic region; and the development of a new military burden-sharing formula.

Rethinking Burden-Sharing:

For the foreseeable future, Europe will not be able to defend itself without U.S. conventional and nuclear capabilities. Nor will it be able to conduct independent robust crisis management operations without U.S. core capabilities. The proposal currently in discussion at the EU level to develop an "Initial Entry Force" of about 5,000 soldiers in the future for an "immediate, short-term deployment scenario" does little to change this. Similarly, the demand of EU foreign affairs representative Borrell and some European defence ministers that Europeans must invest more in 'key military capabilities' unfortunately belongs to the 'déjà vu' category. There is truly no shortage of

concrete findings of military capabilities that Europeans lack. That the Europeans need to spend more on defence if they want to become militarily more independent of Washington is by now a more than worn-out truism. This also applies to the mantra-like repeated emphasis on NATO's 2% rule. In order to gradually increase their military contribution within the alliance, the Europeans would have to rethink their traditional notions of burden sharing. There are several options to do so.

They range from the possibility of providing operational relief to the U.S. ally, for example, by providing larger European troop contingents in the Baltics and Poland (VJTF) or in Kosovo, where U.S. soldiers have served under the KFOR flag for more than 20 years. Although the NATO mission in Kosovo has been reduced in recent years, Americans still provide the lion's share of troops. Why can't the Europeans in the Alliance take over this task entirely?

Another possibility would be to bundle particular military capabilities of individual Europeans more closely into core capabilities. One example would be the British Carrier Strike Group, which, along with its French, Spanish, and Italian counterparts, could form the core of a strengthened European maritime and amphibious capability. Or the Franco-British Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF), which could become a new command framework for coalition of the willing operations.

It would also be an important political signal if the Europeans in the alliance decided to set and work toward their own level of ambition in the future. And even if the discussion in Europe is difficult and unpopular: the question of the future of the nuclear umbrella would at least have to be addressed.

Whatever individual steps can be taken to strengthen the political and military capacity for action of the Europeans in NATO; the discussion about this should be at the centre of the strategic self-positioning in Germany. Courageous steps and decisive impulses from the new German government are required now, not cautious small talk. For the foreseeable future, Europe will need highly modern troops equipped with new technologies, capable of rapid deployment and robust action, in order to achieve a minimum level of autonomous military readiness. This is a realization one can confidently pre-empt a still pending post-Afghanistan reflection process.

The authors



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Dr. Stefanie Babst has had a distinguished career on NATO's International Staff. Over the course of 22 years, she held various positions in the Public Diplomacy Division, which she led as NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General from 2006 to 2012. From 2012 to 2020, she led NATO's civil-military Strategic Foresight Team. Stefanie is an internationally renowned editor and speaker on international security issues, Senior Associate Fellow of the European Leadership Network/London, board member of the German Council on Foreign Relations and the Danish Center for War Studies. She is active in various networks, including Women in International Security (WIIS) and the World Economic Forum. In recognition of her professional achievements, she has received several national government awards. In 2021, Stefanie co-founded Brooch Associates, a global consulting firm for women leaders based in London.

