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AFGHANISTAN'S PARALLEL CRISES UNDER THE TALIBAN

Exploring Limited Options

Wardah Rehman

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**CRISIS OBSERVATORY THINK TANK
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE STUDENTS**



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Afghanistan's Parallel Crises under the Taliban - Exploring Limited Options

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Quick Facts



- The fundamental dilemma confronting the international community in Afghanistan is the difficulty of decoupling the provision of humanitarian aid from political considerations.
- The long-term viability of aid in Afghanistan faces significant challenges, owing to both donor fatigue and the Taliban's rigid ideological stance.
- 40 million Afghans are grappling with an unprecedented economic crisis as well as a repressive regime; parallel humanitarian and human rights crises.
- To prevent state collapse and mass starvation, there is urgent need to stabilize the Afghan economy and establish principled engagement.

3.4 million

internally displaced

3.5 million

children need nutrition
treatment support

5.7 million

refugees in neighboring countries

28 million

in urgent need of
humanitarian assistance

Afghanistan's Parallel Crises Under the Taliban

Exploring Limited Options

by Wardah Rehman

Introduction

Almost two years into Taliban consolidated power, Afghanistan gradually slips down the list of international concerns. Yet the crises in the country remain of high intensity demanding a well-articulated and coherent response¹. While the country is declared the world's largest and most severe humanitarian crisis site², the 2023 aid appeal has the potential to go underfunded with the temporary suspension of assistance programs. Ideologically rigid and politically repressive policies of the Taliban have led the international community to reassess its presence on the ground, which is deemed necessary to address the ongoing crisis effectively³. The Taliban's behavior, defying initial expectation after the takeover in August 2021 that the organization has evolved and would not repeat the past mistakes of the 1990s, which turned them into a pariah state, has triggered not only internal protests predominantly by girls and women but also elicited global disapproval, diminishing cooperation prospects with the regime. Most recent to which stands the United Nations' (UN) warning to halt its operation as a response to the Taliban's decree banning female workers from reporting to work by April 11⁴. The UN is one of the primary channels for international humanitarian assistance to aid-dependent countries; Its departure would have serious repercussions for Afghans, as international assistance would inevitably experience a significant fall, and for the regime itself while dampening the prospects of any international recognition and acceptance.

The humanitarian condition after the withdrawal of foreign forces, the fall of the republic, and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban, continues to slip alarmingly. With 95% of Afghans suffering from food shortages, more than 3.5 million children need nutrition

¹ Jehangir, A. (March 28, 2022). *The media spotlight on Afghanistan is fading fast – but the agony of its people is far from over*. The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/19/the-media-spotlight-on-afghanistan-is-fading-fast-but-the-agony-of-its-people-is-far-from-over>

² United Nations. (2023a). *Afghanistan still a grave humanitarian crisis, senior aid official says*. UN News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/02/1134002>

³ Stroehlein, A. (2023). *Will the UN pull out of Afghanistan?* Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/the-day-in-human-rights/2023/04/19>

⁴ Wintour, P. (April 5, 2023). *UN concern after its female workers are 'banned' from working by Taliban*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/04/un-concern-after-its-female-workers-are-banned-from-working-by-taliban-afghanistan>

treatment support: by August, nearly 6 million- "an entire generation" face the threat of famine⁵. Climate-induced factors have also aggravated the country's food shortage issue. A country experiencing drought, flooding, and extreme weather conditions poses greater instability, displacement, and potential violence risks⁶. Moreover, Afghanistan remains financially distressed with banking restrictions, limited foreign exchange reserves, and more than \$7 billion in frozen assets⁷.

Despite the fiscal dysfunctionalities, the Taliban have shown notable progress. According to the World Bank report, on the economic front, the regime managed to ensure robust revenue collection, increased merchandise exports, and relative appreciation of the Afghani to other currencies, 5.4% against the US dollar⁸. However, prolonged sanctions by the West could hinder normalization and sustainability in the country's economic structure. In return, deteriorating socio-economic conditions of citizens might push the Taliban to resort to illegal conduct of businesses such as opium cultivation and trade, which they banned earlier as a bargaining chip but failed to get the intended response.

On human rights concerns, the Taliban continue to attack fundamental rights and individual liberties. Girls are restricted from pursuing higher education, and women are denied the right to work. Since coming into power, the Taliban administration has carried out a series of discriminatory measures against women, hindering women's education, media presence, public mobility, and working in domestic or international NGOs.

In the meantime, the country continues to host terrorists with the Taliban's lackluster performance to keep their Doha promise of denying Afghan soil in providing sanctuaries to terror outfits. The number of Al Qaeda operatives has increased since the withdrawal of NATO forces, and Afghanistan has proven to be a 'central strategic node' for the militants⁹. In July 2022, the US killed Al Qaeda leader Iman al Zawahri in a drone strike with an over-the-horizon operation in downtown Kabul, where he was found residing as a guest to the

⁵ United Nations. (2022b). *Afghanistan: Food insecurity and malnutrition threaten 'an entire generation'*. UN News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113982>

⁶ United Nations. (2021). *General Assembly defers decision on Afghanistan and Myanmar seats*. UN News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/12/1107262>

⁷ Byrd, W. (March 1, 2022). *Afghanistan's frozen foreign exchange reserves: What happened, what's next*. *United States Institute of Peace*. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/afghanistans-frozen-foreign-exchange-reserves-what-happened-whats-next>

⁸ The World Bank. (2023). *Overview: The political crisis of August 15, 2021, morphed into an economic confidence crisis*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>

⁹ Jones, S. (April 14, 2022). *Countering a resurgent terrorist threat in Afghanistan*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-resurgent-terrorist-threat-afghanistan>

Taliban's key leadership. Alongside the return of Al Qaeda under a more sympathetic regime, a self-proclaimed local affiliate of ISIS, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), has gained significant ground in Afghanistan as the group seeks to rebuild its operational presence and maintain an armed opposition against the Taliban and religious minorities, notably Shias and Hazaras. Amongst the group's claimed 490 terror-related incidents in 2022, nearly 1653 lives were lost. The group, which was previously constrained inside the Nangarhar province due to aggressive counter-terrorism actions by the American forces, has managed to restore itself under the Taliban while expanding its size, capabilities, and activities across the country. In less than a year, the number of ISKP operatives has doubled, from 2000 in 2021 to 4000 in 2022¹⁰. The attacks from ISKP may continue until the Afghan Taliban are able to rein in the group¹¹.

Considering the current landscape, this paper examines various potential responses and policy options for the international community seeking to prevent economic collapse and humanitarian catastrophe from occurring within Afghanistan while bound to deal with an authority that appears reluctant to the acceptance of international norms - a condition for engagement.

Afghanistan's overlapped crises

Afghanistan is facing concurrent crises in the form of ongoing human rights atrocities and an unfolding humanitarian catastrophe. Nevertheless, humanitarian grounds in Afghanistan have remained grim for decades due to prolonged armed conflict, failed governance models, and recurrent natural disasters. However, the ongoing crisis under the Taliban, prompted by autocratic rule, persisting political repression, and economic downturn, has resulted in an Afghanistan that reflects a massive deterioration in Afghans' humanitarian and protection needs while presenting a profoundly uncertain future. The current phase of the crisis has the potential to reverberate across the neighboring states and influence regional stability. In 2023, 28 million people out of a 38 million population are

¹⁰ European Asylum Support Office. (2022). Country guidance: Afghanistan 2022. Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). European Union Agency for Asylum. <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-afghanistan-2022/14-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>

¹¹ Clarke, C. P. (April 29, 2023). *Islamic State Khorasan Province is a growing threat in Afghanistan and beyond*. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/islamic-state-khorasan-province-is-a-growing-threat-in-afghanistan-and-beyond/>

expected to require humanitarian assistance, of which 13 million are children¹². Approximately 45% of the Afghan population suffers from hunger, and nearly 6 million survive on less than one meal per day (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, n.d.)¹³. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 3.4 million Afghans were internally displaced, 28 million were in need of urgent humanitarian relief, and over 5.7 million Afghan refugees were living in neighboring countries¹⁴.

Altogether, 40 million Afghans are dealing with humanitarian and human rights crises inflicted by the economic downturn and a repressive regime, respectively. Soon after the Taliban took over, the humanitarian crisis resurged to unprecedented levels, with a record 18.4 million in 2021, 24.4 million in 2022, and 28.3 million people in need of assistance in 2023¹⁵¹⁶. Meanwhile, international response to the takeover is constituted of a diminishing flow of aid and assistance and the freezing of Afghan funds and reserves worth \$9.4 billion, enough to halt economic prospects. The UN launched its largest single-country humanitarian funding appeal for \$4.4 billion, along with a dire warning of "outflow and suffering" in 2022¹⁷. Due to the upsurge in humanitarian needs, the appeal was increased to \$4.6 billion for 2023. However, under the circumstance of the Taliban's unwillingness to make political concessions, aid appeals are threatened to go underfunded or delayed¹⁸. The appeal seeking \$4.6 billion launched in January 2023 has so far received a mere \$250 million, while aid agencies estimate that 9 million vulnerable and hungry Afghans would not receive life-saving

¹² OCHA. (2023). *Afghanistan humanitarian needs overview 2023 (January 2023)*. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-january-2023>

¹³ European Commission. (n.d.). *Afghanistan factsheet - European civil protection and humanitarian aid operations*. European Commission. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/asia-and-pacific/afghanistan_en

¹⁴ UN High Commissioner for Refugees. (2023b). *Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) January-December 2023*. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/afghanistan-situation-regional-refugee-response-plan-summary>

¹⁵ OCHA. (2022). *Afghanistan humanitarian needs and planned response 2023*. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-and-planned-response-2023-endarips>

¹⁶ OCHA. (2023). *Afghanistan humanitarian needs overview 2023 (January 2023)*. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-january-2023>

¹⁷ United Nations. (2022a). *Afghanistan: UN launches largest single country aid appeal ever*. UN News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1109492>

¹⁸ Dawi, A. (March 9, 2023). *UN launches \$4.6B appeal for Afghanistan, warns of drop in funding*. VOA. <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-launches-appeal-for-afghanistan-warns-of-drop-in-funding/6997974.html>

assistance. At a time when assistance provision needs to be scaled up, it is being reduced. In short, the already sanctioned and isolated Taliban, with their repressive policies and behavior, undermines the prospects of continued aid, the discontinuation of which poses a threat to the lives of millions of Afghan individuals reliant on humanitarian assistance for their survival.

Humanitarian aid, human rights and security landscapes post-Taliban takeover

International funding cut-offs and transaction sanctions with the advent of Taliban power seizure have led Afghanistan's economy largely to collapse. Major donor countries resorted to non-humanitarian aid suspensions and humanitarian aid reductions, immediately citing concerns over the abandonment of peaceful transition and power-sharing mechanisms. It was an economic disaster for a country heavily reliant on external aid, with approximately 75% of its annual budget derived from such sources. The economic condition has driven the humanitarian crisis. The UN announced a worsening humanitarian situation as early as 2022, exacerbated by a severe drought, leaving two-thirds of the population in need. Being regarded as at risk of "systemic collapse," Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis is unfolding at unprecedented speed and scale. Previously, the key factor driving humanitarian needs was conflict. This has now become multifold and multi-dimensional, including economic shocks, natural disasters, climate change, and disproportionate protection threats for women and girls.

Besides the humanitarian crisis, the Taliban imposed a series of social and political restrictions after taking power, worsening the situation¹⁹. A crackdown on the fundamental rights of Afghans, including the right to protest, transparent rule of law, freedom of the press, and exclusive political grouping in terms of gender and ethnicity. Women have significantly been excluded from public spheres, losing access to education, employment, and basic freedom. Soon after returning to power in August 2021, amid high concerns and mounting international pressure, the Taliban promised to uphold human rights, including those of women and girls, and freedom of the press. Nearly a month later, they started to roll back

¹⁹ Hakimi, H., and Price, G. (August 15, 2022). *Afghanistan: One year of Taliban rule*. Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/08/afghanistan-one-year-taliban-rule?_cf_chl_rt_tk=DV7BT2zRcnoQCQIO_DinLWMv1JVCgu8ujfGdE7Cz_hg-1685357276-0-gaNycGzNDqU

gradually on their commitments to inclusivity and protection of human rights²⁰. In September 2021, only gender-segregated classrooms were allowed, and to ensure separation, schools were temporarily closed. Then in March 2022, girls were ordered to stay home, and secondary schools were shut down for them, claiming that although schools were already segregated, the hardliners found the idea of women's education "controversial"²¹. In May 2022, imposing more restrictions on women in public spheres, the Taliban made it mandatory for women to cover themselves fully and banned them from traveling within cities. In December 2022, the Taliban resorted to public executions. In western Farah province, 27 Afghans, including women, were flogged for allegedly committing crimes such as theft and breaking social behavior rules. Later that month women were utterly barred from attending university and working for NGOs, and agencies were ordered to suspend the hiring of women. In April 2023, the Taliban issued an order to ban Afghan women from working for the largest assistance network, the UN. Alongside the curtailment of half of the population to participate in mitigating the crisis, the effects of climate change have proven to be an impediment to structural and effective humanitarian response. The population's dependence on agriculture as a source of livelihood and the country's structural limitations to mitigate the effects of climate-induced disasters such as floods and earthquakes, famine, and droughts, whose onset patterns are high for the coming years, increase the need to scale up humanitarian response.

Moreover, the Taliban's unwillingness to uphold "Afghanistan's soil will not be used against the security of any other country"²², which they pledged in the Doha agreement in return for foreign forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan, remains a point of contention between the regime seeking recognition and countries seeking allegiance. The Taliban's ties with "friendly" groups such as Al Qaeda and Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) remain intact²³. Al Qaeda's leader Aman Al Zawahiri was struck down by a US drone in Kabul last year. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) are other regional terrorist outfits that have gained ground in Afghanistan under the Taliban,

²⁰ Graham-Harrison, E. (September 17, 2021). *Taliban ban girls from secondary education in Afghanistan*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/17/taliban-ban-girls-from-secondary-education-in-afghanistan>

²¹ Williams, H. and Hamedani, A. (December 8, 2021). *Afghanistan: Girls' despair as Taliban confirm secondary school ban*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59565558>

²² Gannon, K. (September 8, 2021). *Taliban form all-male Afghan government of old guard members*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-pakistan-afghanistan-arrests-islamabad-d50b1b490d27d32eb20cc11b77c12c87>

²³ Ghosh, N. (January 27, 2023). *Al-Qaeda threat, blowback for Pakistan increasing from an Afghanistan in chaos*. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/al-qaeda-threat-blowback-for-pakistan-increasing-from-an-afghanistan-in-chaos>

posing insecurity, and raising concerns. The evolving security dynamics are a cause of worry for regional countries as well as a threat to global stability.

Conversely, the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-KP) has emerged as a major armed opposition to the Taliban. Afghans keep facing terrorism threats from the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISIS-K), which has expanded its activity in Kabul and Jalalabad and its presence in south-eastern provinces²⁴. While briefing the Security Council on the security situation UN special envoy for Afghanistan, Deborah Lyrons, remarked, "[o]nce limited, ISIL-KP now seems to be present in nearly all provinces," implying the Taliban's incapacity to prevent the expansion of the terror outfit²⁵. Formed in 2015 by the dissident members of Afghanistan and Pakistan Taliban, ISKP has ramped up targeted suicide attacks ranging from civilians to high-profile officials. ISKP has frequently carried out "designed" bombings inflicting terror and suffering on religious minorities and the Hazara community, and has presented itself as a challenge to the Taliban ideologically and militarily²⁶. Despite its operational numerical weaknesses with 4000 recruitments, it has managed to carry out attacks on Taliban security personnel and government employees, killing hundreds since the 2021 takeover and continuing its efforts to destabilize the region.

Imminent state collapse?

The country is on the brink of the "world's worst humanitarian crisis," as identified by UN Deputy Special Representative, with 85% of the population living below the poverty line²⁷. UN agencies estimate that about two-thirds of the population will face extreme food insecurity unless more aid is delivered. Afghanistan has been at war for 40 years; now that the war has ended, factors such as mass displacement, social insecurity, drought, and pandemic stand as causes for an ongoing humanitarian crisis. Most importantly,

²⁴ Constable, P. & Hassan, S. (August 18, 2019). *Islamic State claims suicide attack on Kabul wedding that killed 63*. The Washington Post.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/bloody-suicide-attack-on-kabul-wedding-kills-at-least-63/2019/08/18/ace5f0d4-c17d-11e9-a5c6-1e74f7ec4a93_story.html

²⁵ Landay, J. (November 17, 2021). *U.N. envoy says Islamic State now appears present in all Afghan provinces*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-envoy-says-islamic-state-now-appears-present-all-afghan-provinces-2021-11-17/>

²⁶ Human Rights Watch. (October 25, 2021). *The ISKP armed group has repeatedly carried out devastating attacks that appear designed to spread terror and inflict maximum suffering particularly on Afghanistan's Hazara community*. Human Rights Watch.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/25/afghanistan-surge-islamic-state-attacks-shia>

²⁷ United Nations. (2023b). *Afghanistan: UN predicts restrictions on women's rights will worsen economic catastrophe*. UN News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1135762>

Afghanistan's economy is collapsing largely because foreign aid has dried up, on which the economic structure was entirely dependent. Non-humanitarian aid, sanctions relief, or recognition remain elusive until the government meets a set of conditions - acceptable norms - among them a more inclusive government, respecting and protecting human rights, and allowing girls and women to go to school and work. So far, the Taliban has shown little sign of making any concession while Afghans continue to bear the brunt of this standoff²⁸.

Extreme poverty in Afghanistan is exacerbated by the repercussions of the Taliban government's dystopian gender policies and subsequent response by the international community. Its decision to ban women workers in December 2022 forced the 'leftover' humanitarian aid groups to halt or suspend operations abruptly. Thousands of the jobs provided by those agencies consequently eroded, tipping the country into economic freefall. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Afghanistan's economic output collapsed by 20.7% following the Taliban takeover in 2021. Compared to pre-august 2021, an additional 6 million people faced hunger, and over 900,000 lost their jobs over the course of this period²⁹. Restrictions on women have proven to bring disastrous economic consequences in the form of abysmal poverty and have significantly impeded much required humanitarian response.

Afghanistan's economic structure is insufficient to counter the lack of aid flows. Even after decades of global involvement and thousands of foreign aid agencies operating in Afghanistan, poverty remains and has become endemic. In other terms, three out of four people are in need of humanitarian assistance. The country remains trapped in perpetual aid dependency. In a report published by the UNDP, it is indicated that there has been a notable increase in poverty rates in Afghanistan over the past three years, escalating from 47% to 97%³⁰. Furthermore, the World Bank has highlighted several contributing factors, including declining economic activity, mounting inflation, and the occurrence of natural disasters, which collectively impose a significant strain on Afghan households. Consequently, these circumstances heighten the risks of economic collapse and the onset of a severe

²⁸ Allen, J. R. and Felbab-Brown, V. (2020). *The fate of women's rights in Afghanistan*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/the-fate-of-womens-rights-in-afghanistan/>

²⁹ United Nations Development Program. (2023). UNDP warns that restrictions on women's rights will worsen economic catastrophe in Afghanistan. *UNDP*. <https://www.undp.org/press-releases/undp-warns-restrictions-womens-rights-will-worsen-economic-catastrophe-afghanistan>

³⁰ United Nations Development Program. (2021). *97 percent of Afghans could plunge into poverty by mid 2022, says UNDP*. UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/press-releases/97-percent-afghans-could-plunge-poverty-mid-2022-says-undp>

humanitarian crisis, leading to increased outward migration flows³¹, marking two-thirds of the population as vulnerable and 6 million, as Griffiths³² states, "knocking on famine's door," whose reversibility is beyond the limits of state authorities. At the same time, it would have ramifications for the region and globe.

The study "Afghanistan Socio-Economic Outlook 2023" by the UNDP suggests that despite the corruption reduction, security improvement, and domestic revenues generation, the economic outlook remains uncertain. It reveals that the imposition of sanctions, lack of financial reserves, and substantial reductions in foreign aid have exerted additional economic pressures on the Afghan population, resulting in challenges such as high unemployment rates, inflationary pressures, and persistent poverty. Women employed by NGOs often serve as sole breadwinners for their families. The recent decree barring women from working in those NGOs not only infringes upon their fundamental right to work but also elevates financial hardships for many households³³. Overall bleak economic prospects substantially amplify the probability of widespread migration and the risk of a consequential refugee crisis for the world.

Afghan refugees already make the largest refugee population worldwide after Syrians and Venezuelans. Deteriorating conditions marked by natural disasters, chronic poverty, and food insecurity have increased the numbers. The UNHCR³⁴ had warned about the steady flow of an uprooted population, accounting for a 1.618.817 refugees outflow to the neighboring countries since August 2021. Another 3.5 million people count as a conflict-induced internally displaced population. Given the upward trajectory of hunger, poverty, and starvation levels, high-level migration of Afghans is expected if the economy further deteriorates. Alongside the economic downturn, the Taliban's unwillingness to form an inclusive government has resulted in greater resentment towards the regime. Hence, deepening humanitarian crises compounded by extreme climate patterns may cause turbulence in the fragmented society, adding more people willing to flee from both a

³¹ The World Bank. (2023). *Afghanistan Economic Monitor* (pp. 1–11). The World Bank. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/3157ea4d9d810356476fca45ef1e9370-0310012023/original/Afghanistan-Economic-Monitor-March-28-March-2023.pdf>

³² Reuters. (2023, January 25). *U.N. aid chief: 6 mln Afghans "knocking on famine's door"*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/video/watch/idOV507425012023RP1>

³³ Yousfi, S. (2022, December 29). *"In two days, I will have to beg on the streets": what the Taliban's bar on women's NGO work means*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/dec/29/what-taliban-bar-on-women-ngo-work-means>

³⁴ UN High Commissioner for Refugees. (2023a). *Afghanistan situation. Global appeal 2023*. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/afghanistan-situation>

repressive and inefficient authority. A huge displacement is not inevitable given the prospects of economic disaster and reduced freedoms, and it would prompt a large-scale refugee crisis, extending beyond the immediate neighborhood³⁵.

Given the risks associated with low-income levels, education and healthcare system collapse fueled by vulnerability to natural disasters in Afghanistan creates a troubling situation where the country is susceptible to relapsing into conflict and further entrenching itself into a humanitarian crisis. In 2022, the UNDP Representative in Afghanistan, Abdallah Al Dardari, stated that the country narrowly avoided a "total collapse" and famine through the dispersal of \$3.7 billion in life-saving assistance. This sustained inflow of foreign aid played a crucial role in preventing a dire humanitarian crisis³⁶. However, the outlook for 2023 appears grim, as the UN has issued a warning to reassess its operational activities on the ground. This warning stems from the Taliban's ban on women aid workers, which has led several major foreign aid groups, such as Care International, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Islamic Relief, to halt their work due to the absence of their female staff³⁷. Consequently, the reduction in international aid is likely to exacerbate Afghanistan's economic prospects and perpetuate extreme poverty. The potential lack of continued assistance only further jeopardizes the country's stability and increases the risk of conflict relapse.

The dilemma of response

The international community is currently facing an Afghan policy dilemma. With the Taliban in power, deliberations on how to engage or whether to engage with an insurgent-turned-government go on without clear consensus. Afghanistan's reliance on external aid and the Taliban's non-compliance with donors has made it difficult to predict the continuity and sustainability of massive aid and support. The Taliban's failure to ensure an inclusive governance model and return to its notorious practices, including public executions, media controls, crackdowns on protests, and far-reaching restrictions on women's rights and

³⁵ Stewart, R. (2022). Afghanistan and refugees since the Taliban capture of Kabul. In *The Afghan refugee crisis: How to resurrect the global refugee resettlement coalition* (pp. 14–25). The Atlantic Council. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep39627.8>

³⁶ United Nations Development Program. (2023). *UNDP warns that restrictions on women's rights will worsen economic catastrophe in Afghanistan*. UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/press-releases/undp-warns-restrictions-womens-rights-will-worsen-economic-catastrophe-afghanistan>

³⁷ Preskey, N. & Sadid, N. (December 26, 2022) *Foreign aid groups halt work after Taliban ban on female staff*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64090549>

education, further pushes donors back from operating³⁸. Its stance on individual rights and gender policies, refusal to accept the basic idea of universal human rights endorsed by the United Nations, and sticking to the enforcement of its strict interpretation of religion have led to widespread condemnation from the international community. Many countries, including the United States and members of the European Union, have imposed sanctions on the Taliban leadership and have suspended development aid to Afghanistan due to the Taliban's lack of transparency and failure to engage with the international community to address the issues of mutual concern. Against this backdrop, the regime remains internationally unrecognized despite its eagerness and desire. However, by withholding recognition, the international community sends a message that the Taliban's actions and policies are unacceptable, clearly without being enough to coerce the Taliban to change their behavior significantly.

In the meantime, Afghanistan's humanitarian and human rights crises have already turned into a catastrophe, with nearly 23 million people facing acute food insecurity. According to United Nations Children's Fund³⁹, an estimated 24.4 million people in Afghanistan are in need of humanitarian assistance to survive. This includes internally displaced persons, returnees, and vulnerable communities, including women and children. The situation is rapidly evolving, so the numbers may change in the future. The Taliban's abhorrent decision to ban women workers and repressive policies have significantly impacted humanitarian aid and access in Afghanistan, with a notable number of NGOs terminating their activities⁴⁰. Since the Taliban took control of the country in August 2021, they have implemented several policies that restrict aid organizations' ability to provide assistance to those in need, ranging from mobility restrictions to intimidation instances.

Given the Taliban's behavior so far, there is less doubt that Afghanistan has entered into a state of autocratic rule dictated by a small group of secluded leaders. The regime's crackdown on human rights and civil societies and its rejection of political inclusivity and national dialogue have significantly pushed the state into international isolation and further

³⁸ Human Rights Watch. (2021, October 25). *Afghanistan: Surge in Islamic State attacks on Shia*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/25/afghanistan-surge-islamic-state-attacks-shia>

³⁹ UNICEF. (2022, December). *UNICEF Afghanistan humanitarian situation report: January - December 2022 | UNICEF Afghanistan*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/reports/unicef-afghanistan-humanitarian-situation-report-january-december-2022>

⁴⁰ Beaumont, P. (April 18, 2023). *UN ready for 'heartbreaking' decision to pull out of Afghanistan*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/18/un-ready-heartbreaking-decision-pull-out-afghanistan-taliban>

impoverished the population causing incalculable and irreversible harm. Below are assigned possible response options to the increasingly disappointing Taliban behavior amidst the humanitarian catastrophe. Considering little leverage over the Taliban, it is important to prefer international institutions and mechanisms that prevent systemic collapse and widespread violence relapse in the foreseeable future.

Option #1: Disengagement and isolating Afghanistan

Pertaining to the Taliban's ideological rigidity, human rights violations, unwillingness to devise inclusive government, and presence of specific terror groups, isolation can be used as a punitive measure by the international community, seeking moderation in the Taliban's extreme behavior. Broader disapproval might coerce the diplomatically isolated regime to alter its outlook and practices. However, it is important to consider the potential consequences and implementation challenges associated with isolating the regime or the country. Such measures, if pursued, may carry undesired effects, including limited influence, humanitarian impact, regional instability, marginalization of moderates, and constrained leverage.

Against the backdrop of the Taliban's ongoing repression and unwillingness to make political or ideological concessions, a policy of isolation ranges from limited engagement to more intensive sanctions or prolonged existing sanctions. It will be marked by continuity in non-recognition and frozen assets with limited or conditional aid dispersion. Given the dominance of the Kandhari faction's extremist tendencies, women's education and employment ban, uncredited Doha agreement, harboring of Al Qaeda, and political exclusivity, the international community, especially the United States - party to the peace agreement - has already resorted to the policy of isolationism. The US keeps refraining from recognizing the Taliban as the formal government of Afghanistan, further excluding any diplomatic footprint in the country while moving its embassy to Qatar as soon as the Taliban took over. The US has also prevented the Taliban from being represented in the United Nations. The Taliban has requested to be invited to the United Nations General Assembly, but its request has been postponed twice. If accepted, it will be a first step towards granting international legitimacy, which clearly reflects the last point of leverage the international community has left with to tamp down the violent and repressive policies of the Taliban against Afghans. However, it is important to consider that the tool of non-recognition can only yield intended outcomes if it receives equal support from all actors, which does not seem to be the prevailing circumstance. Notably, regional countries such as China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan have already extended a form of soft or de facto recognition by actively

engaging with the Taliban, hosting their acting foreign minister, and signing various state-level agreements, indicating their willingness to foster economic cooperation and normalize relations, even without the broader support or willingness from the international community.

Divided responses

Non-recognition, along with diplomatic isolation and sanctions, has the potential to exert pressure on the Taliban, compelling them to reconsider their policies as a means to secure the much-needed international funding and support necessary for the stability and survival of their government. However, the presence of divided responses limits the potential effectiveness of these measures. Without wider, collective, and convincing efforts applying practical pressure on Kabul remains infeasible. In order for isolationism to effectively influence the situation, it is imperative that regional countries, including China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia, align their response to Afghanistan with those of global actors, particularly the United States and the European Union. Without such convergence, the impact of isolationism may be limited. To elaborate, China, under its policy of 'ruthless pragmatism,' eyeing to tap into billion-dollar resources, has already signed an oil extraction deal in January 2023 while signaling a willingness to play a more active role in Afghanistan, filling in the vacuum left by the US⁴¹. As an outcome, isolation, and trade restrictions to coerce the regime's behavior in the US would go in vain without wider regional consensus. The trajectories appear to be toward 'soft recognition' of the Taliban by regional countries and 'soft pariah status' of them by the US and its close partners. Therefore, a US-led 'isolate' approach would yield diminishing returns, especially when other countries have started to 'engage.'

Missing accountability

The Taliban's control over much of Afghanistan means that they have significant power to shape the country's future, and cutting off all forms of engagement with them could limit the international community's ability to influence their decisions. The policy of disengagement leaves the Afghan population vulnerable to Taliban abuses and limits the ability of the international community to monitor human rights abuses and hold the Taliban accountable for their actions. Reports coming from Afghanistan validate Taliban perpetrated abuses and risks facing vulnerable groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, women and girls, human rights activists, media persons and journalists, and former government

⁴¹ Hoskins. P. (January 6, 2023). *Taliban and China firm agree Afghanistan oil extraction deal*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-64183083>

personnel⁴². These attacks might surge with the collapse of mechanisms for victims to seek protection, support, and accountability⁴³. As per the Report of the Special Rapporteur⁴⁴ on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, these attacks appear to be systemic in nature, targeting vulnerable communities, violating human rights, and "bear hallmarks of crimes against humanity." The Taliban as a government must be called upon by the international community to reverse discriminatory policies and be held accountable for investigating cases of arbitrary arrest, extrajudicial killing, torture, and forced migration.

The issue with aid reduction and conditionality

The Taliban's lack of technical capacity and emerging resource constraints impede the possibility of recovery of the Afghan economy on its own. The economy has already contracted by 30% since the Taliban takeover. The probability of reliance on humanitarian aid to sustain some basic services and survival is evident. Aid conditionality under the circumstances could be resorted to as a desired strategy to advocate international conditions and norms in return for access to additional assistance. In theory, aid conditionality can be an effective tool for encouraging positive behavior and promoting development. However, it can be difficult to implement effectively in practice, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states like Afghanistan. Conditionality leads to a reduction in aid flows or delays in aid delivery if the authority is unable or unwilling to meet the conditions set by the donor countries. The potential withdrawal of the UN and other agencies could affect vulnerable sections more, including women and children. Altogether, pushing the country into abject poverty will bear grave consequences for the region and beyond in the form of conflict, insecurity, and refugee crisis. Thus, the isolation of Afghanistan would have a disproportionate impact on the Afghan population, suffering from poverty, hunger, and lack of access to basic necessities, than on the Taliban, who possess the capacity and intent to maintain its finances through the black market and opium trade.

⁴² Rubin, B. R. (October 20, 2022). *Afghanistan under the Taliban: findings on the current situation*. The Stimson Center. <https://www.stimson.org/2022/afghanistan-under-the-taliban-findings-on-the-current-situation/>

⁴³ Ahmadi, B. & Worden, S. (September 29, 2022). *Want more accountability for the Taliban? Give more money for human rights monitoring*. United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/want-more-accountability-taliban-give-more-money-human-rights-monitoring>

⁴⁴ Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan. (2022, September 9). OHCHR | A/HRC/51/6: Situation of human rights in Afghanistan - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan. *United Nations Human Rights - Office of the High Commissioner*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc516-situation-human-rights-afghanistan-report-special-rapporteur>

Breeding ground for terrorism: Reduced engagement and economic and political isolation means reduced incentive for the Taliban regime to cooperate, although passively, on counter-terrorism, a vested shared concern of the world and the Taliban when it comes to growing ISKP presence. Afghanistan has been a breeding ground for terrorist groups in the past, and isolation could create a vacuum that extremist groups could exploit to regroup and launch new attacks⁴⁵. This would not only pose a threat to Afghanistan but to the wider international community as well. The Taliban would not mount a sustained and proactive effort to suppress extremist activity without inducements in recognition, aid continuity, and sanctions relief. Additionally, resource containment would hinder the government's, facing armed resistance, capacity to govern, and ability to maintain security in the long run. An isolated Afghanistan will be dangerous for the world from humanitarian, social, political, and security perspectives. It is important to find ways to engage with Afghanistan and support efforts to address its problems for fear of a larger crisis associated with isolation.

Option #2: Comprehensive sanctions and opposing the regime

With military options certainly off the table, economic strangulation and political opposition of the regime in response to its grave violation of human rights and international norms can be devised as yet another international response. It will involve economic pressures ranging from significant aid cuts and deeper isolation to extensive sanctions wielded as weapons to alter the Taliban's behavior, coercing them to oblige by their international obligations. However, there are lesser chances that it might serve desired results given the intensity, fragility, and severity of looming risks in Afghanistan.

Interestingly, since the Taliban takeover, there have been no additional sanctions against the Taliban. As a result of the takeover, the US reimposed a series of sanctions against the Taliban, which were originally assigned by international governmental bodies in 1999. These sanctions were reinforced following the 9/11 terror attacks. For its support of Al Qaeda, terrorism, and continuity of threat, the Taliban movement was assigned a status as a terrorist organization. Currently, there are over 150 sanctions targeting the Taliban, and about 70% of those relate to counter-terrorism and financing authorities. Around 100 newly constituted Taliban government members are listed in the 1267 list of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as individuals associated with terrorism and are supposed to be tried in a court of law. Individuals' travel bans, asset freezing, and suspension of transactions primarily constitute the targeted sanctions program invoked by the government of the US.

⁴⁵ Ramakrishna, K. (2023). Global threat assessment 2022. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 15(1), 1-11. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48707911>

However, these sanctions have proven to be ineffective so far in crippling the regime and its status. There are reasons why the sanctions have not been effective, and the Taliban continues to consolidate power. First, the sanctions are not comprehensive as the Taliban's financial resources and ability to import goods go untargeted. Second, the sanctions are not well-enforced, and several countries are not complying. Given the Taliban's position of control over the entire assets and revenue of the Afghan government, these sanctions have no impact apart from the reserve funds frozen by the US. At the individual level, the Taliban has managed to maintain fiscal sufficiency by engaging in illicit economic activities and forcing people to give money. Moving forward under a similar framework, broader diplomatic and financial sanctions on the regime enforced by all UN member states in response to its severe policies and crackdown on women have the potential to pressurize the Taliban, who are seeking credibility on the global stage. The policy of opposition can further incorporate explicit condemnation of the regime's legitimacy, unlike isolation which suggests avoidance of recognition and engagement.

Supporting resistance groups

In terms of opposition and resistance against the regime, the Northern Alliance, a military opposition that operated against the Taliban during the 1990s, is unlikely to be able to counter the Taliban regime in the near future. The political and ethnic diversity within the resistance group makes it difficult to unite and coordinate effectively against the Taliban. The Taliban's control over a strong military and intelligence apparatus gives it a significant advantage over the opposing armed groups. Furthermore, the rapid collapse of the Afghan National Army indicates that neither the Ghani government nor the various warlords who sided with the US during the occupation had substantial independent backing. They can only work sporadically for now. Supporting such opposing groups could lead to increased violence, instability and conflict renewal in Afghanistan.

The paradox of sanctions

It remains highly uncertain whether more sanctions, including those potentially led by the UNSC, will effectively coerce the Taliban into moderation. Sanctions can be a powerful tool for pressuring governments or groups to change their behavior by imposing economic and political costs on them. However, in the case of the Taliban, they have shown resilience to sanctions in the past and have adapted to survive despite the economic pressure. Certain economic sanctions targeting the financial sector disproportionately restricted Afghan citizens from accessing transactions and funds necessary to receive life-saving aid compared to the Taliban, who managed to survive. It depicts the challenge of "collective punishment"

associated with an inherently ineffective sanctions program against the Taliban without bypassing its negative effects on the population.

In short, global sanctions and freezing of the assets of Afghanistan's central bank could not generate the intended consequences for the Taliban but have resulted in unintended consequences by negatively impacting the economy and ordinary people, particularly vulnerable populations such as women and children.

Therefore, while sanctions may be useful in certain situations, they should be used judiciously and as part of a broader strategy that includes engagement and dialogue with the Taliban. It is important to continue monitoring the situation in Afghanistan closely and adapt policies accordingly to ensure that the Afghan people are protected and that the Taliban respects human rights and upholds international agreements. Imposing additional sanctions against the Taliban, to exert financial leverage to pressure them into countering terrorism, establishing an inclusive government, and respecting human rights, would yield counterproductive outcomes. Such an approach would undermine both counter-terrorism and developmental objectives by hastening complete economic and state collapse, thereby creating a political and security void that would enable terrorist groups to operate with greater freedom and push the country back into conflict.

Unintended consequence

Sanctions, even comprehensive, would have minimal impact on the Taliban given the economic alternatives of the group. The Afghan population would largely face the unintended consequences of sanctions. The malfunctioning of the banking system has led to an unprecedented escalation of poverty and a severe food crisis in Afghanistan. Despite having money in banks, Afghans are only allowed to withdraw \$400 per month. Moreover, since the banking system is not working at its fullest, people have resorted to the Hawala network, an informal transaction system paving the way for illicit economic activity and transportation inside and outside Afghanistan, which is then used by terrorist groups as well. It could also lead to the rise of illegal trade and the growth of criminal networks, further eroding the rule of law in Afghanistan. In addition, sanctions could devastate the Afghan economic structure, which is already struggling.

Option #3: Dialogue and pragmatic engagement

Given the urgency of "twin" - economic and humanitarian - challenges in Afghanistan and fear of spillover, many remain reluctant to advocate for an isolation policy towards the Taliban. Although general consensus over pragmatic engagement and constructive dialogue largely prevails, what steps can be taken under limited options remain difficult to devise.

Cautious engagement

Engagement provides the grounds necessary for mitigating the unfolding risks of instability stemming from Afghanistan and ensuring accountability for the regime's atrocities. A sustainable presence with light footprint factors needs to be explored to persuade the Taliban to heed the international community's concerns about Afghanistan. These factors could include economic incentives, diplomatic pressure, and a clear demonstration of the benefits of cooperation. It is crucial to find a way to engage with the Taliban without compromising fundamental human rights and democratic values. Efforts to assist the country's economic revival are the ultimate objective of engagement and not mere humanitarian aid disposition. Reactivity could avert crises in the short term; however, Afghanistan requires proactive long-term strategic thinking to move beyond crisis mode.

Consolidated regional framework

After the fall of Kabul, Afghanistan's neighbors are engaging pragmatically with the Taliban, but they remain cautious about what the future holds. An uneasy and complex diplomatic relationship exists between the Taliban and Afghanistan's neighboring countries, including Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia, which are still hedging their bets and engaging with the Taliban in a more cautious manner. Afghanistan's neighbors are primarily concerned about regional stability and the potential for the Taliban to export instability and violence beyond Afghanistan's borders. They are also concerned about the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, as well as the potential for terrorist groups like ISIS-Khorasan to take advantage of the chaos. In addition, the neighboring countries are also worried about the influx of refugees and the economic impact of the crisis on their own countries. To mitigate any potential spillover effects and to ensure timely acknowledgement, engaging the Taliban has become a necessity. Simultaneously, Afghanistan's political capacity and economic recovery are greatly influenced by the strength of its regional relationships. Countries of shared interest thus have the leverage to organize indigenous capacity for efficient, effective service delivery, economic development, and integration, which stands as the only viable long-term strategy to ensure stability. Regional stakeholders must be aligned

to negotiate concerns of inclusiveness, fundamental rights, and detachment from terrorist networks with the Taliban.

On political grounds

An integrated and coherent political approach vis-à-vis Afghanistan is necessary and can be achieved by strengthening the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) mandate. The recent renewal of the UNAMA mandate is certainly a step in the right direction that needs to be preserved⁴⁶. Established by the UNSC in 2002 to provide political and technical support to the Afghan government and promote human rights, good governance, and sustainable development in the country, the UNAMA's main responsibilities include facilitating national and international efforts to promote peace, stability, and development in Afghanistan, advancing human rights and the rule of law, and coordinating international humanitarian and development assistance.

The organization must be supported, strengthened, and empowered as the major political entity and representative of the international community in Afghanistan. Moreover, under the framework of UNAMA, the international community could engage and work with the Afghan civil society to develop solutions and transparently address problems. Taking into consideration the Taliban's propaganda campaigns, producing and disseminating content across various media platforms, including social media, radio, and television, direct communication with locals could help with reporting and consulting accurately.

The misinformation campaign was fueled by a variety of factors, including the Taliban's own propaganda efforts, the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories on social media, and the lack of reliable information sources on the ground in Afghanistan⁴⁷. This misinformation has had real-world consequences, including spreading fear and confusion among the Afghan people, stigmatizing vulnerable groups like women and minorities, and the potential for further violence and instability in the region. It has potentially hampered the policy-making capacity of other countries by disseminating false news and deviating inputs. Opposing pluralism, making no concessions to popular will, and pursuing a policy of ethnic domination while excluding other tribal-ethnic groups from the political structure,

⁴⁶ International Peace Institute. (2023). *Prioritization and sequencing of security council mandates: The case of UNAMA*. JSTOR; International Peace Institute. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep48443>

⁴⁷ Kugelman, M. (2022, March 25). *Afghanistan misinformation after the Taliban takeover: Content, causes, consequences*. South Asian Voices. <https://southasianvoices.org/afghanistan-misinformation-after-the-taliban-takeover-content-causes-consequences/>

hardliners have gained a monopoly over power dynamics in Afghanistan⁴⁸. Under this circumstance, 'friendly' Muslim states can send officials and informal envoys, including religious scholars, to negotiate pluralism in Afghanistan which is necessary to ensure a peaceful environment. This can also help break the hardliners' monopoly over power dynamics and pave the way for a more inclusive government.

On economic grounds

Humanitarian aid alone provides no sustainable solution to Afghan's economic crisis. There is a need to expand humanitarian into economic and developmental support. Although the economic outlook has reached a low-level stabilization, external obstacles continue to significantly affect the Afghan economy. Minimal development impetus pushed by the international community could unlock numerous agriculture and agribusiness, regional trade and transit, and mining and extraction opportunities in Afghanistan.

Under work programs proposed by NGOs, the task of transitioning former local militias, over 300,000 former Afghan National Defense and Security Forces members, and an estimated 85,000 Taliban jobless fighters into civil occupations, with employment opportunities remaining insufficient (Fishstein & Amiryar, 2022)⁴⁹. Only a revived and functioning economy would ensure a stable Afghanistan in the long run. It can be done by lifting sanctions on international financial transactions, as well as mobilizing the Afghan private sector and improving macroeconomic governance to attract business activities. Unfreezing Afghanistan's central bank's assets to improve the banking and liquidity crisis plaguing the country and restoring the SWIFT system would build confidence in the banking sector and boost formal economic activity and transparency. Henceforth, attempts to ease banking restrictions pour developmental investments into the private sector and promote local businesses would be the key to revitalizing Afghanistan's economy.

On diplomatic grounds

Until the Taliban acknowledge a complete governmental transition, the international community must withhold diplomatic recognition from the government. However, a

⁴⁸ Atta ur Rahman Saleem, M., & Semple, M. (2022, September 5). *Towards peaceful and plural politics in Afghanistan: Rethinking approaches to Afghan peacemaking in the wake of the Taliban takeover*. PeaceRep; PeaceRep Report: Interim Transitions Series, University of Edinburgh. <https://peacerep.org/publication/towards-peaceful-and-plural-politics-in-afghanistan/>

⁴⁹ Fishstein, P. and Amiryar, M. (2022, March 28). *For Afghanistan's economic revival, focus on macroeconomic stability, financial flows, and economic governance*. The Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/for-afghanistans-economic-revival-focus-on-macroeconomic-stability-financial-flows-and-economic-governance/>

diplomatic presence with the agenda to revitalize the peace process along with humanitarian and security priorities in Afghanistan is necessary to incentivize or pressure the Taliban to cooperate. Direct engagement and dialogue without reliance on intermediaries will also help to establish a clear roadmap for international dialogue on issues of common interest, such as countering terrorism, illicit drugs, irregular migration, and enhancement of access to information. Moreover, a more robust diplomatic presence in Afghanistan would demonstrate the international community's commitment to supporting the country's stability and development, which could help to build trust and confidence among the Afghan people. An on-the-ground presence to negotiate and mediate aid with the Taliban would improve the effectiveness of relief efforts. Recognition and diplomatic presence should be the two strands of political engagement with the Taliban under the condition of a dire humanitarian crisis. Additionally, engaging the Taliban's clerics with religious scholars and intellectuals from around the world to deconstruct and negate the Taliban's extreme policies and narrative could be beneficial.

On humanitarian grounds

The Taliban's subjugation of women should not invoke international reprisals that exacerbate their sufferings. With limited options on board, finding ways to mitigate the harms inflicted by the Taliban on vulnerable groups of the country in a principled way would be another objective of engagement. Under this framework, the international community would be required to:

1. Mobilize resources and ensure funding humanitarian appeals immediately while monitoring and re-evaluating the approach, commitment, and effectiveness of aid delivery.
2. Ensure principled dispersion of aid and ensure adequate resources are made available without discrimination. Women are disproportionately affected by humanitarian crises; their meaningful participation as both humanitarians and clients needs to be assured.
3. Apart from humanitarian bandages, what would potentially put Afghanistan back on a self-sustaining path is enabling civic action and national dialogue by ensuring the participation of locals through platforms as a practical step towards reconciliation. Government officials and citizens under such local dialogue platforms must incorporate their perspectives on factors of divergence and negotiate consensus under the mediation by international representatives. Sustained pressure from within the country by active civil constituency could only help shape the emerging inclusive political system.

Conclusion

The Doha Agreement between the US and Afghan Taliban signed in February 2020 was expected to serve as a roadmap toward peaceful Afghanistan and a template for intra-Afghan dialogue. However, marked by a chaotic pullout, the collapse of the Afghan government, and the Taliban's swift return, the country faces the worst of economic and humanitarian turmoil. In addition, the Taliban's repressive policies keep undermining prospects of foreign recognition and interaction with Afghanistan, a country heavily dependent upon foreign aid and financial assistance. In this context, decoupling aid dispersion from the Taliban's governance style remains a challenge for the international community. While exploring the ongoing debate over whether the world should engage with the Taliban regime given their violent past and present record on human rights, the paper attempts to present alternative perspectives on the issue, including arguments for engagement with the Taliban as a means of promoting stability and preventing terrorism, as well as arguments against engaging with the group due to concerns about their legitimacy and violation of human rights.

The paper highlights that aid cut-offs or conditionality under the policy of isolation pose grave humanitarian risks, alarms mass exodus, and even conflict reinstatement. Weighing in "global" concerns associated with Afghanistan, engagement with the regime is a suitable policy option. Overall, it is a delicate balancing act between engaging with the Taliban to protect the Afghan population and holding them accountable for their actions. It will require a nuanced approach that takes into account the complex situation on the ground in Afghanistan. To disassociate the Taliban's domestic policies and behavior from the humanitarian needs and requirements is a fundamental challenge that many donor countries and organizations may continue to face. To navigate the uncertain future of Afghanistan under Taliban rule, it is important to resolve the impasse that the Taliban authorities and the international community have been in over the last 19 months and move forward to explore the avenues of engagement and dialogue. While humanitarian engagement has been necessary, the global community must recognize that mere aid dispersion is neither sustainable nor optimal for alleviating human suffering in Afghanistan. Therefore, a principle, pragmatic and phased approach to engagement with the Taliban is required on multiple fronts, pursuing the social and economic development of the country.

A more constructive engagement requires strategizing on two tracks: immediate and long-term. Upholding regional trade connectivity and putting an end to 'opposing' the regime impulses that enable the use of violent proxies can only push Afghanistan into a sustainable

structure. Alongside, at least temporarily, considerable relaxation of sanctions and financial constraints is required as Afghanistan teeters on the brink of famine and economic collapse. This can be made effective by keeping the pressure high and providing a revival deadline. In the meantime, beginning negotiations under the UNAMA mandate, engaging the local communities, and addressing their needs must be upheld, given the imminent situation in Afghanistan. Partnerships and platforms facilitating peace, reconciliation, and recovery should encompass the participation of donors and international and non-governmental organizations on the one hand, and, on the other, it must promote more participatory approaches in order to ensure ownership of the reconciliation and recovery processes by the affected populations and concerned national authorities. Continuity in addressing the humanitarian crisis, political negotiations by regional countries pushing for more representative government, increasing the capacity of Afghans to project their priorities by engaging in national dialogue initiatives, and facilitating the restoration of the peace process should form the overarching goals of the international community in Afghanistan.

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