

EU lessons from the evacuation of Kabul: Part 1 – What went wrong? The decision-making moments

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Credit: NATO

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Executive summary

The analysis of what went wrong in Kabul must focus on the critical junctures in the West's decision-making. Two moments stand out: the establishment of the military withdrawal schedule in mid-April and when all the countries involved scrambled to get their civilians out too.

► April – June 2021: Spring 'insouciance'

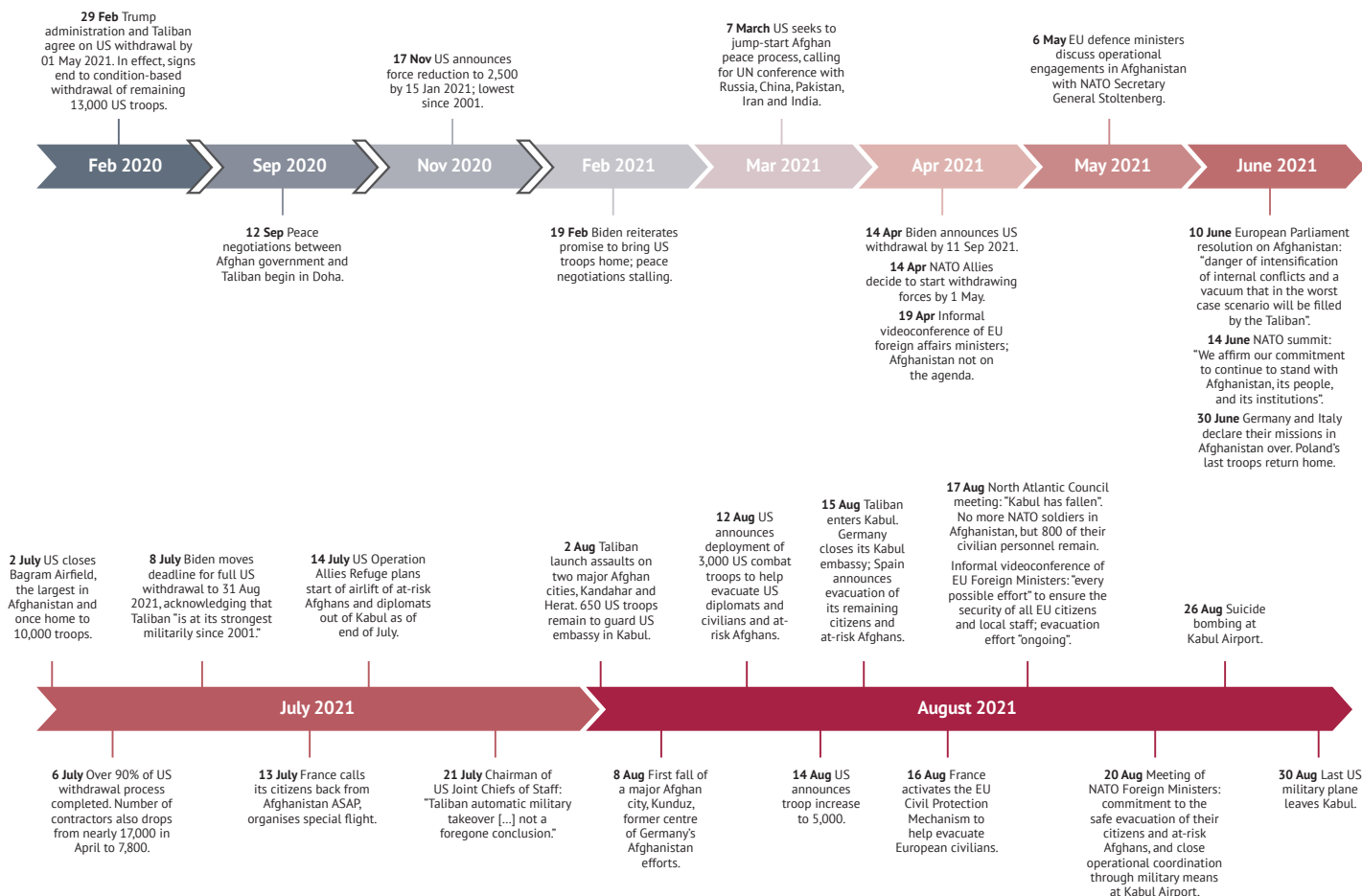
On 14 April, US President Biden announced the decision and the calendar for the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan. Despite limited consultation upfront, the NATO Ministerial that took place on the same day promptly endorsed this decision and the withdrawal of the Resolute Support Mission forces. In public, all NATO Allies put on a brave face, and optimism was the order of the day, despite intelligence and public concern about the consequences of a rapid military withdrawal. As for the EU, an analysis of publicly available documents from the Foreign Affairs Council meetings that took place in this period shows that Afghanistan was simply not a foreign policy priority, leading to a conspicuous lack of attention to possible consequences at EU headquarters, too.

► July – August 2021: Summer 'sauve qui peut'

By the end of June, NATO and US forces were fast retreating out of the country. The Taliban made substantial territorial gains and prepared offensives in key cities. Despite acknowledging that the Taliban was at its strongest militarily since 2001, the US decided to move forward the schedule for troop withdrawal to 31 August. The Biden administration and its allies were still in denial about the possibility of an imminent Taliban takeover, and an evacuation of civilians was not envisaged. In August, matters went from bad to worse. The Taliban advanced quickly, gained significant ground, and entered Kabul on 15 August. The race against the clock then started for the US and allies to get as many 'entitled persons' out as possible. The EU institutions had prepared no better and were equally blindsided by the speed of events and decisions.

Fig. 1

THE WEST'S RETREAT FROM AFGHANISTAN



Introduction

'A minute to midnight'. As the last plane took off from Kabul on 30 August 2021, the four words ripped across international news services, announcing in somewhat heroic terms the end of the largest humanitarian airlift mission in history. It also marked the end of two decades of war and the indisputable failure of the US-led Western alliance in Afghanistan. Over a few summer weeks, more than 125,000 people were evacuated through the Hamid Karzai International Kabul Airport and onto planes towards transit airports, and eventually onwards to Europe and the US. Yet despite the impressive numbers and logistics, the operation was all else than a well-planned exit.

Four months earlier, on 14 April, NATO Foreign Affairs Ministers met in Brussels to decide on the end of NATO's involvement in Afghanistan and the withdrawal schedule of all *Resolute Support Mission* forces. In a solemn statement, the North Atlantic Council Ministerial affirmed that the pull-out would be "orderly, coordinated, and deliberate" and coined the motto *'in together, out together'*.¹ With hindsight, this critical juncture in the spring of 2022 stands as a moment of grave error in the West's leadership and judgment.

In its essence, military planning is about preparing for every scenario. But NATO acted on an optimistic 'fair weather' outlook where Afghanistan's security forces would hold the country (or at least Kabul), and international diplomats and civilian efforts could stay to support the political and economic transition. In the

following months, NATO and other troops withdrew on schedule, but civilians remained behind. As the media and public eventually discovered, the US and its NATO Allies had made no provision for a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) should matters turn to the worse.

Two Dutch ministers resigned over the ensuing debacle. Yet they had not been alone: the US set the calendar for the military withdrawal, but decisions were collectively endorsed by NATO and, largely, by the broader Western community. The case of the EU is interesting. In more than ten meetings from early 2021 to mid-July, the FAC stayed conspicuously silent on Afghanistan, as if underscoring a division of roles in Brussels: from beginning to end, Afghanistan was the US' and NATO's responsibility. Yet as the Taliban circled in on Kabul in the summer, threatening not only a collapse of the regime but also thousands of EU civilians, that position became untenable. Over the subsequent weeks in August, the EU's political leadership and civilian and military crisis management capacities were called upon to support national evacuation efforts led by the most capable member states.

If the anecdotes are many and disturbing, the analysis of what went wrong in Kabul must focus on the critical junctures in the West's decision-making. In this regard, two moments stand out: the establishment of the military withdrawal schedule in mid-April, and August, when all the countries involved scrambled to get their civilians out too.

1. April – June 2021: Spring *'insouciance'*

THE US AND NATO DECIDE

When the Biden administration took office in January 2021, it was facing a worsening security situation in Afghanistan, with the Taliban steadily gaining ground and a set of bad options.² It could follow through with the January 2020 agreement between the Trump administration and the Taliban that would see all US troops out by 1 May 2021. It could continue the military presence and rethink negotiations with the Taliban and the Afghan government. Or it could stick to Trump's withdrawal decision, but on a different timeline.

As the 1 May deadline loomed, the option of immediate withdrawal became increasingly unrealistic. It also became evident that the US intended to leave sooner rather than later. On 14 April, Biden made his intentions clear: all US troops would leave Afghanistan by 11 September. The NATO Ministerial that took place on the same day effectively endorsed this decision:

*"Recognising that there is no military solution to the challenges Afghanistan faces, Allies have determined that we will start the withdrawal of Resolute Support Mission forces by May 1. [It will be] completed within a few months."*³

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in Brussels to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg for the announcement. But this show of partnership could not hide that, in reality, it was the US giving the marching orders. Despite the many tough, unanswered questions, the other Allies had "little choice but to salute smartly" and follow suit:⁴ 2,500 US troops and a further 7,000 from other NATO Allies were duly scheduled for withdrawal over the following months.⁵

... BUT FAIL TO PLAN

The degree of consultations among NATO Allies that went into the decision remains a contested fact. *Ex post* the UK defence secretary, Ben Wallace, has claimed that the UK

was so aghast at the US decision that it had, “alongside NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg”, canvassed “a number of key countries” to see if there was support for a reconfigured alliance.⁶ Stoltenberg, for his part, has played down any such discussions about continued troop presence, highlighting instead that no Allied country could keep its forces in Afghanistan without US military support.

What is certain is that there was both intelligence and public concern about the consequences of military withdrawal. On 9 April 2021, the US Intelligence Community’s Annual Threat Assessment warned that the “Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield, and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support.”⁷ In Germany, experts and officials worried in private that what was shaping up as an unconditional withdrawal would, in effect, hand Afghanistan to the Taliban.⁸

Yet, in public, NATO Allies put up a brave face, and optimism was the order of the day. While recognising it was “not a decision we hoped for”, the then UK Chief of

the Defence Staff, General Nick Carter, summed up the strategy of the moment:

“The Afghan armed forces are indeed much better trained than one might imagine. I think they could easily hold together and all of this could work out. We will just have to see.”⁹

THE EU LOOKS AWAY

Over at EU headquarters, the approach was different, but the results were the same. An analysis of publicly available documents from the EU Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) meetings shows a conspicuous lack of attention to Afghanistan. Between mid-January and mid-July 2021, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP), Josep Borrell held more than 11 meetings with the member states’ foreign affairs or defence ministers. In 9 of these, Afghanistan was neither on the agenda nor mentioned in background briefs and records of discussions (see Infobox 1).

INFOBOX 1: AFGHANISTAN NOT A PRIORITY OF EU FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL MEETINGS BETWEEN JANUARY AND JULY 2021

Foreign Affairs Council, 25 January: Afghanistan not on agenda, nor in public background brief and records.

Foreign Affairs Council, 22 February, including videoconference with US State Secretary Blinken: First high-level interaction between the EU and new US administration. In a broad list of topics, ranging from transatlantic dialogue, COVID-19 vaccines and recovery, and climate change, the discussion “touched on international opportunities and challenges such as relations with China and Russia, Iran and security and defence.”¹⁰ No specific mention of Afghanistan.

European Council videoconference, 25-26 February, including an exchange of views on EU-NATO relations with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg. The European Council debated COVID-19 travel restrictions, vaccines, health and solidarity with third countries, and EU-NATO relations. Security and defence were also on the agenda, but focused on the Strategic Compass. No specific mention of Afghanistan.

Foreign Affairs Council, 22 March: Afghanistan not on agenda, nor in public background brief and records.

Informal videoconference of FAC, 19 April: Afghanistan not on the agenda, nor in public background brief and records.

Informal video conference of FAC (Development), 29 April: Afghanistan not on the agenda, nor in public background brief and records.

Foreign Affairs Council (Defence), 6 May, including an informal working lunch with NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg: The exchange covered “operational engagement in theatres of common interest, from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan.”¹¹ Ministers also discussed how missions and operations could be launched more

quickly and the idea of an initial entry force that could be deployed as a ‘first responder’ in an urgent crisis.

Foreign Affairs Council, 10 May: Afghanistan not on the agenda, nor in public background brief and records.

Informal videoconference of FAC, 18 May: Afghanistan not on the agenda, nor in public background brief and records.

European Union Military Committee (EUMC) meeting, 19 May: EU chiefs of defence met with High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Borrell and discussed the Strategic Compass, the EU Battlegroup and the Common Security and Defence Policy military missions and operations, together with the chair of the NATO Military Committee, Sir Stuart Peach, they also discussed the state of play of EU-NATO cooperation.¹² No specific mention of Afghanistan.

Informal meeting of foreign affairs ministers (Gymnich) and defence ministers, 27-28 May, including dinner with NATO Secretary General. Afghanistan not formally on the agenda but likely discussed.

Foreign Affairs Council, 21 June: Afghanistan not on the agenda, nor in public background brief and records.

Foreign Affairs Council, 12 July: Afghanistan on the agenda, in public background brief and records. “Ministers also addressed the situation in Afghanistan, in light of the withdrawal of US and NATO troops and the increase in ethnically motivated targeted attacks. In this context, the High Representative emphasised the need to urge the Taliban to engage in substantive and inclusive peace negotiations, and to reach out to countries in the region and the broader international community to play a constructive role in support of the Afghan peace process.”¹³

INFOBOX 2: THE EU'S 'DUTY OF CARE'

The EU has a 'duty of care' linked to its missions, operations and presence through delegations and offices in some 140 countries across the world. This duty is notably set out in the 'Security rules for the European External Action Service', applying to all staff under the EEAS' responsibility regardless of their administrative status or origin, as well as their dependents (i.e. family members).¹⁹ The duty is defined as taking all reasonable steps to implement security measures to prevent reasonably foreseeable harm, including those resulting from emergencies or crises. If the security situation so requires, it also covers evacuation.

EU delegations, missions and operations have security and contingency plans, which might also cover evacuations, depending on the situation. Given the EU's lack of means, non-combatant evacuation operations in non-permissive environments are, in practice, conferred to an EU member state. The security rules foresee that the EEAS establishes

administrative arrangements to address the respective roles, responsibilities, tasks and cooperation mechanisms in such situations. The EEAS is also responsible for putting in place appropriate alert state measures to anticipate or respond to threats.

In the case of an evacuation, the EU will draw up a list of 'entitled persons'. Priorities are established based on different categories of relations with the EU, which can extend beyond EU nationals, staff and their families to contractors and other persons involved in EU activities in a country. Responsibility to protect can also be argued in relation to broader categories of civil society. The EU Guidelines on protecting human rights defenders identify ways and means to promote and protect human rights defenders in third countries under the Common Foreign and Security Policy.²⁰ While not excluding evacuation being part of such efforts, it is not explicitly mentioned.

The notable exception is the meeting of 6 May, where defence ministers had an informal working lunch with NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg that covered the "operational engagement in theatres of common interest, from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan".¹⁴ That said, beyond expressing the wish to preserve the gains of the last 20 years and an update on the drawdown of forces, it was far from a substantial, critical examination of the potential consequences of troop withdrawal.¹⁵ The meeting was a formality, not an in-depth exchange on the exit strategy from Afghanistan. Interestingly, the ministers also discussed – in the abstract and not linked to the situation in Afghanistan – how EU missions and operations could be launched more quickly, with an 'initial entry force' deployed as a 'first responder' in urgent crisis.¹⁶

EU foreign affairs ministers then addressed the issue of Afghanistan only on 12 July, at a moment when most European allies were finalising the withdrawal of their forces. As highlighted by the public record, the emphasis on the eve of the summer was on getting the Taliban to engage in peace negotiations.¹⁷ Undeniably, there was an increased sense of urgency as the Taliban made territorial gains, but the state of mind remained that Kabul would not fall any time soon. As another sad, ironic coincidence of the calendar, the ministers also lauded themselves for having prepared in "record time" a new EU training mission and examined the need for an air bridge, not for Afghanistan, but for Mozambique and Ethiopia.¹⁸

2. July – August 2021: Summer 'sauve qui peut'

MOVING OUT, MOVING IN

With the Western troop withdrawal underway, the Taliban made further territorial gains and, by June, were preparing offensives on key cities.²¹ NATO forces were also fast on the move – but *out* of the country. The US set the direction and pace; Spanish and Swedish troops left Afghanistan in May. In mid-June, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, Romania, and Norway followed suit. Towards the end of that month, over 4,800 non-US forces had left Afghanistan.²²

"Mission accomplished, you have fulfilled your task", the last returning German soldiers were told as they arrived at Wunstorf Air Base on 29 June.²³ The day after, the last Italian and Polish troops returned home, too. In early July, with the closure of its largest base in Afghanistan, Bagram Airfield, the US withdrawal was

more than 90% complete.²⁴ President Biden decided to accelerate further, moving the schedule for complete *troop* withdrawal to 31 August. Despite acknowledging that the Taliban was at its strongest militarily since 2001, a full *civilian* retreat from Afghanistan was not envisaged. The US administration and its allies were still in denial about the possibility of an imminent Taliban takeover.

Meanwhile, others were becoming concerned. Weeks later, the UN Security Council was briefed on the 'seismic tremor' in Afghanistan due to this swift withdrawal of international troops. As public scrutiny grew, allies increasingly started encouraging their citizens to leave. On 14 July, the US decided to launch *Operation Allies Refuge* to evacuate at-risk Afghan civilians as of the end of that month. Yet preparations for large-scale airlift were not the order of the day. In fact, the one ally that seemed to anticipate the worst, France, met stiff criticism for

doing so.²⁵ France was already telling its citizens to leave and started evacuating hundreds of Afghans working for its embassy and French organisations in May. On 17 July, France issued a final warning to its remaining citizens to leave and organised a special flight.²⁶

EXIT AT GUNPOINT

In August, matters went from bad to worse. The Taliban advanced quickly, winning significant ground. With Herat and Kandahar already under siege when Kunduz also fell in the morning of 8 August, it seemed only a matter of time before the Taliban would go for Kabul. On 12 August, the US government decided to deploy 3,000 US combat troops to secure the airport, a number which later became 5,000. The evacuation of US embassy personnel, nationals and Afghans applying for protection had finally been decided.²⁷

Herat fell the next day, and everything accelerated. NATO’s remaining civilian personnel relocated to the airport to prepare for evacuations. As the Taliban stormed Kabul on 15 August, Afghanistan’s President Ashraf Ghani fled, and a mad scramble for the airport started. US and Taliban representatives met in Doha to negotiate

the terms of safe departure, and US troops established security perimeters at the airport. On 17 August, NATO’s Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan, Stefano Pontecorvo, tweeted, “Runway in HKIA #Kabul international airport is open. I see airplanes landing and taking off #Afghanistan”.²⁸ The race against the clock to get as many out of Kabul as possible had started.

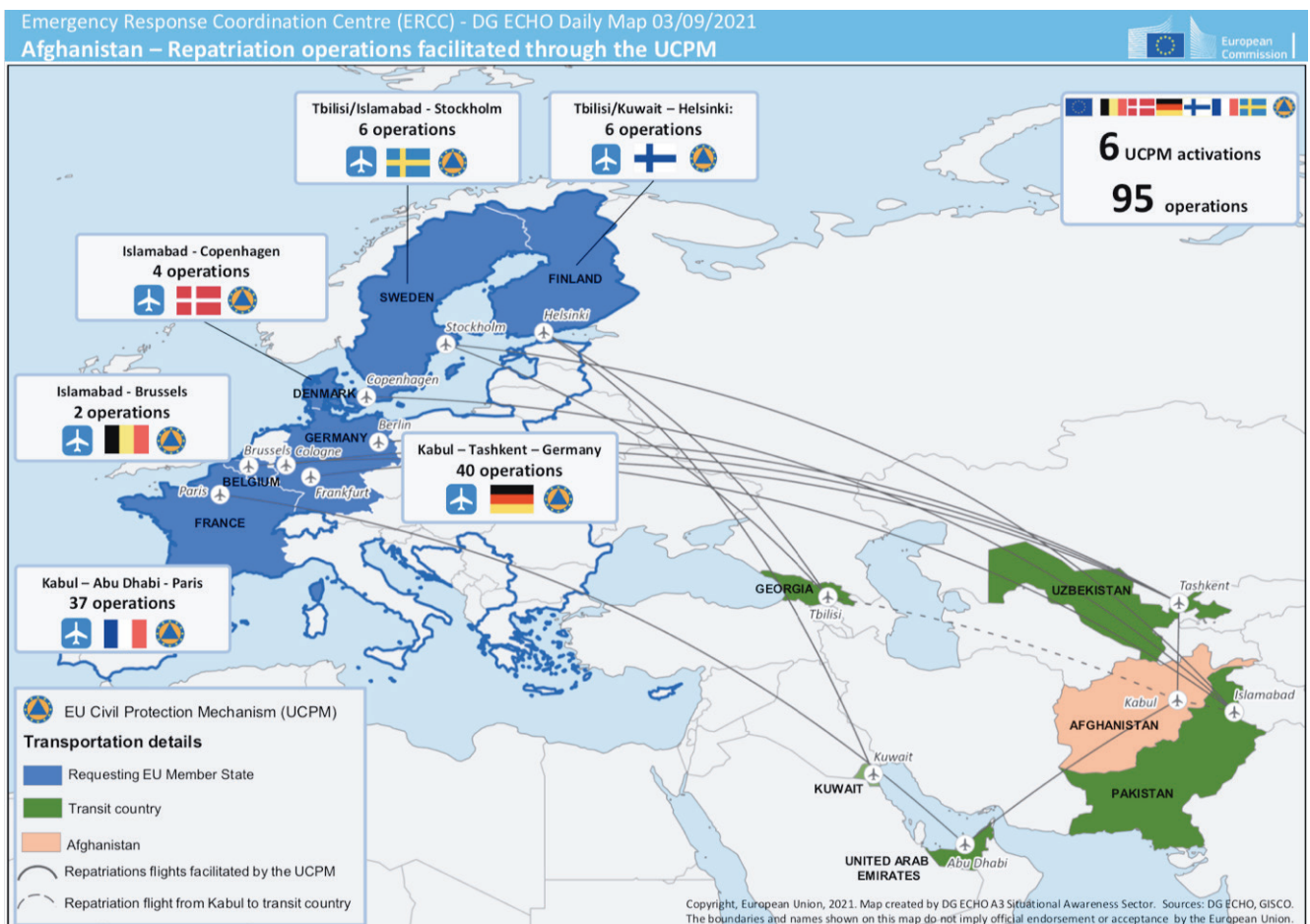
Over the next ten days, an average of 120 flights per day would depart Kabul under the disbelieving eyes of the world’s TV cameras while thousands of Afghans massed around the airport. The first few days, planes took off almost empty as all countries struggled to process documentation of would-be passengers. Yet with necessity and shared effort, efficiency improved quickly, evacuating more than 125,000 people in 14 days. While the US took on the main security tasks, according to NATO statistics, European Allies conducted 40% of the evacuation flights.²⁹

THE EU MAKES UP FOR LOST TIME

EU institutions had prepared no better than anyone else and seemed blindsided by the speed of events and decisions. Quite astonishingly, the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangements that monitor crises

Fig. 2

EU CIVIL PROTECTION MECHANISM REPATRIATION FLIGHTS



INFOBOX 3: EU INSTITUTIONS' ON-THE-GROUND EVACUATION DRAMA IN KABUL (15-25 AUGUST 2021)

When the Taliban entered Kabul on **15 August**, the EU institutions were largely unprepared. Neither the central services in Brussels nor the EU Delegation to Afghanistan was staffed and ready for an evacuation effort in the timeframe set by the US retreat and at the scale required by the EU's duty of care.

A few uncertain days followed, informed as much by TV images as by reliable information on the ground. In Brussels, at the European External Action Service (EEAS) headquarters, it was a time for improvisation. In Kabul, the EU Delegation swiftly relocated to Kabul Airport, where remaining staffers set up at the makeshift French compound in the airport guarded by French special forces.

On **19 August**, the Director of Operations of the EU Military Staff (EUMS), a General by rank, was called to duty to lead the EU institutions' evacuation efforts and coordination with EU member states, the US and other actors in Kabul. The EU Ambassador to Afghanistan was no longer in Kabul, and a flag officer was needed on the ground to coordinate with counterparts of similar ranks.

When the EUMS Director of Operations arrived on **20 August**, the EU Delegation was comprised of a recently arrived *chargé d'affaires*, an official from the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), two political analysts from EEAS, two majors dispatched by EUMS for reinforcement, and the regional security officer. The EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan was also present. Security and operational support were ensured by Belgian and French means.

The EU Delegation had three priority groups of 'entitled persons' for evacuation. Priority 1: Delegation staff, including local staff and their close families. Priority 2: Contractors for the Delegation. Priority 3: Local staff that previously worked with EU Police Mission. These groups totalled around 2,000 people.

Given the situation on the ground, it was not possible to extract people from the city. A convoy system was therefore put in place. Civilian buses were hired to pick up entitled persons which were notified and directed to a meeting point via WhatsApp. By agreement with the Taliban (through US intermediation), busses could pass through Taliban checkpoints based on their licence plates, the driver's identity and the number of people on board.

Every country had its own system at the airport gates to signal to and physically extract people from the crowd

(e.g. Belgians waved the Belgian flag). A security check was performed outside the gates, whereas the identity verifications took place inside the airport under conditions of great human drama. Entitled persons would be directed onto the planes. Non-eligible persons (e.g. extended family) would, in principle, be ousted again.

With thousands massed for days at the gates in brutish conditions, the sight and sound of human suffering and despair mixed with a sense of uncertainty and threat. Thanks to the 'Team Europe' approach, progress on evacuating the Priority 1 and 2 groups was relatively positive. The EUMS Director of Operations, the *chargé d'affaires* and the DG ECHO official worked as a decision-making team.

In the early stages of the evacuation, European and US planes departed almost empty. Through ad hoc coordination between EU member states, evacuees were soon efficiently distributed towards all available seats. Similarly, coordination between European militaries played a key role in making the convoy model work, with multiple member states providing resources to others (e.g. force protection, transportation, security checks, logistics).

By **24 August**, reports emerged of possible terrorist infiltrations in the airport, and the risk of an attack was growing. It was decided that the night of 26 August would be the last with EU evacuees to leave. Part of the EU team left on **25 August** with the last plane of the Belgian contingent. The following day, another part left with the Italian contingent, marking the end of the evacuation of the EU Delegation.

From the accounts we have gathered, a high percentage of the Priority 1 and Priority 2 groups were evacuated. In contrast, the evacuation rate of Priority 3 was low. The EU delegation was able to evacuate all its staff, including 430 local staff and their families, and 75 contractors at risk. Still, at least 300 Afghan personnel and their families who had worked with the EU Police Mission (EUPOL) to Afghanistan could not be evacuated.³¹

French, Italian, German and Belgian efforts, in particular, provided critical support for the extraction, evacuation and repatriation of EU personnel. After initial difficulties to find EU countries willing to take in evacuated EU local staff, they were eventually flown to Spain and then resettled in various countries.

and support decision-making were never activated, neither before nor during the summer of 2021. From when the US announced the deployment of troops for the airlift to when the FAC finally met virtually on 17 August, five full days had passed. By then, a large number of member states were expressing the necessity and expectation that the EU would coordinate European efforts in addition to those at national, NATO and US levels.

The day before, on 16 August, France activated the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) to coordinate and co-finance evacuation flights. At the FAC of 17 August, member states called for European solidarity in repatriating EU citizens and local staff. Over the next few days, things moved quickly. The EU had no mission or operations plan ready, but what was lacking in formal

planning and structures was made up for by active information exchange, improvised coordination and strong *de facto* cooperation.

The EU established a dedicated cross-institutional crisis cell of more than 100 staff, bringing together the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU Military Staff (EUMS) and the European Commission's Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC). EU staff was deployed to Kabul to aid the EU institutions' evacuation efforts and assist with on-the-ground coordination between member states and with the US and NATO (see Infobox 3). Between 15 and 30 August, the EU supported the evacuation of more than 17,500 people from Kabul, including 4,100 EU nationals and 13,400 Afghans.³⁰

Conclusion

The conditions of the August 2021 evacuation from Kabul were nothing short of chaotic. In the heat of the action in mid-August, Bundeswehr planes circled the capital, ran out of fuel and could not land, or returned home all but empty as evacuees could not be brought to the airport.³³ Dutch armed forces left Afghan interpreters behind, contradicting a parliamentary commitment that everyone who worked for the Netherlands would be evacuated.³⁴ In the UK, thousands of emails from at-risk Afghans were left unread for days.³⁵

Failure in the responsibility to protect is manifest in the case of NATO and most allies. The analysis of what went wrong in Kabul and the critical junctures in the West's decision-making, shows that this dereliction of prudence, planning and duty also extends to the EU. As the last planes left Kabul on 30 August, the EU left (former) local staff behind.

List of abbreviations

CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
DG	Directorate-General
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
DSK	Division Schnelle Kräfte
EEAS	European External Action Service
ERCC	Emergency Response Coordination Centre
EUMS	EU Military Staff
EUCPM	EU Civil Protection Mechanism
FAC	Foreign Affairs Council
HR/VP	EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
IPCR	Integrated Political Crisis Response
NEO	non-combatant evacuation operation
PSC	Political and Security Committee
RDC	Rapid Deployment Capacity
RSM	Resolute Support Mission
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

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