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The views expressed by the authors are their own and do not reflect the official position or opinion of the institution they work or have worked for.

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Abstract

This paper examines the strategic lessons that can be learned and distilled from the experience of the European Union (EU) in the volatile geopolitical situation of Afghanistan – known as the 'Graveyard of Empires'. It critically reviews the actions, plans and strategies of the coalition of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United States and the EU. The main take-aways are (1) the necessity for the EU to acquire the legal, political and strategic means needed to conduct Realpolitik for the sake of the pursuit of Idealpolitik, (2) the need to resolve political differences with allies behind closed doors whilst displaying unity to the outside world, and (3) the imperative to discreetly engage with opponents whilst avoiding binding timetables and unreciprocated concessions at the negotiating table. Afghanistan can also be labelled the 'Graveyard of Umpires', as many negotiators and mediators, including the EU, have failed, but hopefully learned their lessons. The paper is largely based on Ambassador Kobia's personal reflections on his experience as EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan and on his 'EU Diplomacy Lecture' held at the College of Europe in Bruges on 16 October 2020.

Introduction

As we commemorate its third anniversary, the withdrawal of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) from Afghanistan in August 2021 has been one of the defining moments of 21st century geopolitics to date, both in what it meant politically and for the dramatic optical way in which it happened, aired live on TV channels around the globe. Just like the moment when the Twin Towers in New York collapsed on 11 September 2001, many people remember their day when Kabul suddenly fell 20 years later, on 15 August 2021, with daunting images and the immediate realization that the aftermath of 9/11 was there again to haunt us. More widely, this was accompanied by a feeling that something fundamental was changing in the world, well beyond South Asia. As it ended in a much less resolute way than the NATO mission's new name as from 2015 – Resolute Support Mission – had initially heralded, those most versed into geopolitics immediately understood that the 'Thucydides trap'¹ was widening before their eyes.

This paper will delve into the lessons and strategic maxims that can be distilled from the interaction of the European Union (EU) with allies, opponents, and its own political philosophy in the case of Afghanistan. With both an insider's and a more academic outsider's perspectives, this paper will candidly shed some light on what happened behind the scenes of the highly intricate negotiations and delicate political stakes, through the subjective prism of a front-line actor to the Afghanistan process between 2017 and 2021. Critical personal reflections will aim at offering ideas to avoid repeating the same mistakes. Just like the Chinese meaning of 'crisis' (Wei-Ji) brings together the notions of danger and opportunity, when events teach hard-learned lessons, they must be taken as an occasion to reflect and improve. This is especially urgent given that the increasingly destabilizing geopolitical landscape requires the EU to step up its posture internationally, and that negotiators and mediators should be prepared to handle cases just as complex as the Afghanistan file.

Afghanistan was a one-of-its-kind microcosm where fundamental political shifts took place. It was one precursor of the 2005 codification of the 'responsibility to protect' to prevent further threats. It saw civil wars being internationalized, and international conflicts used for national purposes. It witnessed a modernized version of the myth of

¹ The 'Thucydides trap' is the realist conception that an established and an emerging power are set on a collision course towards a war for hegemony. Based on the description of the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides: "The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable." Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, book I. 23.6.

Sisyphus as forces of modernity tried to push the 'stone' of democracy up the mountain while radical conservative forces ensured that the stone systematically rolled back. It displayed a permanent struggle between an exegetic interpretation of the values and traditions of the Afghan society by conservative forces versus a teleological aspiration of progressive communities that wanted an Afghanistan evolving with its time instead of remaining stuck in a medieval past.

Afghanistan was in some ways another episode of the World War II 'Mers-el-Kébir syndrome', where allies fired at each other – this time politically. We will look at the mistakes that were made by NATO as a collective and individual countries within the coalition; at how the cooperation between partners worked, or not; at how spoilers can be toxic forces coming from unexpected corners; at the implications all this had, and continues to have, for Afghanistan and for the West, including the European Union.

The twenty-year long campaign of NATO in Afghanistan started in a different world, a unipolar one, a decade after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. That period was marked by a comfortable but illusory conviction that 'history had ended'² and was henceforth unchangeable. In the middle of the Afghanistan campaign came the dawn of a fractious multipolar world, or perhaps rather an 'a-polar' world. Poles indeed give a direction, but no country today seems to be capable of offering one that is convincing enough to be widely endorsed – or imposed – and rally the majority. As Ian Bremmer puts it, we seem to be in a 'G-Zero world', a disorderly system without rules and overseen by nobody.³

A perceived eternity has passed in political terms since the hasty exit out of Afghanistan in 2021, and the world is now confronted with the consequences thereof. Old paradigms shift in real time before us, marked by increasing fluidity in international relations, rapidly changing alliances, a pervasive tendency to be transactional, a return to political mercantilism and an inflated sense of pride and sovereignty often based on myths rather than reality. The great powers now face a new form of competition by the increasing ambitions of middle-sized powers shaking the world order in an inordinate fashion, diminishing the reliability of traditional alliances and

² According to the popular argument of Francis Fukuyama that the end of the Cold War marked the beginning of a final state of human government and related socio-economic norms, values and institutions. Fukuyama, Francis (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: The Free Press.

³ Bremmer, Ian, 2012. *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.

enhancing the competition for narrow interests in a new fragmented political market that may lead us to miss the times of the uni- or bipolar worlds.

In the first section, the paper outlines strategic mistakes, reflections on political differences within the NATO coalition, and lessons learned from the international negotiation table on the Afghanistan case. The second part touches on the issue of nation-building with Western ideals in a country that is situated in an entirely different geographical, cultural and religious context. The last part reflects on the necessity to change the diplomatic conduct and international posture of the EU in light of the lessons learned 'on the ground', including the need to pursue both *Idealpolitik* and *Realpolitik* through the notion of 'convincing power'. Finally, a conclusion will bring together this exploration of strategy, diplomacy and geopolitics through the lens of the Afghanistan file.

Afghanistan was not such a 'Great Game'

Afghanistan is associated with a country that epitomized the 'Great Game',⁴ a euphemism for not-so-resplendent ambitions by the then imperialist powers. Such competition has certainly created dire outcomes that led to a martyred Afghan population over decades. Empires conveniently exported their turf war far away from their own land to territories mostly unknown to their leaders, and only known to their fighters. They engaged in conflicts where most left without lastingly achieving their ambitions; most were humiliated. The conquerors were conquered by the country they invaded. Afghanistan resiliently and admirably pushed back this 'Great Game' and managed its way through.

Therefore, leaving Afghanistan in a hasty and disorderly way hammered the last nail in the coffin of attempts to help Afghanistan on its bumpy path to democracy, human rights and good governance. All the successive signals sent by Washington to the Taliban about their willingness to ensure a quick withdrawal of US troops contributed to weakening the Republic and to making it impossible to have either real intra-Afghan negotiations and/or a possible accord between Kabul and the Taliban. The worst part is that what happened was not an accident. The withdrawal process was initiated due to the narrow-minded interests of the US Trump administration – although successive administrations had displayed similar flaws in their lack of consideration for

⁴ The 'Great Game' refers to the geopolitical competition between the British and Russian Empires in the 19th century, taking place in various regions across the globe and most notably in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan and the Afghan people. There was a lot of 'non-greatness' in all this, notably for an administration that wanted to 'Make America Great Again'.

Yet cynicism and short-sightedness rapidly met their karma, as the damage brought by the disastrous exit campaign led to costs for the US and its allies in terms of a loss of credibility, attractiveness and empathy, in a world that was already ready to make fundamental choices away from the West. Russian President Putin's decision to attack Ukraine in 2022 is probably one of the most visible consequences of the Afghanistan exit, and the perceived loss of stamina and reliability of the hegemonic power. Due to the fact that the US let down a security and military ally, the Republic of Afghanistan, its global power projection both with foes and friends as well as the perception of the US as a reliable ally have taken a huge blow. One can assume that Ukrainians today quietly keep this in the back of their minds for the future, notably if Trump would come back to power.

Military dominance and a focus on military action did not yield the expected results in Afghanistan. They lacked accompanying policies and a comprehensive approach to the intricacies of the country. The US Department of State and the Department of Defense should probably have been more in sync to mutually reinforce their efforts to win the population. Donors, including the EU, should have made the fight against corruption a much higher priority – and condition for future aid – as the combination of large flows of economic aid with a weak political system created the perfect environment for wide-spread embezzlement. Corruption alienates the population from its government, as it directly touches upon the perception of ordinary citizens on the 'dividends of peace'. Afghan citizens witnessed how financial aid was not transformed into enhanced provision of public goods, or how privileged Afghans became untouchable in official courts. This created fertile ground for the Taliban's hold over Afghan society, exemplified by the facilitation of alternative judicial institutions, such as traditional Islamic courts to the detriment of the traditional Afghan Jirgas. Even though NATO challenged and chased the Taliban in the field, the door to the hearts and minds of the Afghans were opened to them by the failure of the alliance to address the concerns of the common citizen.

Finally, in 'Great Games', timing should not be underestimated. The famous proverb '*You have the watches, but we have the time*' exemplifies the strategy of the Taliban, and it proved to be a visionary one. The decision by the Trump administration to formulate an exit strategy based on a timetable rather than a conditions-based approach was a major and historical strategic error. This US decision indeed fell entirely

into the Taliban's strong point. Time was one major aspect where the Taliban enjoyed a comparative advantage compared to the alliance. The time-based exit strategy led to a self-imposed pressure on the US to give in to concessions in order to keep deadlines. Other countries like China or Russia, on the contrary, played the long game, acted as free riders, and became appeasers of the Taliban in light of their likely return to power. They were driven by geo-strategic considerations, their economic interests and the vast natural resources of Afghanistan, notably rare-earth minerals.

It is still difficult to understand how such a self-inflicting strategy was decided and pursued as it came close to surrender. One did not need to be an experienced negotiator to understand that this would be self-defeating. Particularly as it came on top of a process that was made to diminish levers, with very secret one-on-one negotiations between the US and Taliban chief negotiators, which will probably never be told in truth by neither party. And the infamous 2020 Doha Agreement, which we will discuss hereinafter, was a masterpiece in the plan to surrender, withdraw, and abandon the Republic. It was one of the worst agreements one could imagine, and its follow up has not been better, with many of its provisions not being implemented.

Shaking hands with the devil can be necessary to obtain peace

The allies went to Afghanistan on a fighting-terror agenda. They also wanted to bring peace and democracy to a state run by the Taliban. However, the peace business does not only have noble sides and may hide other agendas. Making peace requires negotiating and reconciling with people that one would not want to go around with otherwise.

When the opportunity arises to make a peace settlement, it is important not to waste time and procrastinate; and to seize opportunities rather than look for alibis or stand on one's high ground. No situation will ever protect one's interests perfectly just as no process will either be perfectly inclusive. Therefore, early engagement is key to avoid early spoiling dynamics. Time heals but healing takes time; and peace processes do not have the luxury of that time to start.

The exclusion of parties or natural stakeholders to a given cause is tempting in order to reach a swift deal, but it will in most instances undermine the agreement in the longer run. Inclusivity is the seed of sustainability, buy-in and ownership, even more so in today's world where no nation or entity wants to be told what to do by anyone any longer. We are in an era where sovereignty and independence are more vivid

concepts. The West had the opportunity to act differently and be inclusive when the Northern Alliance⁵ toppled the Taliban-led government at the end of 2001. To prevent a repeat of the tumultuous Afghan civil war (1992-1996), Afghan stakeholders were invited to the Bonn conference (2001), organized and overseen by Germany, other EU partners, the US, China and Russia to decide upon the future of the country. The famous letter sent by the Taliban to President Hamid Karzai offering a deal remained unanswered. The Taliban were willingly excluded from the negotiating table, and hence from any deal on the design and build-up of Afghanistan's own future while belonging to the dominant ethnic group, the Pashtuns. Instead of trying to bring the various constituencies at peace with each other, the new government appointed many anti-Taliban officials in high positions. This reinforced the idea that the Taliban – and its sympathizers – had to adapt to a society that seemed to take revenge and granted them no role or voice in the process of shaping that society. They were presented with the humiliating choice of surrendering or assimilating to a society they could not meld in. They then chose to continue fighting and seek revenge.

In the long run, this exclusive approach proved *ex post* to be a missed opportunity at constructing a more sustainable, inclusive design to reconcile Afghanistan with itself and embed it in a peaceful and mutually beneficial context where parties would have fewer motives to organize revenge. This mistake planted the roots for a long-lasting conflict, in which time would play an increasingly significant role in tilting the balance of power in favour of the Taliban.

Admittedly, there was an 'original sin', of which the roots resided in an old and highly respected local tradition: the Pashtunwali code. The latter prevented the leader of the Taliban at the time, Mullah Omar, from delivering Osama Bin Laden to the Americans, in the name of the sacred protection of the guest, even if he was condemnable for his actions. The question can be raised as to how history would have unfolded if the winners had been more magnanimous, or politically savvy?

Because the West missed the opportunity to create an early and inclusive peace settlement with the Taliban, deciding for them without them, the group was forced to adapt and reinvent itself within a generation. They became diplomats and negotiators who played into the divides and competing interests of the EU, the US, Pakistan, China, Russia and India. Whilst gradually enhancing their capacities to inflict damage on the

⁵ The Northern Alliance is a loose alliance of Pashtun tribes which took control of Kabul at the end of the first Afghan Civil War in 1992, and which was revived in 1996 when the Taliban took control of Kabul in the second Afghan Civil War.

ground, they knew from history that the US operated within a time constraint, that EU Member States often disagreed with the US on certain issues, and that there was domestic pressure to withdraw from Afghanistan. Hence, their power grew with each day passing.

Therefore, as a lesson, the EU has to go beyond the naïve, and often hypocritical, idea of 'not negotiating with terrorists', through the right channels. 'Terrorist' is a given and often temporary status that suits one party at a certain time, not an eternal impediment. Supporters of the idea not to negotiate with terrorists aim to prevent actors, which acquired power in illegitimate ways, from obtaining international standing and recognition through negotiations. That may be noble in theory if one wants the comforting moral high ground to prevail over realities. Choosing to negotiate and proportionally include the Taliban in the design of the future of Afghanistan would have meant embarking on a process of testing but hopefully lasting reconciliation, which was more promising than the consequences of a post-war settlement as exclusive as the Taliban wanted. Just like all countries in the world do have radical, conservative or even extremist parties, a way to allow Taliban participation in political life could have been envisaged. The EU should therefore not use the method it condemns – exclusion.

It is attractive for the 'winner' of a military conflict to impose its will in negotiations with the short-term gain of an easy solution, thereby ignoring the longer-term issues, notably the fate and interests of the defeated. But such 'woe to the vanquished' attitude, as displayed during the Bonn conference after toppling the Taliban regime, planted the seeds for the bitter fruits of a long-lasting war rather than the 'dividends of peace'. One can and should negotiate with every opponent, every part of a given country. Of course, legitimate concerns must be addressed, and discretion can ensure that terrorist groups are not recognized beyond what they deserve. Red-carpet treatments of the likes that some countries (China, some Central Asia states, Russia) gave to the Taliban before they took Kabul, receiving them with the decorum they would offer a sitting government, are a line one cannot cross. Discrete contacts and diplomacy are more efficient.

Clash behind closed doors, but unite publicly

Greek stoic philosopher Epictetus famously said that '*In war, truth is the first casualty*'. It is indeed common knowledge in negotiation and mediation circles that one should be as wary of the people sitting on one's side of the table than of those on the

opposite side, and that truth does not always come from where one would legitimately expect it. Relations within the parties are often much more complex than one imagines from the outside.

The fate of a coalition is tied to its ability to resolve clashes of interests privately, whilst projecting unity and resolve publicly. All coalitions suffer from diverging interests of its members, and it is normal and even healthy to ensure a meaningful discussion that could lead to the best strategic outcome. But the key to success resides in the ability to resolve these clashes privately, in confidence, with respect for each other. This demands candid conversations amongst partners, and a commitment to avoid room for discussion on the clashes in the public sphere. It is understandable that in a crisis situation a coalition delegates its strongest and most influential members to engage in negotiations for the sake of efficiency and a timely first response. A crisis-room dynamic should, however, not be structural and permanent. Others should not be structurally excluded and kept in the dark. The opposition can exploit the divergence of interests among coalition partners when the latter fail to project unity and resolve. Unsolved political differences create a blurred environment which prevents effective cooperation, even on specific cases where interests are joint and clear. This became one of the major causes behind the failure to achieve shared strategic objectives in Afghanistan, and probably to save Afghanistan from what we sadly witness today.

The allies were divided at least at three different levels. First, there was the division within the US administration. The US negotiator was probably mostly in sync with the White House – except at times with the National Security Advisor – and Secretary Pompeo himself. He was, however, far from aligned with the Department of Defense, the State Department (including the US Ambassador) on the spot, the CIA, the Congress, the NATO mission, or the Special Inspection General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). Second, there was a dividing line between the US and its like-minded allies. The US adopted an attitude of self-appointed undisputed leader that expected one thing only from allies: to follow the US decisions. Third, while there was some *unité de façade*, a majority of EU capitals was accepting the second point, while others did not. That failed to ensure enough European common front to stand up to the US when it was necessary. This is partly due to the limiting structural nature of EU foreign and security policy which requires unanimity, pushing EU Member States to invest primarily in security within NATO. The Taliban were better at presenting, at least outwardly, a united front, and allies made their life easier.

If at times diplomacy requires persistence and hard-ball tactics, the Trump administration excelled at that, even with allies. Too often though, the US – prompted by a then short-sighted administration more interested in electoral objectives and party interests than by anything else – have been found willing to bow to the demands of the Taliban without putting in their weight to secure comparable concessions on their side. This was done with at best the illusion or at worst the conscious acceptance of paying a hefty price to break a stalemate and stick to the timetable. Once this dynamic was created, there was hardly any going back as the Taliban quickly understood that the winning strategy was 'not moving an inch' and camp on their hardline positions in any aspect of the discussions. Initial trust-building concessions by the US and/or allies were basically never reciprocated by the Taliban. Travel bans on the Taliban were lifted too quickly, under US pressure, before receiving any tangible or serious concessions. This opened a powerful door, allowing the group to travel and conduct a global charm offensive in order to rally the international community around the mistaken idea that they had changed. The Taliban were also unwilling to be reasonably cooperative when it came to prisoner exchanges, dictating the figures and showing zero flexibility or readiness to negotiate on a prominent deal, to which the US, naïvely followed by allies, regrettably rapidly gave in and even responded with more concessions. The EU was opposing these quick concessions, made as a leap of faith, but could not convince a power coalition made of the US, at times in a tactical alliance together with Russia and China, and a UN that was unable – or unwilling – to resist these three. After a constructive and collegial Japanese Head of the United Nations (UN), his Canadian successor in Kabul did very little to work more closely with the European constituencies. This is even more painful since the EU is the biggest contributor to the UN system and both organizations aimed at defending multilateralism in a time where the US administration seemed determined to undermine the institutions that govern the global order.

The lack of unity in the allies' camp also led gradually to the constitution and reinforcement of quite a united axis between Beijing, Moscow and Islamabad. This trio did everything it could to undermine a US success, bilaterally and collectively. It enjoyed seeing the US getting drowned in Afghan mud. The three countries coordinated positions in multilateral meetings to ensure the international resolutions would protect the interests of the Taliban. But here again, it was a matter of short-term gain. The serious problem faced today by Pakistan with a neighbour fully in the hands of the Taliban, who will never give up on their ethnic Pakistani cousins, stems from serious miscalculations and promises difficult days ahead between the two countries. Along similar lines, both Russia and China continue to face the problem of extremist

threats in the region. The last thing that is sure is that the policy of appeasement that China, Russia and Pakistan have pursued will pay off, economically or geopolitically. Based on their usual political stances, they will probably be the first to resume relations with the Taliban regime and engage a process of formal recognition of the Emirate.

In another illustration of the willingness to do things purely bilaterally, without burdening himself with allies, the US Special Envoy systematically refused the proposals made by the EU to undertake joint *démarches vis-à-vis* the Taliban. This would have projected a more united front, a sense of unity and resolution, of the international community. On the contrary, he systematically opted for unilateral and secretive actions instead of coordinated actions with like-minded partners. The US wanted to talk, decide and act alone. Not allowing European allies and the Afghan government a seat at the table stemmed from the US' desire to impose a deal that suited its own interests and expecting others to obediently follow suit. Looking at today's world, it appears that the US still has not learned that lesson. One can still often see, even with a Democrat administration, a willingness of the US to make decisions alone, taking allies for granted and expecting them to follow their line. More upstream cooperation and consultation could do the trick and European capitals would probably be happier – and more committed – in aligning on US lines under such a more collaborative and respectful *modus operandi*. Persisting in bad old habits not only weakens the West in general, it weakens the US. This attitude has had one consequence: after the Trump years, it has opened the EU's eyes and pushed it to develop its 'strategic autonomy'. The evolution of EU security and defense in recent years and months testifies once more that the EU progresses through crises.

Examples like these set precedents that lastingly undermine one's credibility and power at the negotiation table. The Taliban were too easily allowed to keep a radical attitude even at times when their position was not so strong. They were 'rewarded' for their hard-ball attitude with one-sided concessions. Combined with displays of disunity in the international community and NATO, this incentivized a destructive behaviour by the Taliban. It appears that the Taliban negotiators were reassuring about the prospects and promising advances that they were careful not to reveal to the Emir who was adopting a much more intransigent position. At the fall of the Republic, some would have exhaled a breath of relief that things turned out that way and that their promises should not be concretely discussed in the Shuras.

Unfortunately, the US-led negotiations have been structurally marred by the spirit and attitude of total secrecy without the minimum transparency to allies. Even worse, there

was a clear gap and lack of information-sharing, even with most other US colleagues and departments involved. Through the very private meetings between the US negotiator and Mullah Baradar, the latter was probably much better informed about the US intentions than most US colleagues. There are many stories about US and NATO officials being infuriated about the fact that the Taliban knew more than them about US intentions, let alone non-US allies. The only one who seemed to be provided with some information was Secretary of State Pompeo, whose direct link and information to POTUS remains a question mark. A complete lack of information about a negotiation rarely leads to efficient results.

The Trump administration not only fooled the allies, it also fooled the Taliban. The latter were indeed told by the US negotiator that during the negotiations of the Doha Agreement, the allies – and notably the EU and its Member States –, were fully informed on the details and strategic objectives of the highly secretive bilateral talks between the US and the Taliban, and hence fully onboard. The Taliban were genuinely misled into the conviction that the EU was supportive of these negotiations it hardly knew anything about. This was not a negotiation made on behalf and in sound coordination or consultation with the EU and NATO, but rather a one-to-one between the US Envoy and Mullah Baradar, in Pashto, thereby easily excluding any legitimate request from team members to join the conversation. Even the rest of the US negotiation team was marginalized and kept in the dark of the real deals, some of which one might still not know. Likewise, the briefings made at NATO Headquarters in Brussels by the US negotiator left allies disappointed at best and infuriated at worst because of the obvious retention of information and one-sided presentation of facts. There was a deliberate willingness to keep NATO in the dark, to the point that NATO leadership told the EU Special Envoy how shocked they were when they eventually saw the final version of the Doha Agreement. Commitments were taken on their behalf, without them.

A lesson to be learned from this disastrous way of negotiating is that, whatever the circumstances and the hurry in which negotiations take place, concessions should always be coordinated, reciprocal and balanced if the goals are long-term strategic advantages beyond mere quick wins with narrow-minded interests. Otherwise, a dynamic of surrender unfolds. Negotiations are most often conditional and transactional. Sanctions are well-suited to support that when a party does not play the game. They create negative leverage and positive incentives. A partial and gradual lifting of sanctions should only come with genuine progress and a credible commitment, in turn creating a spiral that can lead towards cooperative behaviour

and eventually a full lifting of sanctions. If the spiral is broken, or agreements are unilaterally destroyed, one should not hesitate to hit back with a heavier set of sanctions than initially implemented. The willpower to follow through on such actions is of critical importance, as the effective strength of sanctions is determined by the political willingness of states to sustain them.

Simplistic slogans do not create effective policy and diplomacy

The cooperation between the US and the EU / NATO in Afghanistan has been a painful transgression of the self-evident maxim that popular evidence does not create effective policy and diplomacy. Slogans were created to serve President Trump's campaign interest, but they were not delivered on.

One of the most prominent slogans was that the Afghan government was supposed to have a vital role in the negotiations, as the process would be '*Afghan-owned and Afghan-led*', and as India rightly kept on insisting: '*Afghan-controlled*'. In reality, the Afghan government was more often than not sidelined by the Trump administration. To paraphrase Minister Sikorski, the Afghan Republic was on the menu, and not at the table. Most partners were genuine in wanting to promote the Intra-Afghan Negotiations (IAN), i.e. direct talks between the government and the Taliban. That never happened, mainly due to the fact that the government was not strong enough to push the Taliban to the table. However, the US just made it inconceivable for the Taliban to accept this, as everything they wanted was eventually accepted, regardless of what they did. Terrorist attacks continued despite the withdrawal of troops, and hardline positions continued despite a conciliatory attitude from Washington. If the US would have used its leverage and power to compel the Taliban to sit with the government and have a real negotiation, the fate of Afghans today would certainly be very different.

The Trump administration also repeatedly stated at various decision-making levels that its policy vis-à-vis the Taliban would be '*conditions-based*'. The exact opposite proved to be true as we saw above; the US policy was actually time-bound, and made all the concessions, one after the other, while nothing was reciprocated by the Taliban, in an attempt to rush to the finishing line in view of the US elections.

Finally, the US promise during the negotiations that '*nothing is agreed until everything is agreed*' mainly proved to be a way to justify the successive concessions. It completely failed to materialize as no overall assessment of all the respective

conditions was ever carried out, at least with allies. Even when the US saw that the Taliban was not reciprocating concessions, they continued all the way to their planned military withdrawal, thereby handing over the keys of Afghanistan to the Taliban.

The EU and its Member States often tried to stick to guiding principles. The point was to have and keep a compass in the midst of highly troubled waters. The EU was faced with US resistance, preferring a level of Realpolitik difficult to match. Every time the EU did try to push back on a US line and present an alternative way of doing things, more subtle but also slower, they were rebuked by an administration which believed that holding hegemonic military power force meant that they were by definition also right politically. Not a noble position *vis-à-vis* allies who fought and died in solidarity with an ally.

For all of the above reasons, the EU decided not to endorse the Doha Agreement, an accord largely unknown to them. This agreement ended up as a fiasco which will reverberate for generations of Afghans, and which only very few still try to justify. Most, even inside US circles, criticize it more and more as time passes. While all countries rushed to Doha to witness the signature of an agreement that most of them had never seen before, and without knowing the details thereof, the EU did not join the party and the picture. History did not prove this instinct to be entirely wrong.

And indeed, there was a last-minute surprise in the Doha Agreement since another heading was added to the agreement. The US had just informed about the four pillars – or headings – of the agreement, without any details, but everyone was surprised seeing that the accord contained a fifth condition imposed on the Afghan government: the release by the government of over 5,000 Taliban prisoners, when the Taliban just had to release a mere fourth of it. That last-hour insistence by the Taliban says a lot about the timeline they were expecting to fully take control of Afghanistan, much longer than what actually happened. They would probably not have insisted on this point if they had known that Kabul and Afghanistan would fall fully into their hands with hardly any meaningful opposition, and that they would have been able to liberate all prisoners once holding the country.

Build slowly on traditional institutions rather than exporting democracy as a 'one-size fits all'

Attempting a radical and swift restructuring of Afghanistan's state and society was a fool's errand given its culture, history and social/religious fabric. The US, supported by the Europeans, attempted to build and strengthen the newly installed republican government on the foundations of a unitary democratic state with a strong executive in the form of a president. But the West did not sufficiently integrate traditional elements of Afghanistan's political history into the model it helped build. The country has a long history of internal resistance against centralized political authorities, and no experience with democratic institutions based on Western political philosophy. Members of the Northern Alliance already expressed their preference for a more decentralized state model during the Bonn conference of 2001. While the sustainability of such a model in Afghanistan would have remained questionable, the ideas of the US prevailed. The timing of this undertaking proved to be a similar disaster for the future of the country. Afghan society had undergone decades of war and civil strife before a third party in the form of NATO intervened and brokered a cessation of large-scale hostilities. Radically redesigning the political organization and structure of a society which finds itself at such an unstable point entails the risk of further internal destabilization.

In the long term, the alliance led by the US weakened the very state it sought to strengthen. The strong executive model transformed into an authoritative, centralized political body that could not fulfil the promises of democracy. It lost its legitimacy in the eyes of the people due to the weak role of the parliament, an absence of viable alternatives in the form of new political parties, a negligence of official and powerful decentralized institutions, as well as the lack of acknowledgement of the local power structures. And, of course, pervasive corruption. Even with a strong and independent army, the Afghan state would not have been able to survive independently as the roots of its political problems were situated in its original institutional design.

The idea of exporting democracy as a 'one-size fits all' should therefore remain a thing of the past. Instead, the required political will, internal stability and institutional structures for the emergence of democracy should be fostered carefully, at a pace that accommodates local necessities. It is about convincing slowly rather than imposing quickly. This allows societies to adapt their traditional political institutions to emerging democratic elements, if the required political will exists and favourable circumstances persist. More than anything, that means paying attention to the input

of local actors when designing the build-up of a state like Afghanistan. More work should have been done with the traditional structures of Afghanistan like the Jirgas, which intrinsically bear elements of democracy.

Cultural or geographic relativism can be envisaged for some concepts, such as democracy; since there are as many forms of democracy as there are democratic countries. The same holds for the social and political rights. But there are issues that are universal and cannot be interpreted differently. These are the fundamental human rights touching the integrity of a person.

Realpolitik and Idealpolitik must be reconciled

It is often said that promoting values clashes with protecting interests. While this may have proved to be true in some instances, more generally, – and looking at long-term considerations rather than short-term gains – there is no in-built dilemma, no structural and systemic tension between these two sets of objectives. Protecting values today has clearly gone out of its 'soft' policy dimension and has become hard-core foreign policy, in a world in turmoil and deprived of a clear ideological direction.

From a conceptual viewpoint, Afghanistan has indeed showed a complementarity – if not a necessary bond – between values and interests. As a matter of fact, and even more so now with the three years of hindsight we have, it showed the necessity there was to support and promote a regime respecting the values of the UN Charter. Not only was it the most probable wish of a majority of Afghans to live in peace, security, prosperity and freedom – while respecting their history and traditions – but it was key to continue the global efforts to enshrine the UN values into one of the most traditional, conservative and resistant parts of the world. The policy of containment here was both on values and geopolitical.

Realpolitik has always been and will always be there; it is inherent to human nature. But it can – or must – be framed to encompass smarter elements. Idealpolitik only makes sense if it departs from dogmatism or ideology. Ideals, to be pursued with a liberal spirit, need a certain dose of pragmatism and realism to reach their target, to be efficient and eventually remain relevant.

One of the errors the allies – led by the United States – have to recognize was that they sacrificed Idealpolitik too hastily on the altar of Realpolitik. After an initial and overall values-based approach under US President Obama, the Trump administration

relinquished long-term strategic interests and values for short-term tactical interests through cynical Realpolitik. The US lost sight of the bigger picture and was drowned in the deep meanders of what humans are best at, seeking immediate gains. Many lost the sense of history having to deal with urgent and life-threatening problems, and they were blinded by breaking news when they should have been enlightened by a sense of history. They also became increasingly oblivious to their future legacy. On the surface, Afghanistan was indeed about many things such as values, ideology, influence and about a certain conception of global politics. Afghanistan continued to be a land of rivalries by proxy, long after this started in the 1830s between the Russian and British Empires. Values and interests evolved and shifted with time but were always linked to one another in a fusal way.

In the years before Kabul fell, the reason why the Republic was defended by the international coalition – despite the obvious intrinsic shortcomings thereof – and supported against the aspiring Emirate, was precisely because it was expected to eventually bring about a system based on universal UN values. The alternative was its exact opposite: a regime strictly based on a radical and exegetic reading of the Sharia. The supporters of both the UN Charter and the Sharia actually shared one common point: the same ambition and appetite for proselytism and universalism. The EU was often accused of supporting the administration of President Ghani. That was a simplistic shortcut. The EU never personalized power but rather institutionalized it. President Ghani, if only by default, showed to be the closest to promoting a democratic, liberal and tolerant Afghanistan. Dr. Abdullah, Chief Executive of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, shared the same credentials, profile and moderate ideology; he could have been a viable alternative. So, it was not about a particular man, it was about what this man represented.

Under Ghani, space was indeed created – even if imperfectly – for women in education and in power positions; a place was given to the youth with many in the administration being in their early ages and educated; one saw religious forbearance, the toleration of critical media and freedom for civil society, as well as openness to modern ideas. Even though the Ghani administration often lacked a realistic dose of political acumen and a connection to people's real problems and aspirations, the aforementioned qualities were invaluable at a time when Afghanistan was threatened by the return of obscurantism. Maybe if the US and its allies had tried more resiliently to keep a bigger picture in mind, if more energy had been devoted to bringing corrective measures to the Kabul government rather than crucify a 'weak'

target, Afghanistan would be in a very different place today; and notably women and youth.

In such a context, the support of the EU to the Republic even increased at a point, triggered and exacerbated by the EU's willingness to compensate for the unbalanced position of the US administration. Many officials in the latter privately acknowledged that things were not done the right way, and this resulted in weakening, marginalizing, and excluding a government that was not obedient enough to America's short-term political interests. But one line that the EU never crossed is venturing into the kingmaker business. Contrary to what was often said to the EU's Special Envoy, the EU never contributed to putting Ghani or anyone else in power. The election process had taken place, surely not perfect, but it was the closest thing to what one could expect and accept in a long process of democratization in the given context.

Another aspect resides in the difference between neutrality and impartiality. Indeed, the EU was from the very beginning a peace project. It is a political project strongly anchored in a free, modern, secular and liberal view of the world. The EU promotes cooperation over confrontation. It defends a societal vision based on differences and tolerance, as well as the right for each individual to flourish. The EU can be impartial, but it will never be neutral. Politics is not neutral and although the societal vision of the EU excludes aggressive power politics, it needs to be capable to defend that vision. In the words of Ralph Emerson (1870): "Nature has made up her mind that what cannot defend itself shall not be defended."⁶ The EU's internal political philosophy, shared with the allies in the NATO coalition, was irreconcilable with that of the defenders of a Sharia-based Emirate with a highly restrictive and intolerant interpretation of rights and freedoms that their country had pledged to abide by in being a UN member. There were hardly any real choices to make between a possible better future for Afghans, and a certain return to Afghanistan's dark past. The EU tried, even against friendly fire, to defend the universal principles of the UN Charter. This was also a driving force in the ambition to consolidate the agenda of a world ruled by the law, organized around institutional continuity, and based on multilateralism.

The lesson we can draw from this is that 21st century politics requires the EU, more than ever, to boldly pursue a world based on values and interests, even if this requires engaging in power politics and, if needed, in finding adaptive ways to deal with its traditional allies that lower the bar. All-weather alliances are an illusion. The 'ends' and

⁶ Emerson, Ralph, *Society and Solitude: Twelve Chapters*, London: S. Low, Son & Marston, 1870, p. 208.

strategic goals are large and ambitious, but the 'means' to achieve them are currently insufficient. The war of Russia against Ukraine illustrates that this also applies to safeguarding the EU's security environment. It is therefore paramount to enhance the means required for the pursuit of goals such as stronger military capabilities, effective intelligence-sharing, and the political will amongst Member States to act united in the international political arena. The EU's inability to weigh in on the Afghan file was in its way a preliminary to the evolution we see today on the Ukrainian file: the strengthening of the EU's defense capabilities and strategic security evolution. But the EU's strength should be to combine – as two sides of the same coin – this increasing power action with its original nature organized around democratic, humanist and peaceful objectives.

A large strategic footprint is necessary in the pursuit of fundamental interests

The war of the US against the Taliban was a repetition of history, notably the war between the Persians and the Scythes. While Persian King Darius in 5 B.C. had the world's most powerful army and equipment, his enemies, the Scythes, were mobile, reactive and adaptive to the terrain. Fighting against them was fighting a shadow. While Persians conquered, they did not manage to defeat the Scythes. Diplomats, politicians and policy-makers should at times read history books.

NATO's campaign against the Taliban was indeed characterized by the same patterns of an asymmetric warfare, where the military and technological balance-of-power was extremely favourable to the alliance. That balance was gradually thwarted by the nature of the conflict, the terrain and the unconventional tactics used by the opponents. The US was undisputedly the leading political and military force in Afghanistan. They decided by and large alone and implemented with a supportive role of others.

The EU did not manage to create a strong negotiation position within NATO as the European states were unable – while agreeing by and large on a unified political strategy – to create enough European solidarity and solidity vis-à-vis the US when doubts and differences emerged. Contributions to operations of national interest were not maximized, which resulted in a small overall EU strategic footprint in Afghanistan. Within the framework of a coalition, a large strategic footprint allows one to have a significant say on the course of a mission, or to shape the outcome of a negotiation. It is naïve to think that minimal contributions will, in the long term, still allow one to

influence the outcome of negotiations in a significant manner. The EU should take that lesson seriously in the unstable geopolitical environment of the 21st century.

In several European capitals, there was too much reverence and awe to Washington. Loyalties were at times more to the hegemon in Washington than to the 'family' in Brussels. This impacted the coordination of funding to the Afghan government, the complementarity of civilian-military operations, and EU leverage vis-à-vis non-like-minded countries. As a result, efficiency and impact were underwhelming, which translated into a small strategic footprint in the Afghanistan campaign. The pursuit of European interests was therefore often knowingly left to the readiness of the US to take the European perspective into account, or not. The fact that the EU was caught in its own internal 'perfect storm' – the Brexit saga – added to the lack of focus on other key issues. On top, it brought yet another element of complexity, with a UK clearly siding more with the US than with the EU. One cannot blame any country for putting its national interest ahead of the priorities of its allies, but there is a way to do that, and there are limits. No less than 23 EU countries agreed to show solidarity with the US under Article 5 and sent troops and equipment to Afghanistan. Many Europeans died or were severely wounded. This blood solidarity should have outweighed national interests, or rather should have turned national considerations into interests of the coalition.

Regardless, EU Member States should take a critical look in the mirror, which painfully reveals their incapacity and unwillingness to formulate and execute a strong, collective strategy in Afghanistan in support of the US. If they had managed to create a large EU strategic footprint, the fickle – and at times selfish – attitude of the US would not have been so harmful to the outcome of the mission. The Europeans could have brought a line of moderation, and served as alarm bell when things were going the wrong way.

The underwhelming concerted European performance is even more remarkable when compared to the attention that Afghanistan received from the international community. This conflict has probably generated one of the highest number of opinions, analyses and public statements. Rare are the countries and the conflicts that draw so much attention from the circles of academia, think tanks and experts. 'Outsiders' were able to make good assessments due to the availability of high-quality information. It must be recognized that the tsunami of meetings, video-conferences, statements, international conferences and discussions at all levels actually generated little impact to avoid, deal with or solve the situation in Afghanistan. The amount and

frequency of non-state discussions in the midst of an ongoing conflict was at times a reassuring blessing that all cared, but perhaps also a complicating factor. Talking will not change any complex strategic environment if it is not followed up with actions, energy and resources. The focus of the international community should therefore shift towards analysing and resolving internal political differences, such as those who prevented the alliance from maximizing its potential power, or the expansion of the European strategic footprint in Afghanistan. However, the largest responsibility rests on the shoulders of individual Member States to work in a coordinated manner towards strong and collective political stances.

The EU needs to transform from a ‘convening power’ into a ‘convincing power’

The EU has for long qualified itself as being a ‘convening power’, that is, a power that catalyses collective action amongst partners and stakeholders. It has done that in an excellent manner as the EU’s DNA is precisely about cooperation and bringing people around the table to settle differences peacefully. Today’s world requires going a step further by transforming the EU into a ‘convincing power’, that is, being able to convince stakeholders and partners to be seated – and remain engaged – at the table. A convening power can only exercise influence if others are willing to convene and cooperate, a convincing power excels in incentivizing that spirit through various means.

This ambition is still work in progress and achieving it is still far-fetched as the political will seems to be lacking. Several Member States played the bilateral card, which severely constrained the EU’s capacity to influence the process ‘as One’. Some EU Member States indeed camped on their positions and historical influence in Afghanistan to develop bilateral dynamics rather than realizing that the pooling of their strength with the European family would have multiplied their own position. This illusion to maintain old positions under new circumstances in a world that had radically changed was naïve and led to a loss of influence and of efficiency on the European side.

There are some good stories though. When it became clear that it was probably a matter of time before the Taliban took power in Kabul, the EU took the initiative to draft a general document regarding the conditions under which it could send

development aid to a Taliban-led regime.⁷ These key elements contained conditions that were in fact not really new on substance, as they were basically translating some of the fundamental principles of the UN Charter. What was innovative, was the process, the timing and the packaging in the given context. They became the standard in development cooperation, as these conditionalities were *ex ante* and highly political, something the conservative and traditional development world had been wary of. The overall idea was to ensure that the 20-year gains of the Republic in terms of democracy and freedoms would be maintained; that Afghanistan would not fall back into the Middle Ages.

Once the various departments of the EU institutions had adopted these guidelines internally, which was a first achievement in itself, they were submitted to the EU Member States who enthusiastically endorsed them. Then, the EU went a step further and proposed to a number of like-minded countries to join the initiative: Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UN, the UK and the US. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were also supportive but could not formally join a political declaration because of their apolitical statutes. Ironically, the partner that resisted the most was the Trump administration, even if there was no unity in the US administration, some being more visionary and seeing the strategic interest of such an initiative. The US Envoy indeed saw this as a threat to his short-term objectives of striking a deal with the Taliban, or to any other objective others were not informed of. But the wider US administration finally could not justify staying out of this international coalition in the making, and reluctantly signed up. These guidelines initiated by the EU are still valid and constitute the basis for putting pressure on the Taliban in exchange for more international aid.

This was a case when the EU, united and together, showed leadership and managed to convince partners, notably the US, of something that was not linked to Washington's interests. It created a political tool to put pressure on the Taliban and illustrated that the EU's approach was indeed 'conditions-based'. This EU initiative was grounded in the entry point the Taliban themselves had created. Over the negotiations with the Taliban, the latter indeed had repeatedly expressed strong interest in receiving substantial amounts of development aid once they would be in power. Until today, the Taliban cannot access full funding from the EU, the US or others until they show proof of their commitment to improving the key conditions. For the record, the EU also

⁷ European External Action Service, "Key elements for sustained international support to Peace and Development in Afghanistan", Brussels, 17 November 2020, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/key-elements-sustained-international-support-peace-and-development-afghanistan_en

tried to involve a number of other countries, including China, Russia, Pakistan, without much illusion at the start, and indeed in vain in the end.

There was another example where the EU position prevailed over the US: the elections. Washington did not want elections for the fear that it would create difficulties or jeopardize their bilateral negotiations. The EU took the lead in supporting the Afghan decision for elections. The motto created at that time by the EU High Representative Mogherini was "Work on elections as if there was no peace process; work on peace as if there was no elections". While both issues – peace and elections – were linked, the EU wanted to give a chance to both, even if no one was naïve enough to think that elections under the dramatic circumstances would be flawless. It was a support to a process, to something in the making. These two examples are a clear illustration of the fact that, more united, the EU could have weighed much more towards a better outcome of the process.

Conclusions

This paper has aimed to distill some strategic lessons from the EU's conduct in the NATO mission to Afghanistan. The EU should have acted with more power, more togetherness and in a more resolute way. The EU and its Member States have no other choice in big issues than to work 'as One'. The concept of Team Europe should not only be a development concept, but should be given deep strategic and operational meaning within the political and security spheres. The current efforts at multiple levels to increase the EU's capacity to act more autonomously on foreign policy and defense are not an option anymore under the current state of global affairs, but a necessity that notably Afghanistan has put in plain light. In a world increasingly made of fluid alliances, flexible partnerships, selective engagements and variable interests, the EU is well advised to build a strategic autonomy within a strong cooperation framework with allies and partners.

It has been three years since the fall of Kabul. It is normal that mistakes are committed in the midst of a storm; however, while one cannot control every aspect of a quest, many, including the authors, still do feel ashamed for some things that could, should, have been done. All those interested in Afghanistan have already learned a few lessons from this tragic process. Many states, like the British Empire and the Soviet Union, have been dealt a painful defeat in Afghanistan, therefore known as the 'Graveyard of Empires'. Based on the analysis above, Afghanistan can also be nicknamed the 'Graveyard of Umpires', as negotiators, mediators and the variety of 'referees' that

have been involved have failed. Hopefully more knowledge and wisdom will emerge for all negotiators, mediators and peace-seeking constituencies on how to do things, and what to avoid.

Besides the intrinsic difficulties met throughout the years, the fiasco of Afghanistan is also the consequence of the incapacity of allies to work better together towards an agreed and reasonable goal. What should have been the strongest ever negotiating team, uniting allies around core values and objectives, turned into a solo performance, leaving the orchestra mute in front of the repeated use of tactics like *fait accompli*. There was no space given to a more capillary approach in using all the cumulated entry points, contacts, leverages and trust, which each partner could have brought. Some countries amongst the allies, even smaller ones, had indeed managed to create a relationship of confidence that was never perceived by the Trump administration, too blinded by its own self-assurance and arrogance. A little more humility in the face of such an admittedly Herculean task would have been more productive and effective. Therefore, more nuancing could have won negotiations but was sacrificed for the sake of keeping control alone and protecting public and private interests that history will hopefully reveal one day.

In the EU's declared policy of 'principled pragmatism', referred to in the EU Global Strategy,⁸ there has probably been too much of pragmatism and too little of the former. Realism and 'followism' sometimes took the upper hand. There was no capacity to adapt, too much conventionalism and hence required a bolder, more independent reaction. An unfortunate policy of appeasement was enforced by some European capitals to avoid hypothetical greater tensions with an US administration with which they already had a very complicated relationship.

The allies, be it at political or military levels, were more instrumentalized than they were instrumental. This precedent is all the more serious as it was the first and only time in NATO's history that an article 5 operation took place. Countries agreeing to participate in the collective security and defense had to twist and bend their parliaments, and convince skeptical populations, to go to war in support of the US. Yet, allies were eventually treated disrespectfully and abandoned, just like the Afghans. If the Ukraine crisis had not come soon thereafter to reunite NATO members

⁸ European Union, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016.

after this trauma, the long-term consequences for NATO solidarity might have been much bigger.

Today, the ballet of visits to Kabul is resuming, timidly but surely. This is a unique opportunity to unify the European approach, especially since the US has lost most of its security networks and intelligence, and it does not seem to have found a new political line for the region. Low profile engagement – without recognition – with the *de facto* regime of the Taliban is useful to test the ways in which the EU's conditional approach can deliver. Usually, governments are given a period of 'honeymoon' at the beginning of their mandate, and then the problems start, internally and externally. With the Taliban regime, problems started immediately, and the possible, gradual normalization – more akin to a 'bittermoon' – that will ensue later should be very carefully framed and conditioned by a united front of the largest possible coalition of countries.

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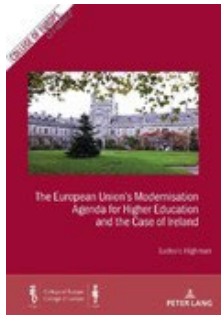
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