

THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU) IN AFGHANISTAN AFTER AUGUST 2021: THE LOGIC OF PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

The processes of peacemaking, mediation, and compromise are complex for a country visited by violence. This article explores whether the European Union (EU) would impose its values (human and individual rights), or settle for viable solutions while aiming to encourage the Afghan government to embrace diplomacy. The EU's policy advice documents show a commitment to building support according to the western formats. This article investigates the central question 'regarding whether opportunities exist "in" and "through" practice when EU officials' practical sense makes diplomacy the self-evident way to interact with Afghanistan' by applying the practice approach to the EU embroiled in Afghanistan after August 2021. It considers diplomacy as a development connected to social relations and views micro-level dynamics as the site within which to construct diplomacy. It builds on a research design framed by the theoretical concepts offered by the practice approach and by the three parameters that shape the analytical methodology supporting a paradigm shift for the EU. The research agenda also includes insights into developments in Afghanistan, after August 2021, because this shapes the knowledge base necessary for the EU to meditate on how to change its approach toward dealing with Afghanistan under the Taliban. As a supplementary to the literature on practice approaches and their implications for scholars interested in European studies, this empirical investigation argues that the EU's diplomatic practices should be represented by socially meaningful patterns of action if the EU aims to impact other countries in global politics, such as in this instance of seeking to re-orient events in Afghanistan. The primary sources of the European Parliament and Parliamentary debates are central in supporting this argument.

Keywords: European Union, Practice approach, diplomacy, peace, social relations, Afghanistan, Taliban

INTRODUCTION

On 14 September 2021, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP), Borrell, argued, in the European Parliament, that, for the EU to 'reorient' events in Afghanistan, there was no option but to 'engage with the Taliban. The minister was cautious regarding the recognition that the Taliban regime had taken power by forming the government. Discussions with the Taliban were to be made possible with the assistance of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Union's diplomatic division, where the situation on the ground

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was sufficiently safe for the EU's presence in Kabul (HR/VP/b, 2021). Almost a month after Borrell had spoken about reorienting events in Afghanistan, the spectre of a humanitarian crisis there alarmed the EU and the member states. The EU believed that positive interactions with the Taliban could be built. Relations with the Taliban were to be facilitated by Qatar which was playing a substantial diplomatic role in the region. Doha was home to the Taliban's political office and a strategic protagonist in dealing with the new situation in Afghanistan (HR/VP/c, 2021). Doha's link meant the easing of relations with the authorities in Kabul and a connection to the western world, bridging the messaging to the Taliban concerning the European Union's expectations and those of the international community. Whilst Borrell was in Doha, Qatar's minister for foreign affairs entrusted the EU to 'reorient' the action of the new Afghan government (HR/VP/d, 2021).

How the EU would 'reorient' the action of the new Afghan government was difficult to predict. The EU had difficult relations with Afghanistan, on the one hand demanding 'behavioural conduct' (a balanced relationship between actions and norms), and on the other condemning its leaders. In 2018, it declared its support for an 'inclusive Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process with the government and the Taliban at its centre' (Council Conclusions, 2018, p. 3). At the same time, in the same European Council's conclusions, the EU censured the Taliban for their (criminal and ruthless) attacks on civilians and officials (p. 5). Later, the EU accused the group and urged them 'to enter formal peace negotiations' (p. 3). In fact, the EU focused on the talks held on 17th August 2021 (HR/VP/a, 2021) between the government in charge (Ghani) and the Taliban. In its official documents, the EU asked the Taliban to cease all ties and practices with international terrorism and not to become a sanctuary for extremists and organized crime again (Council of the EU, 2021). As recently as mid-September 2021, the European Council confronted the Taliban as actors who endangered others and fixed guidelines that the caretaker cabinet was to observe.

Yet, seeking to interact with the new government, the departure point was the West and the EU's failure to attempt to construct an Afghan state. The EU's reliance on Afghanistan's governors, rather than confronting the government's corrupt links to the drug trade and warlords, proved unsuccessful (Hassan, 2020, p. 86). The dimension of terrorism and violence that was shielded under the principles of Afghan's sovereignty, the conviction that migration fluxes were detrimental, and particularly the belief in development and democratization as the 'best route' to global stability merged as the motivations explaining the EU and the member states' interest in engaging with Afghanistan (HR/VP/a, 2021).

The EU's policy advice documents show a commitment to building support according to the western formats, such as the European Commission's demands of satisfying rights-based approach working principles; applying all human rights for all; meaningful and inclusive participation and access to decision-making; non-discrimination and equality; accountability and rule of law for all; and transparency and access to information (European Commission, 2021, p. 28). Demanding the observance of these rules might be complex for a system based on different principles, carrying the risk that the EU diplomacy might engage in a difficult dialogue. Analyzing the political and institutional reconstruction in Afghanistan, Thier & Chopra (2002) and Freeman (2002) questioned the criteria: Will the international

community superimpose its own values on ethnic representation and gender equality, or settle for what is politically expedient and perhaps the only viable solution? The European Union's diplomatic service might find a role by relating to the Taliban government and helping to construct diplomacy. It is the European External Action Service of the EU's capillary distribution within the territory and among people that matters and made sense. Their active presence may serve as a bridge between the EU's claims (freedom and rights, among others) and the reality in the field. A change might be necessary for the EU to deal with Afghanistan under the Taliban, especially if it aims to impact other countries in global politics. Hence, a new direction becomes vital, and hence the need to devise a paradigm shift for the EU.

This is an empirical investigation that locates itself in the debate about practice approaches and EU diplomacy. It aims at exploring the central question regarding whether opportunities exist 'in' and 'through' practice when EU officials' practical sense makes diplomacy the self-evident way to interact with Afghanistan (Pouliot, 2008, p. 284). It employs the practice approach to the EU related to Afghanistan after August 2021. It relies on primary sources that are useful bases to lead us away from the expedients that failed in the past. The primary sources include official documents released by the European institutions and EU diplomats and the European Parliament (the European Council's Conclusions, the Council of the European Union's statements, and the Action Documents from the European Union, the Guidelines from the European Commission, the European Commission's Financing measures, and the Motion for a resolution from the European Parliament, and the statements by the High Representative and Vice President of the European Union). All of these sources contribute to explaining the situation on the ground. Also, scholars' studies contextualizing the Taliban, and reports by specialists who operated in Afghanistan provide valuable comments. Similarly, scholars that studied the situations of human conflicts, and were involved in negotiating agreements, offer suggestions about the foreseeable expectations of the Taliban connected with the local communities, the government, and the EU. Declarations made by representatives of the Taliban government and other secondary sources are important as well.

The article is organized as follows. The *first section* concentrates on the practice theory, its relations with social change, and its contribution to demonstrating how informal practices interact with changes in European diplomacy. It proposes the article's understanding of 'practice', the logic of practice, and 'diplomacy', shows how the literature was influenced by several inputs in international relations (IR), and traces the practice approaches' contributions to European studies. Arguing for a paradigm change for the EU, the article adapts the practice approach. The *second section* deals with the methodology and elaborates the elements of the proposed approach. The second part of the article concerns the data and analysis that support *sections three* and *four*. The first of the two sections offer insights into developments in Afghanistan during the three months subsequent to August 2021 (the Taliban government's governing style, social restrictions, and security issues). This evidence serves as a knowledge base that the EU needs in order to reflect on what diplomatic practices might be useful for intervening in the field. Next, *section four* examines in greater detail how the EU would engage with Afghanistan under the Taliban seeking to inspire peace and reconciliation. It highlights the contribution of the European Parliament and how the debate and the practice approach intertwine.

A DIFFICULT CHALLENGE AND AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH?

Employing the practice approach to the EU related to Afghanistan after August 2021 means getting closer to the mechanisms of European diplomatic practices aimed at generating European foreign policy. Practices can be explained as different people's activities (Schatzki, 2001, p. 13). To offer a nuanced definition of 'practices' in IR, I look at scholars' definitions of the word and the concepts behind it to avoid the misperception of interpreting the logic of practice as a logic based on common sense. An early supporter of the practice turn, Neumann (2002), contends that especially in IR we have to remind ourselves that the linguistic turn and the turn to discourse analysis are involved from the beginning of a turn to practices (p. 627). This is justified by the belief that the language and discourse analysis is valuable to grasp the pre-conditions for action, but still requires the study of practices to explain how international and European politics unfold (p. 628). Practices, Neumann argues, 'are discursive...in the sense that practice cannot be thought "outside of" discourse' (p. 628). However, no definitional consistency exists among practice followers. Depending on how the literature is organised and with what consequences, Bourbeau (2017) distinguished four different forms of a practice approach (comprehensive, complementary, discursive, and relational). All of them seek to shed light on the 'role that practices play in socially constructing our political world' (p. 170). This is an important point we gain in terms of building up an understandable definition of the practice approach.

Within the landscape of 'practices as socially constructing our political world', Neumann went further by specifying practices as conducted 'based on what people learn from others' (Neumann, 2015, p. 160; Bourbieu, 2017, p. 173). For Adler and Pouliot (2011, p. 10), practices are considered 'the ontological core concept that amalgamates the constitutive parts of social international life' (Bourbieu, 2017, p. 171). Pouliot's (2008) 'comprehensive' form (Bourbieu, 2017, p. 171) seeks to establish the priority of practice in all social actions. 'Conceiving of practices as socially meaningful patterns of activities' provides common ground for students of international practices (Pouliot & Cornut, 2015, p. 301) and allows us to adopt this interpretation as a working definition. Hence, in this article, we believe practices as socially meaningful patterns of activities as asserted by Pouliot and Cornut (2015, p. 301) play a significant role in socially constructing our political world (Bourbeau, 2017, p. 170), and explaining how international and European politics unfold (Neumann, 2002, p. 268).

This investigation deals with diplomacy. Our understanding of diplomacy and how it relates to the practice theory or approach, rest on the observation that diplomacy intersects three stages of practice: first, diplomacy is a process; second, it is relational; and third, it is political (Pouliot & Cornut, 2015, p. 299). A more refined explanation suggests that diplomatic practices 'embody forms of know-how and competence that are socially meaningful and recognizable at the level of action' (p. 299). In other words, we consider diplomacy as a process where all those engaged in finding solutions to problems (individuals, groups, communities, states or groups of states) are involved (Bicchi, 2016). We believe that diplomacy bears a relation to peace to the extent that it aims at the peaceful resolution of disputes and disagreements. Hence,

peace designates a process, and a set of practices that, dynamically, tend to reach and shape ‘reconciliation and compromise’.

The literature

An examination of the literature shows us how this approach was influenced by several inputs. The agenda implying that practice theory operates as complementing the language and discourse analysis was retaken by Adler and Pouliot (2011) contending that the analysis of practices can offer the basis for a productive exchange among realists, liberals, constructivists, and post-structuralists. It was re-launched by Bueger and Gadinger (2015), who posit that practice theory embraces various theoretical commitments such as an emphasis on process rather than stasis, and attention to the material underpinnings of the social. On their side, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014) claim that in the practices of multilateral diplomacy, competence can function as an inherent basis of power that other (IR) theories cannot perceive. Kustermans (2016) asserts that when debating about practices, (IR) scholars do not discuss one entity, but about three: the multiple conducts of human behaviour, the practical knowledge that leads this behaviour, and the institutions in which it is sited. The supporters of these concepts argue that practice theory allows for inter-paradigmatic conversation, to better conceptualize social change, and get closer to the routine actions of the persons dedicated to international politics, understand materiality, and advance forms of analysis concentrating on practitioner communities (Wille, 2020).

A significant body of literature on practice approaches and implications for scholars concerned with European studies also materialized. Bicchi (2016) shows how Europe performs on the ground by exploring the activity of European practitioners within a geographical and political area. Graeger (2016) explains how informal practices of cooperation expanded and interacted with different institutions and levels of responsibility by focusing on EU-NATO relations, and Bremberg (2016) demonstrates how a range of positions and related knowledge concerning the EU’s Mediterranean policies constituted a basis from which EU diplomats and officials acted. Chelotti (2016) offers an insight into continuity and changes in European diplomacy, by examining the weekly negotiations among diplomats within the Council of the EU, and contends that altering nationally oriented ways of performing an action is problematic, even in a highly institutionalised situation such as EU foreign policy. Bueger (2016), re-examining several practices of the EU in the field of international counter-piracy, discusses how the EU changed from a minor actor into an international leader in combating piracy, and debates its international actorness from the viewpoint of a relational perspective. Hence, distinctive readings diversely contribute to the patterns, mechanisms, and processes of European diplomatic practices. These include how European diplomacy is created, how practices evolve in European diplomacy, and how the mechanisms through practices are important to politics develop in the case of European diplomacy (Bicchi & Bremberg, 2016, p. 392, pp. 402-403).

An Approach for the EU

What do we gain from this conversation regarding the practice approach that would be useful to this investigation linking the EU to the Taliban? As mentioned, this article would ultimately suggest the lessons that the EU would learn after the failure in Afghanistan. Furthermore, this investigation believes it possible that the European Union's diplomatic service engaged in helping the construction of diplomacy there. Interestingly for the present investigation, we found a 'reading' of the practice approaches that encompassed cases of diplomats, or simply operators, performing their activities in a way that drew our attention. As Pouliot (2008, p.281) explains, these operators build tools and try materials that work and discard others that do not, following their inspiration to change the shape of the object incrementally. The 'following inspiration' as a means of proceeding to interact with the Taliban and 'change the shape of the object' by encouraging peace and reconciliation is a useful proposition. As Pouliot suggests, European officials' (EEAS officers') diplomatic practices do not necessarily follow a rational or structural pattern, but rather a haphazard, creative and combinatorial configuration (p. 281). These officials enjoy certain autonomy, and their room for manoeuvre depends not so much on the explicit rules of the institution they belong to, but more on what can be achieved in and through practice despite recognized constraints (Pouliot, 2008, p. 281; Cross, 2007). They 'continue to think about a variety of policies' (either instrumentally or normatively), but 'take for granted that all possible options for solving mutual disputes begin within the diplomatic practice' (Pouliot, 2008, p. 280). Their horizon of possibilities is defined by a set of diplomatic courses of action. These officials might end up with a new paradigm for the EU.

We might consider Afghanistan as a chance, or even an opportunity, whereby officials from the EU, or the EEAS, in their role as the EU's diplomatic division, attempt to create peaceful relationships within the nation (or external to it) constructed on diplomacy. This connects with the argument of this research central question. According to the logic of practice, 'peace' (potentially) exists in and through practice when European/EEAS officials' practical sense makes diplomacy the self-evident way of solving disputes (Pouliot, 2008, p. 284). During the week from 6th September 2021, either the EU, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Borrell (HR/VP/b, 2021), or member states, the Italian Institute of International Affairs (Ronzitti, 2021), stated that there was no hurry to recognize the Taliban government. Their affirmation suggests that the European Union as well as the member states reasoned along similar terms that diplomacy is perhaps still possible. In the introduction, we questioned whether the EU would impose its own values when dealing with Afghanistan under the Taliban, or settle for what is politically expedient, and we argued for a change of course for the EU. Therefore, the section below discusses the paradigm shift and the parameters that shape the change.

THE METHODOLOGY

There are different implications in terms of how the EU might engage with the Taliban that the practice approach highlights. Only involving rational actors on each side proved insufficient. Rational actor does not capture the underlying political and

‘human psychology’ (Monroe & Hill, 1995, p. 1) and ‘suffer[s] for a representational bias’ (Pouliot, 2008, p. 259). The purpose of interacting with the Taliban was to move away from a confrontational tone. By exporting ‘democratic institutions’ there was no equal to barter to win the attention of the Taliban (Sakwa, 2018). Trying to impose alien value systems on populations that were already committed to different values produced no constructive effects (p. 1660). Avoiding reproducing the zero-sum logic of the politics unable to offer ‘constructive practices’ was a vital goal (Sakwa, 2018, p. 1660).

Yet trying to understand what to reject from western governments and the EU’s failed activities, theorists enquired about which criteria to follow when interacting with Afghanistan (Sen, 2007). Violence and violent groups can immensely contribute to generating a political climate in which the most peaceful of people come to tolerate the most egregious acts of brutality (Sen, 2007, p. 1). However, ‘the ways and means of pursuing...civil routes make a great many demands’ on thinkers¹ (p. 2). Theorists, however, also recommend the need for overcoming ‘flammable readings of the world’ (p. 2). They also ask what makes the violent groups, the Taliban, willing to fight to the death, which is a distinct component of their behaviour (Sen, 2007, p. 2-3). We know how strongly the practice approach recommends focusing on micro-level dynamics as the site within which to build diplomacy (and peace). We have also learned the value that practice theory gives to social relations as a context in which diplomacy may flourish.

Practice theorists insist that the ‘possibility of violence’ diminishes if a set of diplomatic actions is arranged (Pouliot, 2008, p. 280). They believe that ‘one thing’ the Taliban extremists are right about more than foreign actors is how the local communities are embedded in thinking and feeling. They seem to suggest that the change of tack might also involve trying to deal more closely with the group’s extremists via an intensified dialogue (Sen, 2007, p. 83; Alderdice, 2021). Hence, building on what exists and operating within the local social context as the practice approach indicates, the EU might seek consensual ways forward.

Aiming at the Taliban’s involvement in the processes targeted at stopping violence and promoting peaceful governance, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy confirmed that EEAS experts (who operated in Afghanistan) would provide valuable assistance on the ground for dealing with the Taliban (HR/VP/b, 2021). With the EU interacting with the Taliban through diplomacy, with the view that the Taliban would share practices contributing to an enduring peaceful future, the logic of practice distinguishes a set of analytical parameters or processes. These are cyclical, mutually reinforcing and overlapping, and distinctively kept for analytical purposes only: building on what exists; bringing extremists to the table and seeking consensual ways forward.

- i. Building on what exists. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic and mainly tribal society,² with a population that includes several linguistic groups. An important breakthrough in the process of consensus building within the country would be the recognition that obstacles to making peace reflect the troubled historic relationships (Northern non-Pashtun fighters, Taliban vis-à-vis Hazara, the Sikh community, the Islamic State-Khorasan, Salafi clerics, and also the Afghan security forces and Salafi forces, to quote a few (Watkins, 2021, p. 10)). Each group should aim to understand the other groups’ claims

and try to agree on what responses would ideally fit all. The EEAS specialists should operate in order to facilitate the groups' exchanges. This process is a lengthy and challenging course of interaction and socialization.

- ii. Bringing extremists to the table. This decision implies engaging with the fighting mates and demands that they talk when divergences make this process difficult. It aims to obtain answers concerning what it is that they are right about (Sen, 2007, 84; Alderdice, 2021; Spinney, 2021). Extremists may say that they are right regarding the feelings of the people in their own local communities. The practice approach would show its character of being 'situationally specific' to the extent that practices are entrenched in the communities where the approach is applied (Adler-Nissen & Pouliot, 2014, p. 896).
- iii. Seeking consensual ways forward. Despite several meetings, it might happen that the Taliban leadership, its affiliates and adversaries, the security forces, and the representatives of the local communities show no readiness to compromise, stop violence and commit to a real peace process. The Taliban may follow their own political agenda, and may not blame themselves for refusing to change; they may accuse those who refused to meet them. While the doubt might arise that these people are not ready to discuss a respectable compromise (Alderdice, 2021), the EU, on the other hand, has no doubt that lacking interaction, the Taliban would return to violence. Hence, as it confirms in its stabilization programme on Afghanistan (EU, 2021), the EU persists in promoting practices aiming at conciliation.

Backed by the European Commission and European Council, the EU's diplomatic structure of the European External Action Service would play a prime role in engaging itself with developing diplomatic practices with Afghanistan under the Taliban.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Having defined the methodology of analysis (the paradigm shift), the article focuses on the data collected regarding what the EU would find in Afghanistan. This analysis is essential for understanding 'how' the EU might interact with the Taliban, aiming at encouraging diplomacy and peace. The data garnered by the article on the situation in the field rely on documents by scholars located currently or recently in Afghanistan, or who have conducted interviews with Afghans, or have informants there, and also foreign media. These data give us an opportunity to get close to the reality there. We are interested in the 'governing style', problems of 'security', and 'social restrictions' because these three shapes the knowledge base necessary for the EU to mediate, project, and organise how to intervene with its diplomatic practices in the area. The reader will also find the positions of the EU regarding the matters under analysis. With an eye on the parameters of the paradigm shift, we examine the first three months of the Taliban's government, and how the Taliban behaved. Here, practice theory contributes to leading the observation of the social dynamics in the field, wherever practicable. It also urges the focus to be placed on micro-level situations to perceive whether constructing diplomacy would appear feasible.

The EU looking at the field

Governing style

When, on 6th September, the EU stated that there was no urgency to acknowledge the Taliban government (HR/VP/b, 2021) it probably attempted to reason along the practice approach as follows: ‘diplomacy is the commonsensical way to go’ (Pouliot, 2008, p. 280). Two days later, an interviewed Taliban fighter stated that yesterday, they were revolutionaries and today winners’ (*Financial Times*, 2021), simply expressing the truth that they were now allowed to talk about ‘diplomacy’. The situation that the EU found on the ground was complex with charges that the Taliban’s government (the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) needed to address. Regarding the concerns, the caretaker government was almost unable to deliver any services (Donati & Stancati, 2021). In addition, everyone who had influence could try to shape it in a way that would make space for what they hoped would happen (Toremark, 2021). How many components of the former government (the Islamic Republic) might form an armed resistance remained a further uncertainty (Watkins, 2021, p. 2). Therefore, the Taliban’s trust in the insurgency framework at the beginning of power taking was crucial (Ruttig, 2021, p. 5). Hence, upholding unity within the organization was a central concern. Regarding the tasks, the aspiration to remain unchallenged by foreign and western troops was central to the government. Also, giving substance to the sovereignty and independence of the state that they sought to build was a key struggle for the new administration (Toremark, 2021).

As the government worked on these tasks, the EU became aware of several developments on the ground: the Taliban did not shy away from the nature of their cabinet, which included 20 out of 33 officials on the United Nations sanctions list. It saw that the Taliban privileged former participation in the composition of the new cabinet, and favoured individuals who had held ministerial positions in the 1990s (BBC/a, 2021). It was understood that the Taliban’s governing style followed the preference for a ‘minimalist government’ based on firm control of public order and severe judicial practices to hold the country together (Jackson & Amiri, 2019; Watkins, 2021, p. 6).

Security

During the first few weeks following the Taliban’s entry into Kabul, when the group quickly moved to assert order over the capital, the EU and its member states decided that security was of major concern and that everything possible was to be done to eliminate the risks (Siebold, 2021). This feeling developed further after an Islamic bombing of Kabul (airport) raised security alerts. Based on the member states’ coordination, the EU made sure that the evacuation from the country continued undisturbed (European Parliament TT, 2021), and the Taliban entered a functional phase of coexistence, on their part agreeing to maintain peace and security (Watkins, 2021, p. 2). As the international presence contracted, the EU and member governments’ officials saw the group heightening their grasp and control over the evacuation practices, terms and conditions. It was a power flex exhibition. Examining these developments and the peaceful efforts made since 2001, EU foreign ministers alerted the Taliban that security was to be guaranteed, making clear that the country was at a new crossroads of conflict (Siebold, 2021).

The Taliban's conduct in security matters ranged from brutally violent actions to surprisingly clement behaviour. An indication of the violence was their opposition to one of the first anti-Taliban demonstrations (killing three protesters), while at the same time their leaders congregated with powerbrokers of the Islamic Republic, their former adversaries, seeking tacit cooperation and promises of fealty (Watkins, 2021, p. 2; BBC/b, 2021). In early November, the Taliban appointed a number of police chiefs at the provincial level showing major progress in moving the group into the state's administration (i24, 2021, p. 1). In addition, re-entering Afghanistan from the surrounding countries, Taliban fighters have re-taken office in the former government's police stations. However, with the fighting persisting and risks continuing, the desired authority of this group faded. They re-entered Taliban controlled several areas, conducting both constant patrols and periodic raids (Watkins, 2021, p. 2). The Taliban's approach to security seemed mostly a patchwork, revealing step-by-step development, at best, as their judgment of the events required.

From its side, the EU already fixed its way of proceeding: good governance meant preventing and managing the risks associated with an unstable Afghanistan. At the core of the EU's collective engagement with the country was cooperation with its partners in Central Asia. The EU conditioned the interaction with the Afghan government. There were several instruments that the EU and member states decided to use in order to apply a concerted approach to security in Afghanistan namely Europol, Frontex, Eurodac (the European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database), and the Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), established in November 2020, as a multi-purpose action on asylum, migration, and border management (European Commission, 2020). Similarly, the exchange of information and intelligence with third countries, respecting national competencies, and sharing threat assessments were the main instruments at the core of the EU's approach to Afghanistan (Council of the EU, 2021).

Social restrictions

The EU met with scepticism on the Taliban's claim that certain policies were only temporary. The Taliban's social restrictions on Afghan society exposed their pragmatic behaviour similar to the period of shadow governance as an insurgent group (Watkins, 2021, p. 10). The restrictions on women represented a truly provocative image. As recently as October 2021, the issue of girls' education became muddled when Taliban officials, stationed in four different provinces, endorsed an apparently liberal approach to tutoring and authorized girls to resume their schooling (Sharif, 2021, p. 1). This produced two narratives: on the one hand, it provides optimism that the Taliban might accept some evolution of their primitive approach as a regional variation to the enforcement of the social codes. On the other, it reminds the longstanding problem of the Afghan government's fear that some degree of central power's devolution of the social norms would be detrimental to the government's well-being and overall dominant control.

The Taliban expressed ambivalence regarding their social policies. They may enquire into the movement's clerical authority on their theological position and decisions on specific issues, but also play on the ambiguities to justify new organizational policies. In reality, the Taliban endorses two pillars of morals; they usually default 'to uniquely exclusive interpretations of Islam', once challenged with regard to the 'Afghan-ness' of such social practices. Once contested on the 'Islamic-

ness' of a specified social policy or practice, they justify it as purely Afghan in traditional terms. On the whole, the restrictions on women suit the most socially conservative members of the group. As an accepted code of conduct, the group's leadership has never ventured to jeopardize the cohesion of the movement even when overly severe implementations of social rules have been applied (Watkins, 2021, p. 10).

Contesting the Taliban's limiting of women's access to education, the EU and its members argued to defend females' right to instruction. They challenged the social restrictions imposed by the Taliban responding with strong reactions, blaming, denouncing, and condemning the physical, psychological and social violence (European Parliament, 2021; German Foreign Office, 2021, p. 1; Reuters, 2021, p.1). What would be needed for the EU to cooperate with the Taliban and enhance diplomacy remained a problem. The practice approach informing the parameters of the paradigm shift may offer an answer.

The EU constructing diplomacy

What do we gain from the above insights, the three analyses that shaped the basic information useful to the EU to project how to promote diplomacy and peace in Afghanistan? In addition, how do the practice theory and approaches contribute to supporting the EU's action? The observation of the limited development regarding the Taliban's government's governing style, social restrictions and security issues suggests the main consideration if one bears in mind the dynamics of the paradigm shift. Remembering the assumption by practice theorists that peace potentially exists when practising diplomacy (Pouliot, 2008, p. 284), the above scrutiny of the field suggests that constructing diplomacy requires the EU to make additional efforts. The EU has to expand the context of the debate if it seeks to reach mature positions with the Taliban.

As for the parameters of the modified paradigm supported by the practice approach, engaging with the Taliban the EU needs to be guided by the assumption that gathering as many people as possible encourages exchanges that facilitate concessions, trade-offs and conciliation. Actions calling for compromise inevitably follow the imperative of beginning from the site, the local, and the reality on the ground (Pouliot, 2008). Following the new paradigm, the EU would gain the opportunity to strengthen its ability to encourage others to dialogue, practice consultation, learn facilitation, exercise mediation, search for resolution, and experiment with compromise. Learning about the complexity of the government's organization and cabinet's formation can only help the EU to elaborate proper diplomatic practices for dealing with the interaction. The changing paradigm also assists the EU to understand more clearly the range of difficulties that Afghanistan must face due to the Taliban. It offers the advantage of potentially realizing how to deal with the people there, or what to avoid doing there. It encourages the EU to enlarge the debate, making it more inclusive by attempting to deal with peace and reconciliation. Here, the analysis and investigative interpretation are strengthened by the primary sources of the European Parliament, as well as the debates there within.

The European Parliament

Beyond the EU and member states censure of any form of deprivation of liberty (threats, minority communities' intimidation and violence against women) as a response to the new face of the Taliban's governance, there were ways to head towards processes governed by diplomacy and mediation. A sense of guilt pervaded the EU and its members, vis-à-vis their failure regarding Afghanistan and its people. European parliamentary debates (European Parliament, 2021) admitted the fiasco of imposing the 'nation-building' concept on Afghanistan (p. 2). They also recognized several deficiencies resulting from the country's foreign occupation (the empowerment of warlords, armed militias, and the militarization of society (p. 3)). What appears useful to learn from this regret is the opening up of different channels of interaction that might accommodate the country more than the processes tested by the EU and member states in the past.

The EU and its members believe that the art of (soft) diplomacy (not meddling with the country's rights) leads to positive developments. This does not mean, as practice theorists argue, that the process of diplomacy making is uninhabited by disagreements, and that identity struggles come as a surprise: politics and conflict never retreat (Pouliot, 2008, p. 280). Nevertheless, so long as diplomacy remains the goal in mutual dealings, practice theorists claim that one must conclude that the search for peace is alive and well. Within the European Union's sphere, there were calls, such as that by a group of European parliamentarians (European Parliament, 2021),³ to adopt practices intended to open up routes to constructing diplomacy in Afghanistan. Considering that it is up to the Afghan people...to solve their problems (p. 7), the parliamentarians searched for alternative ways of interaction. Believing that the Afghan people were entitled to choose their own path of development (p. 7) the parliamentarians' request favoured 'a new approach' and proposed a 'multilateral forum for dialogue' (p. 9).

Remarkably mirroring the parameters of the paradigm shift, the 'forum' was an open arena for discussion with all of those concerned with Afghanistan. It was designed to give a voice to those inhabiting the country (which included Pashtun, Northern non-Pashtun fighters, and Hazara, the Sikh community, the so-called Islamic State-Khorasan, and Salafi clerics, community elders, and those who claim some authority there). In the forum, the parliamentarians stressed, that it would signal the beginning of a system founded on self-determination, and would be based on the responsibilities of states towards their citizens and to each other (p. 9). In the end, it would be a system grounded on mutual respect and compliance with international law (p. 7). These calls were recommended within the motion for a resolution that was presented to the European Parliament president, to be forwarded to the president of the European Council, of the European Commission, and to the Vice President and High Representative of the European Union. Building on this message, the EU is set to explore and enhance the working of the proposed multilateral forum.

The practice approach and the paradigm shift confirm the value of the multilateral forum envisaged by the parliamentarians' resolution to open up the dialogue with all of the possible forces within Afghanistan under the Taliban. This was a radical proposal. Its significance was due to the parliamentarians' focus on the social context of relations, testing this article's argument. In fact, the argument claimed that the EU's diplomatic practices should be represented by socially meaningful patterns of action if the EU aims to impact other countries in global politics, such as when seeking to

reorient events in Afghanistan. The evidence that the parliamentarians sought positively to influence developments in Afghanistan and repair the failure of previous actions by the EU was proved by the dynamics that the resolution enhanced. Hence, the parliamentarians proposed a way of reorienting events in Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

This article has discussed how the EU relating to Afghanistan after August 2021 involves difficult choices by showing that, since the EU and member states sensed their failure vis-à-vis the Afghans and their country and were tempted to reorient the action of the Taliban's government towards non-violent and diplomatic conduct, hence a paradigm change was essential to the EU. Locating itself into the debate about practice approaches and EU diplomacy, the article showed how the practice approach proposed a number of concepts correlated with themes: it understands diplomacy as a procedure connected to social relations and views micro-level dynamics as fundamental to its construction. It underscored the centrality of interaction among groups of different legacies and traditions as the capable process aiming at avoiding the return to violence. It acknowledged diplomacy as the only single way of solving disputes, sustaining the concept that peace potentially exists when practising diplomacy. As a matter of fact, it indicated socialization as the course of action in support of the building of consensus (among the non-Pashtun, the Salafi, and the Sikh communities), and the primary step for the extremists to disclose their positions. Furthermore, the article made clear the approach understanding, that it is only by revisiting past experiences and practices and adapting the practices to new circumstances that the Afghan/Taliban may seek consensual ways. Therefore, it led to the message that practices reliant on the past can be adjusted to new situations.

The investigation also showed how the practice approach allowed a range of positions according to which the EU operators and diplomats experiment with materials that seem to work and abandon others that are less promising. They do not feel obliged to follow a structured pattern of action, but rather a haphazard, creative and combinatorial configuration depending on the reality on the ground. They enjoy a room of manoeuvre that allows avoiding strict dependence on the fixed rules of their institution. By so doing, EU operators and diplomats are positioned to pursue what they perceive as the practices more closely achieving their aim in spite of recognised limitations of their institution. By disclosing these prospects, the article indicated that there are opportunities inherent in the practice approach leading to alternative or innovative stances on facing Afghanistan.

The practice approach asserts that action is specific and located in time considered within the instances of the Taliban governing style, social restrictions and security led to recommend adjusting the practices of the EU, then, leading to the metaphor of the Forum that represented an answer to the parameters fixed by the paradigm shift: the Forum satisfied the suggestion about building on what exists, responded to the choice of bringing extremists to the table as well, and supported the process of seeking consensual ways forward. As a result, the investigation fulfilled the central question revealing how the paradigm shift demonstrated that opportunities exist for the EU, within the practices themselves and through them, identifying diplomacy as the self-evident way to interact with Afghanistan.

As a supplementary to the literature on practice approaches and implications for scholars interested in European studies, this investigation argued that the EU's diplomatic practices should be represented by socially meaningful patterns of action if the EU aims to impact other countries in global politics as this case of seeking to re-orient events in Afghanistan suggested. Again, by exposing the characters and the working of the practice approach applied to the 'EU relating to Afghanistan after August 2021', this article methodologically added to the practice approaches in terms of revealing its policy performance within the EU research area. The primary sources and official documents, as well as the secondary sources and the European Parliament's debates, have been particularly valuable in contributing to these results. Ultimately, we hope that this investigation will motivate other researchers to consider policy implications for other major powers, especially the United States, and most importantly, explore the explanatory capability of the practice approach in order either to confirm or disprove the interpretations proposed herein.

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NOTES

¹ Scientists such as John Alderdice, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Adrienne Clarkson, Noeleen Heyzer, just to quote a few as reported by Sen (2007, p. 2, note 2).

² In article 4 of Afghanistan's constitution, 14 ethnic groups are mentioned. Of these, the first five groups are large communities and play a prominent role in the country's political life: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkman and Baluch.

³ The European Parliament motion was presented by the following parliamentarians: Jaak Madison, Anna Bonfrisco, Marco Campomenosi, Susanna Ceccardi, Maximilian Krah, Jörg Meuthen, Tom Vandendriessche, Harald Vilimsky, Marco Zanni, Bernhard Zimniok on behalf of the Identity and Democracy (ID) Group.

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